

From Battleground to Intermediary: The Conditions and Limits of Iraq's Mediation Diplomacy in the Middle East

Çatışma Sahasından Aracı Aktörlüğe: Irak'ın Ortadoğu'daki Arabuluculuk Diplomasisinin Koşulları ve Sınırları

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Abstract

This study examines the conditions under which Iraq can make a meaningful and sustainable contribution as an intermediary in interstate disputes in the Middle East. To this end, it compares Iraq's role in the Iran-Saudi Arabia dialogue, contacts involving Iran and Jordan and Iran and Egypt, and the attempted rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria in 2024. Methodologically, the study combines structured, focused case comparison with within-case chronological analysis, separately assessing diplomatic functions, observable effects, and the reliability of the evidence. It argues that Iraq's comparative advantage lies in early-stage, facilitative intermediation functions, including opening discreet channels, transmitting messages, sustaining exploratory contacts, and providing a platform acceptable to the parties. The effectiveness of this contribution depends on three conditions: the parties' readiness to negotiate; Iraq's simultaneous access to and relational acceptability among both sides; and the absence of domestic political obstruction that could undermine credibility and continuity. Active neutrality is treated not as an outcome of these conditions, but as an issue-specific diplomatic practice through which Iraq maintains functional relations with rival governments without fully aligning with any party. The comparative findings show that Iraq can facilitate entry into dialogue and confidence-building, but that diplomatic access alone is insufficient when evidence is limited, party readiness is low, or bargaining positions are incompatible. The study contributes empirically and conceptually to the literature on regional mediation by demonstrating that Iraq's mediation capacity is stage-specific and that movement toward political settlement may require stronger leverage or a more capable external sponsor.

Keywords: Regional Diplomacy, Conflict Resolution, International Mediation, Facilitative Mediation, Iraqi Foreign Policy.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Irak'ın Ortadoğu'daki devletlerarası anlaşmazlıklarda bir aracı aktör olarak hangi koşullarda anlamlı ve sürdürülebilir katkı sağlayabileceğini incelemektedir. Bu amaçla Irak'ın İran-Suudi Arabistan diyalogundaki rolü, İran-Ürdün ve İran-Mısır temasları ile 2024 yılında Türkiye ile Suriye arasında başlatılmaya çalışılan yakınlaşma girişimleri karşılaştırılmaktadır. Yöntem, yapılandırılmış ve odaklanmış vaka karşılaştırmasını kronolojik vaka içi analizle birleştirmekte; diplomatik işlevleri, gözlemlenebilir etkileri ve kanıtların güvenilirliğini ayrı ayrı değerlendirmektedir. Makale, Irak'ın karşılaştırmalı üstünlüğünün, gizli kanallar açma, mesaj iletme, keşif amaçlı temasları sürdürme ve taraflarca kabul edilebilir bir platform sağlama gibi kolaylaştırıcı nitelikteki erken aşama arabuluculuk işlevlerinde bulunduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu katkının etkinliği üç koşula bağlıdır: tarafların müzakereye hazır olması, Irak'ın her iki tarafla eşzamanlı erişim ve ilişkisel kabul edilebilirlik geliştirebilmesi ve iç politik engellemelerin güvenilirlik ile sürekliliği zayıflatmaması. Aktif tarafsızlık ise bu koşulların sonucu değil, Irak'ın herhangi bir tarafa bütünüyle hizalanmadan rakip hükümetlerle işler ilişkiler sürdürmesine dayanan, konuya özgü bir diplomatik uygulama olarak ele alınmaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı bulgular, Irak'ın sürece giriş ve güven inşasını kolaylaştırabildiğini; ancak sınırlı kanıt, düşük taraf hazırlığı ve bağdaşmayan pazarlık pozisyonları karşısında diplomatik erişimin tek başına yeterli olmadığını göstermektedir. Çalışma, Irak'ın aracı aktörlük kapasitesinin aşamaya özgü olduğuna ve siyasi çözüme geçişin daha güçlü etki araçları ya da daha yetkin bir dış destekçi gerektirebileceğine işaret ederek bölgesel arabuluculuk literatürüne ampirik ve kavramsal katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bölgesel Diplomasi, Çatışma Çözümü, Uluslararası Arabuluculuk, Kolaylaştırıcı Arabuluculuk, Irak Dış Politikası.

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Introduction

International mediation is a voluntary method of conflict resolution in which a recognized third party supports disputants without having the legal capacity to impose a binding judgment. Its functions can range from facilitating communication and transmitting messages to developing procedures, offering formulas, and assisting with implementation. Dialogue facilitation is typically more open-ended and trust-based, whereas good offices may only enable contact or carry messages (OSCE, 2014, pp. 10-11; Soares, 2018, pp. 9-12). These differences are important in the Middle East, where governments frequently refer to holding a meeting or sending a message as mediation, even when the third party has minimal influence over negotiations or outcomes.

Scholarship on international mediation suggests that its effectiveness cannot be attributed to any single quality possessed by the mediator. Rather, the outcomes of mediation emerge from the interaction between several contextual and procedural factors, including the character and severity of the conflict, the parties' willingness to pursue a negotiated settlement, the mediator's relational position and available resources, and the particular strategy adopted during the intervention (Bercovitch & Houston, 2000, pp. 170-176; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006, pp. 329-335). Major powers may use diplomacy in conjunction with guarantees, pressure, incentives or assistance with implementation. Although they may offer discretion, contextual expertise, fewer political expenses, and connections that enable initial engagement, smaller or non-major powers frequently have less capability leverage. Although their institutional coherence is very different from Iraq's, Qatar and Oman provide examples of how mediation can develop into a foreign-policy specialty that safeguards security and boosts diplomatic importance (Kamrava, 2011, pp. 539-556; Worrall, 2021, pp. 134-150).

Iraq poses a distinct analytical problem. By conventional measures—population size, territorial extent, energy endowments and geopolitical weight—it can hardly be classified as a small state. Nevertheless, these material advantages have not translated readily into a unified or consistently implemented foreign policy. Since 2003, political authority has become fragmented among state institutions, political parties, armed groups and networks of external patronage, limiting the capacity of the central government to act as a coherent international actor. Dodge describes a state repeatedly weakened by institutional incoherence and elite competition, while Haddad and Mansour show that the distinction between state and non-state power is blurred by hybrid armed and political networks embedded within official structures (Dodge, 2013, pp. 241-257; Dodge, 2024, p. 29; Haddad, 2020, pp. 30-34; Mansour, 2021, pp. 2-5). Iraq has consequently been treated mainly as an arena of Iranian, American, Gulf, Turkish and other regional competition rather than as an autonomous diplomatic actor.

However, since 2020, successive Iraqi governments have sought to transform this vulnerable position into a diplomatic asset. Baghdad has played an instrumental role in facilitating numerous diplomatic dialogues between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and has subsequently announced its involvement in collaborative efforts involving Iran, Jordan and Egypt. Moreover, it has explored the potential for a mediating role in fostering reconciliation between the Assad regime in Syria and various other parties. The initiatives yielded varying degrees of involvement and evidence. The Saudi-Iranian channel facilitated repeated, jointly acknowledged contact prior to the restoration of diplomatic relations in 2023. The Iran-Jordan and Iran-Egypt initiatives have received comparatively less documentation. The Türkiye-Syria initiative was met with public recognition in Ankara; however, it did not evolve into sustained negotiations prior to the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024.

The article poses the following question: In what circumstances might Iraq be capable of making an effective contribution as an intermediary in the resolution of interstate disputes in the Middle East? The argument is made that Iraq is most useful as a facilitative intermediary rather than a directive mediator. The principal resources at its disposal are as follows: senior-level access, confidential communication, regional knowledge and the ability to provide a politically acceptable channel. Party readiness operates as a scope condition: Iraq cannot normally manufacture a willingness to negotiate. Simultaneous access and relational acceptability provide the enabling capacity through which Baghdad can respond to existing demand for dialogue. Domestic non-obstruction affects whether that channel remains credible and sustainable. Even when these conditions are favourable, limited material leverage confines Iraq's comparative advantage mainly to pre-negotiation and confidence-building.

The article seeks to make three contributions. Firstly, it extends mediation research to a politically fragmented state whose diplomatic agency rests on relational access rather than institutional coherence

or coercive power. Secondly, it contributes to research on Iraqi foreign policy after 2003 by showing that contested sovereignty does not remove Iraq's ability to act internationally but makes this ability dependent on domestic conditions and vulnerable to internal conflicts. Thirdly, it develops a stage-specific argument: an intermediary with credibility leverage may help parties enter and sustain dialogue, while a more capable actor may become more important at political closure. The evidence does not demonstrate a deliberately coordinated division of labour, but it identifies a sequential pattern that merits comparison beyond the Iraqi case.

This framing also avoids two opposite mistakes. The first is to assume that every Iraqi initiative demonstrates diplomatic autonomy or that official ambition proves actual influence. The second is to assume that domestic fragmentation prevents Iraq from playing a meaningful external role. Instead, the comparative analysis shows that Iraq's capacity for autonomous diplomatic action varies across disputes and at different stages of each dispute. The study poses a series of interrogations, namely: what actions were undertaken by Baghdad, the extent to which the process was advanced, the reliability of the evidence presented, and whether the proposed conditions delineate the strongest case from limited or unsuccessful initiatives.

1. Method

This study uses a qualitative comparative case-study approach, combining structured comparison with a chronological reading of each case. It examines how Iraq contributed to regional mediation by looking at the role it played, the visible effects of its involvement and the conditions that made its contribution stronger or weaker. Rather than claiming that Iraq alone produced the outcomes, the study asks whether it helped launch, maintain or move diplomatic processes forward.

The comparison is structured because each case is examined through the same set of questions, and focused because attention is limited to factors directly tied to the research question (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 67–70). The analysis asks what incentives initially encouraged dialogue, how Iraq became involved, whether Iraqi leaders had access to authorised decision makers, what role Iraq played, what effects followed, how clearly those effects can be linked to Iraqi action, and whether domestic pressures, rival mediators or wider regional changes offer stronger explanations.

The analysis examines initiatives launched between 2020 and 2025, from Mustafa al-Kadhimi's premiership through Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's government. Sources were gathered and checked up to June 2026, although all cases concern diplomatic activity within the 2020–2025 period. Cases include publicly recognised or independently verified Iraqi efforts to serve as a third party between states facing tense or hostile relations. Cases were included only when Iraq was not a main party to the dispute, a senior Iraqi official or institution clearly acted as an intermediary, and there was enough evidence to assess the purpose and effects of Iraq's role. Routine bilateral diplomacy and disputes directly involving Iraq were excluded. Four initiatives are examined, although they are not treated as evidentially equivalent. Iran–Saudi Arabia, Iran–Jordan, and Türkiye–Syria constitute the main comparative cases, while Iran–Egypt is retained as a low-evidence shadow case. The latter meets the minimum threshold of an explicit claim of Iraqi third-party involvement but lacks sufficient corroboration to assess continuity and observable effects with the same confidence as the other cases. Other reported Iraqi diplomatic initiatives were not retained when they amounted to routine bilateral engagement, involved Iraq as a direct party to the dispute, or lacked sufficient public evidence to establish a distinct third-party function, continuity of contact, or an observable effect. The cases examined therefore represent the initiatives for which Iraq's intermediary role could be assessed against the study's analytical criteria rather than an exhaustive catalogue of Iraqi diplomatic activity.

Intermediation is used as an umbrella term covering good offices, message transmission, dialogue facilitation, procedural assistance and mediation. Mediation is used more narrowly for an accepted third party that makes an identifiable contribution to the organisation, procedure or substance of negotiations. It is imperative to note that a public call for dialogue, a single visit or the provision of a venue does not inherently constitute mediation. Diplomatic roles range from public support and message delivery to good offices, sustained facilitation, procedural design and directive mediation. Observable effects range from no active process to opening a channel, repeated contact, confidence building, limited de-escalation or a clear contribution to formal normalisation or agreement.

Evidence strength is coded separately. It is “high” when Iraq's role appears in a joint statement or is confirmed by both parties. It is “moderate” when an official account is backed by a separate

institutional source, “low” when it relies mainly on one-sided claims or indirect reports and “uncertain” when continuity, format or impact cannot be verified. Keeping diplomatic role, visible effect and evidence separate avoids treating weak documentation as policy failure or official claims as proof of an established process.

Three conditions guide the comparison, although each plays a different role. The first is whether the parties already had an incentive to reduce tensions when the Iraqi initiative began; this is not inferred from later events. The second is Baghdad’s ability to reach authorised decision makers on both sides and remain acceptable to both governments as a channel. The third is domestic non-obstruction, which supports credibility and continuity. Warning signs include public rejection, conflicting official messages, breaches of security or confidentiality, and coercive acts by Iraq-based groups. The analysis separates deliberate spoiling from actions that weaken diplomacy without directly targeting it.

The conditions may operate in combination. The parties’ readiness creates a reason for dialogue, Iraq’s access allows it to engage, and domestic non-obstruction helps keep the channel credible and stable. Access may be necessary, but it cannot ensure success on its own. Material leverage sets limits on Iraqi influence: Baghdad is likely to be more effective in communication and confidence building than in enforcing deals or providing guarantees.

The study uses qualitative document analysis. Joint statements, official notices, speeches, press briefings and institutional records identify key dates, participants, stated aims and recognised roles. Independent reporting helps reconstruct confidential or disputed events, while academic research and policy reports provide context and alternative explanations. Joint statements and confirmation from separate sources carry the most weight. A one-sided official statement shows that a claim was made, but it does not prove that a lasting process existed. Reports that simply repeat the same statement do not count as independent evidence. In this study, “confirmed” means joint or independent support, “reported” refers to credible but incomplete evidence and “claimed” or “announced” marks a unilateral statement.

The study does not claim to use formal process tracing. Confidential talks, limited access to internal records and the lack of elite interviews make such a claim difficult to justify. Instead, causal plausibility is judged through chronological reconstruction and comparison across cases. The analysis asks whether events match the proposed conditions, whether Iraq performed a clear function, whether a visible effect followed, and whether other explanations are stronger. The conclusions therefore focus on Iraq’s observable and plausible contribution, not on claims that it acted as the sole or decisive cause.

2. Iraq as a Regional Intermediary: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Mediation, Facilitation and Intermediation

Mediation is a structured form of communication in which an accepted third party helps disputants seek a mutually acceptable outcome. The parties still control whether they take part and what they accept. Dialogue facilitation is less focused on settlement and mainly aims to improve communication, recognition and trust. Good offices and message delivery are more limited. A third party may open contact, pass messages or help restart talks without influencing the terms of a deal. Its role becomes closer to formulation or directive mediation when it designs procedures, proposes formulas or changes incentives (OSCE, 2014, pp. 64-71; Soares, 2018, pp. 9-13).

A flexible concept is needed for the Iraqi cases. Calling every meeting in Baghdad mediation would overstate Iraq’s role, while counting only signed agreements would ignore confidential access, repeated contact and trust building. The article therefore uses intermediation as a broad category and evaluates the function Iraq actually performed. This separates diplomatic activity from effectiveness. An Iraqi initiative may be active but fail to produce a sustained process, or it may play a limited yet useful role before another actor moves the talks forward

2.2. Mediation Effectiveness, Strategy and Credibility

Studies of mediation effectiveness do not show that one mediator type or strategy works best in every setting. Bercovitch and Houston’s contingency approach argues that mediation outcomes depend on the nature of the dispute, the motivation of the parties, and the identity and strategy of the mediator. Later quantitative studies also show that different situations require different types of mediation. Facilitative or procedural methods may work better when the parties need better communication and want to keep control of the process. More directive strategies and stronger leverage may be more

effective in highly intense disputes or when the parties are close to an agreement (Bercovitch & Houston, 2000, pp. 175-176; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006, p. 332). Success should therefore be judged against the mediator's function and the stage of the process, not only by the presence of a final agreement.

The distinction between facilitation, formulation and manipulation helps define Iraq's likely role. Facilitation improves communication and information sharing. Formulation gives the intermediary more procedural influence through agenda setting, proposed formulas or possible compromises. Manipulation changes incentives through rewards, pressure, threats or guarantees (Beardsley, Quinn, Biswas, & Wilkenfield, 2006, pp. 63-64). Iraq can offer a discreet venue, deliver messages and maintain contact. It may also play a limited formulation role by clarifying procedures or sequencing issues. Yet fragmented authority and external dependencies limit its ability to impose costs, provide credible security guarantees or enforce implementation.

Mediator credibility does not require complete neutrality. Kydd (2003, p. 597) argues that close ties, and even perceived bias, can sometimes make information or advice for restraint more convincing. Mediation also depends on reputation, proximity, political links, and the parties' choice among available intermediaries (Crescenzi, Kadera, Mitchell, & Thyne, 2011, pp. 1071-1072). In Iraq's case, the key issue is relational acceptability. Both sides must see practical value in using Baghdad, even if Iraq's relations with them are uneven. Its ties with Iran may provide access but raise Arab concerns. At the same time, Iraq's Arab identity and stronger links with Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt may improve its acceptability without removing Iranian influence.

Party motivation comes before mediation technique. Ripeness theory connects productive talks to a costly deadlock and the belief that another path is possible (Zartman, 2000, pp. 225-250). This article uses a lower threshold than a fully developed mutually hurting stalemate. The parties do not need to view their rivalry as impossible to sustain. They only need to see value in reducing immediate risks or testing dialogue. Iraq can lower the costs of contact and protect early communication, but it usually cannot create room for bargaining when both governments remain committed to incompatible goals.

Bercovitch and Gartner (2006, pp. 331-333) also warn that mediation outcomes are shaped by selection effects. Mediators often become involved in especially difficult disputes, so the lack of a settlement does not mean their efforts had no value. At the same time, a later agreement should not automatically be credited to an earlier intermediary. This matters in the Iraqi case. A protected channel or repeated contact may be a meaningful result, even without a full settlement. Yet such limited effects still require evidence. The study therefore judges Iraq's performance through indicators suited to each stage and separates changes in the diplomatic process from the final resolution of the wider rivalry.

The difference between credibility and capability shows the limits of political relationships. Credibility comes from access, trust, local knowledge, and the ability to carry and explain messages. Capability comes from resources that can influence the parties' choices. Iraq may have useful contacts and access, but it cannot guarantee that the parties will follow an agreement. It can therefore help start negotiations without being able to complete or enforce the final deal.

2.3. Small-State Mediation, Fragmented Sovereignty and the Iraqi Puzzle

Research on small-state mediation shows how actors with limited coercive power can still serve as useful intermediaries. Discretion, diplomatic expertise, a non-threatening image and broad political ties may partly offset material weakness. Qatar has used mediation to raise its profile, strengthen strategic partnerships and support regime security, aided by financial resources and centralised decision making (Kamrava, 2011, pp. 552-556). Oman follows a quieter path based on policy continuity, confidentiality and its role as an "interlocutor state" with ties across Gulf divisions (Worrall, 2021, p. 134).

Iraq fits neither model. It has more population, territory and resources, but less institutional unity. Since 2003, power sharing, party patronage, executive rivalry and foreign sponsorship have divided authority. Dodge (2013, 2024) links this system to weak institutional coherence and the failure of formal institutions to control decision making. Haddad (2020, p. 31) presents the Popular Mobilization Units as part of a hybrid state, while Mansour (2021, p.2) views both the state and the PMF as overlapping power networks. This matters for foreign policy: the prime minister and foreign ministry may support regional de-escalation, while armed groups and party networks maintain separate external ties and coercive power.

Fragmentation does not only weaken Iraq's capacity; it has two opposing effects. Political, religious, commercial and security networks may give Iraqi leaders access to actors who rarely communicate directly. At the same time, these connections raise concerns about confidentiality, independence and government control. This sets Iraq apart from more institutionally coherent niche mediators. Its diplomatic role is genuine but unstable: the network ties that provide access also create its main credibility problem.

The term "spoiler" should be used carefully. Stedman applies it to actors who see peace as a threat and deliberately try to disrupt it, while later research warns against assuming intent from an actor's identity alone (Stedman, 1997, pp. 8-17; Greenhill & Major, 2007, pp. 7-8). Not every armed action that damages Iraq's diplomatic environment is meant to derail mediation. Domestic obstruction is therefore a better category. It covers deliberate opposition as well as coercive or political acts that weaken government credibility, even when diplomacy is not their main target.

Post-2003 literature also makes Iraqi sovereignty harder to describe in simple terms. Formal institutions operate alongside party appointments, informal deals and legally recognised armed groups that still maintain their own chains of command. Foreign-policy authority is therefore not missing, but shared and negotiated across institutions and networks. Prime ministers may gather enough power to launch an initiative, especially when foreign actors accept direct executive channels. Still, they cannot expect every institution or armed group to support the same diplomatic position. The key question is not whether Iraq is fully sovereign, but whether a specific initiative can secure enough authority, access and domestic acceptance to remain credible.

This helps explain why regional dialogue gained importance under al-Kadhimi and continued under al-Sudani. Mediation served as a way to manage external risks. By easing tensions among powers active inside Iraq, Baghdad could reduce the chance that their rivalries would unfold through Iraqi territory and institutions. It also helped Iraq present itself as a contributor to regional stability rather than simply a target of outside intervention (Hassan, 2023). Yet the strategy remained exposed to leadership change, institutional competition and armed groups with separate foreign ties. Iraq's diplomatic ambition was therefore partly a response to the costs of its fragmented sovereignty.

2.4. A Conditional and Stage-Specific Model of Iraqi Intermediation

The argument rests on three conditions. First, the parties must already have some reason to reduce tensions, which sets the limits of what Iraqi diplomacy can achieve. Second, Iraq needs access to authorised officials on both sides and must be accepted as a workable channel. Third, domestic actors must not disrupt the process, so contact can remain credible, confidential and sustained. These conditions may operate in combination. Access without readiness may produce only an offer of dialogue, while readiness without accepted access gives Iraq no clear role. Domestic opposition can weaken both.

Active neutrality is not an outcome of these conditions. It is a practical, issue-based approach through which Iraq keeps working relations with rival governments, avoids taking one side in the dispute, and uses its overlapping ties to support communication. It does not require equal distance, full independence or no political preference. Its value depends on party readiness, authorised access and limited domestic interference. Active neutrality therefore describes Iraq's diplomatic practice, while the three conditions explain when that practice produces a visible contribution.

The model leads to four expectations. Firstly, Iraqi intermediation is unlikely to move beyond early contact when either party has little interest in reducing tensions. Secondly, when both sides are open to de-escalation, Iraq's access to authorised officials can lower the political and informational costs of dialogue. Thirdly, domestic political resistance or interference by armed groups is likely to weaken the channel's credibility and continuity. Fourthly, Iraq's main advantage should therefore lie in opening talks and building confidence, while final agreement and implementation may require stronger leverage or outside support.

The last and fourth expectation points to a stage-based, possibly sequential pattern rather than a complete two-stage theory. Reid (2017, pp. 1401-1403) separates credibility leverage, based on knowledge and relationships, from capability leverage, which relies more on material resources. Iraq may have the first but lack the second. A stronger mediator can support Iraqi efforts with incentives, guarantees or diplomatic weight, but cannot create party readiness. Nor does one mediator following another prove coordination. The key issue is whether they bring different resources to different stages.

These expectations do not treat each condition as simply present or absent. Readiness and access can be stronger or weaker, while domestic obstruction may remain limited, manageable or severe. The comparison therefore relies on qualitative judgement rather than formal QCA. It asks whether the pattern of variation fits the argument. The most advanced process should show stronger readiness, accepted access and limited domestic interference. By contrast, access without readiness should produce little beyond proposed contact. Low-evidence cases are used cautiously because uncertainty about the role cannot be treated as proof that a theoretical condition was absent.

3. Findings

The four cases reveal variation in Iraq's diplomatic function, observable effect and evidentiary confidence. The following sections apply the same analytical questions to each initiative before the comparison separates these dimensions systematically.

3.1. Iran–Saudi Arabia: Sustained Facilitative Intermediation

The Iran–Saudi dialogue is the strongest example of sustained Iraqi facilitation. The two countries had cut diplomatic ties in 2016 and continued to compete across the region (Küpeli, 2025, pp. 270-336). Their rivalry was not only sectarian. It was also part of a wider struggle for influence, shaped by weak Arab states, proxy networks and the wars in Yemen and Syria (Gause, 2014, pp. 1-4). By 2021, however, both sides had reasons to lower tensions. Saudi Arabia faced the costs of the Yemen war and repeated attacks on its territory. Iran was under sanctions, economic strain and pressure from its commitments across several conflicts (Küpeli, 2016, pp. 99-100). Its relatively low-cost support for groups such as the Houthis did not remove the broader risks of escalation (Juneau, 2016, pp. 647-650). Neither government ended the rivalry, but both were willing to explore de-escalation.

Iraq helped turn this limited willingness into a discreet and continuing channel. Baghdad had close political and security ties with Tehran, while also working to improve relations with Riyadh and other Arab states. Mustafa al-Kadhimi's previous role as head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service gave him useful experience and personal contacts for security-based talks. Iraq could therefore reach senior officials on both sides without forcing either government to present the talks as a major change in strategy.

The talks began in secret and were led mainly by security officials. This format allowed both sides to discuss immediate threats and intentions before the dialogue gained a more public political role. In May 2021, Iraqi President Barham Salih confirmed that Iraq had hosted several rounds of Saudi–Iranian talks (Reuters, 2021). The process continued despite some pauses. In September 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said that five rounds had taken place in Baghdad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2022). An Iraqi Foreign Ministry record from July 2022 also referred to the dialogue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Iraq, 2022). Together, these sources show repeated contact, not a single meeting.

Iraq played a facilitative rather than directive role. It arranged secure contact, passed messages and lowered the political costs of exploratory talks at home and across the region. Baghdad also offered a regional setting where participation could be presented as consultation, not concession. Public evidence does not suggest that Iraq set the agenda, designed the final deal, or guaranteed its implementation. Its main contribution came at the opening stage and during early confidence building.

The outcome can be judged at two levels. First, the Baghdad rounds created regular direct contact after years without formal diplomatic relations. Second, they came before—and likely helped prepare the way for—formal normalisation. The joint statement issued in Beijing on 10 March 2023 restored diplomatic ties, thanked Iraq and Oman for hosting talks in 2021 and 2022, and named China as the host and sponsor of the final negotiations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). This confirms Iraq's early contribution while also showing its limits. Baghdad helped sustain the process, whereas Beijing provided the setting and political weight needed for closure.

This does not mean dialogue would have been impossible without Iraq. Both governments already had reasons to reduce immediate risks, and Oman offered another trusted channel. Iraq's clearest contribution was to reduce the political and practical costs of initial contact and keep communication open when neither side was ready for public normalisation. The available record cannot show which Iraqi messages shaped internal decisions, but the sequence supports an enabling role rather than sole causation.

The three conditions were more favourable here than in the other cases. First, both parties had identifiable incentives to reduce tensions. Second, Iraq had sustained access to authorised officials on both sides and was accepted as a workable channel, as reflected in the repeated Baghdad rounds and their later acknowledgement in the 2023 joint statement. Third, domestic fragmentation remained a potential constraint but did not prevent the continuation of the talks. The case is therefore classified as sustained facilitation, marked by repeated contact during the pre-negotiation and early negotiation stages. Evidentiary confidence is high because Iraq's hosting role was subsequently acknowledged by the parties.

The case also shows the difference between personal networks and institutional capacity. Al-Kadhimi's contacts helped open the channel, yet the process went beyond personal diplomacy because Iraqi institutions publicly supported it. Still, the evidence does not show that Baghdad built a permanent mediation system or that the process continued unchanged after the government transition. A narrower claim is more convincing: executive networks, supported by state institutions and sufficient domestic tolerance, made repeated facilitation possible during the early stages.

3.2. Iran–Jordan: Reported Facilitation with No Verified Sustained Process

Jordan's ties with Iran have been limited by tensions over Syria, border security, drug trafficking and Iran-linked armed groups. Iran has sought to reduce its regional isolation and keep channels open with Arab states. Jordan, meanwhile, has tried to manage security threats without suggesting a wider strategic shift. These interests created some room for contact, but far less mutual readiness than in the Saudi–Iranian case.

In June 2022, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said that Iraq was hosting mediation talks involving Iran, Jordan and Egypt. He gave no details about the participants, agenda, number of meetings, or format. Neither Amman nor Cairo confirmed an ongoing process at the time (al-Khazen, 2022). Iraq still had useful access to both sides. It maintained close ties with Iran while expanding political, economic and security cooperation with Jordan. Baghdad may therefore have passed messages or raised issues that were difficult to discuss directly. Yet the evidence does not confirm repeated meetings, a formal procedure, or a negotiating channel recognised by both parties.

The case also points to Iraq's credibility problem, although it does not prove a direct causal link. In January 2024, a drone attack on a US position in north-eastern Jordan killed three American service members. US officials blamed Iran-backed militants, while Iran denied direct involvement (Reuters, 2024a). The attack happened well after the reported 2022 initiative, so it cannot explain why the process remained limited. It also does not show deliberate efforts to undermine Iran–Jordan dialogue. Its relevance is narrower: it illustrates the challenge Baghdad faces when armed networks linked to Iraq's political and security environment carry out attacks that affect Jordanian security.

The case is therefore best classified as reported good offices or facilitation, with no confirmed sustained process. Iraq likely had access to both sides, and the foreign minister's statement records an official claim of facilitation. Still, evidence of continued contact or any clear effect remains limited. Party readiness was weak, security mistrust was high and the dispute involved armed activity in Syria and Iraq, not only poor communication. Iraq's role is coded as reported message transmission or good offices, with no verified lasting outcome and low-to-moderate evidentiary confidence. The case shows that access alone does not produce effective intermediation.

This label is intentionally more cautious than "limited mediation." Good offices may matter even when they leave little public evidence, but the term should rest on proof of a real third-party role, not simply Iraq's ability to speak with both governments. The Jordan case mainly marks the line between possible access and confirmed intermediation. It also highlights the importance of the agenda: disputes involving armed networks, border security and Syrian territory cannot be addressed through message delivery alone.

3.3. Iran–Egypt: A Low-Evidence Shadow Case

The Iran–Egypt initiative is included as a low-evidence shadow case. Its purpose is not to prove that Iraqi facilitation was effective, but to separate an announced third-party role from a confirmed process. It also helps avoid focusing only on well-documented cases.

In June 2022, Fuad Hussein named Egypt among the countries involved in Iraqi-hosted mediation. However, he offered no practical details, and Egypt did not publicly confirm the claim (al-Khazen,

2022). In May 2023, an Iranian parliamentarian said that Baghdad was hosting early Iran–Egypt talks aimed at preparing higher-level contact (Mustafa, 2023). This suggests that some communication may have taken place. Still, there was no joint statement, clear institutional format, or evidence of repeated Iraqi involvement.

Iran–Egypt contacts later became more visible. In October 2024, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi met Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in Cairo to discuss bilateral ties and regional de-escalation (Presidency of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 2024; Reuters, 2024d). This sequence is consistent with earlier Iraqi message delivery, but it does not prove that Iraq caused the later contact. The Gaza war, fears of wider conflict, Egypt’s maritime and border concerns, and Iran’s outreach to Arab states also encouraged direct engagement.

The evidence supports only a reported claim of Iraqi facilitation, not the conclusion that Baghdad drove the later rapprochement. Iraq’s role is therefore coded as possible message transmission or facilitation, with no later effect that can be clearly linked to its involvement. Evidentiary confidence remains low. The case shows the limits of public evidence without assuming that undocumented contacts either mattered or never occurred.

3.4. Türkiye–Assad Regime Reconciliation: Access without Sufficient Readiness

The attempted rapprochement between Türkiye and the Assad regime is the clearest case where Iraqi access failed to produce a lasting process. Ankara and Damascus had remained on opposing sides since 2011. Türkiye later showed willingness to reopen contact, but serious disputes continued over Turkish troops, support for armed opposition groups, border security, refugees and Kurdish-led forces in northern Syria.

Iraq had both an interest in mediation and access to each side. Syrian instability affected Iraqi border security, trade and the threat posed by the Islamic State. Baghdad kept official ties with Damascus while strengthening political and economic relations with Ankara. In 2024, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said he was in contact with both Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Bashar al-Assad and was seeking common ground for reconciliation. Erdoğan later referred to al-Sudani’s plans and publicly mentioned Iraqi mediation as a possible route toward restoring Turkish–Syrian relations (Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2024). This showed Ankara’s openness to an Iraqi role, but not a formal mandate accepted by both sides. Iraqi officials also considered hosting direct talks (Akin, 2024).

The main barrier was limited party readiness. Türkiye was open to meeting, but Damascus demanded progress on core issues, especially Turkish withdrawal and support for armed groups. In July 2024, Assad said that talks would matter only if these questions were addressed (Reuters, 2024b). The parties therefore disagreed over the purpose, order and terms of negotiation. A general willingness to talk did not create a shared basis for bargaining.

Iraq also lacked the leverage needed to change the parties’ positions. It could offer a venue, carry proposals and reduce the political cost of early contact. It could not, however, decide the future of Turkish forces, meet Syrian security demands, resolve the refugee and Kurdish issues, or control the armed groups involved. Russia had greater military and political influence over Damascus and had already supported Turkish–Syrian talks, yet it also failed to bridge the main disagreements (Reuters, 2024e, 2024f). This supports the readiness argument: leverage can strengthen facilitation, but it cannot create a basic bargaining range where none exists.

Iraqi access might, in theory, have worked alongside the influence of a stronger actor. The available evidence does not support the claim that joint Iraqi–Russian involvement would have produced an agreement. By August 2024, Assad said that initiatives involving Russia, Iran and Iraq had achieved no concrete results (Reuters, 2024f). No sustained Iraqi-hosted negotiations followed. The fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 then ended this diplomatic track (Reuters, 2024c). Iraq did not cause that change, but the lack of earlier progress shows that the parties had not reached a workable basis for talks.

The case is therefore classified as attempted facilitation without sustained negotiations. Iraq had strong access to both sides, and Ankara publicly welcomed a possible Iraqi role. Yet the parties had little shared readiness to negotiate. Their conflicting positions, rather than domestic opposition inside Iraq, were the main barrier. Confidence in the evidence is moderate to high because both Iraqi and Turkish

officials discussed the initiative publicly. The case shows that access can support diplomacy, but it cannot replace a common reason to enter negotiations.

The comparison with the Saudi–Iranian talks also shows the importance of secrecy. Iraqi involvement in Türkiye–Syria dialogue became public before a secure format had been created. Such statements signalled political interest, but they also brought domestic pressure and greater focus on preconditions. Publicity alone did not cause the failure, since the core disputes remained decisive. Still, the case suggests that Iraq is better suited to quiet early contact than to public efforts aimed at resolving deeply rooted disagreements.

3.5. Comparative Findings

The comparison points to a conditional and stage-based view of Iraqi intermediation. In the Iran–Saudi case, party readiness, Iraqi access, manageable domestic constraints, repeated facilitation and strong evidence came together. Türkiye–Syria shows a different pattern: Baghdad had access to both governments, and Ankara publicly supported possible mediation, but incompatible positions blocked sustained talks. Iran–Jordan and Iran–Egypt raise another issue: weak evidence. Iraqi statements show diplomatic intent, but not repeated involvement or outcomes clearly linked to Baghdad.

Table 1 keeps separate several dimensions that earlier classifications may blur. It reports diplomatic function, observable effect and evidence strength independently, while distinguishing domestic non-obstruction from the wider security and bargaining limits of each dispute.

Table 1. Comparative Assessment of Iraq’s Regional Intermediation

Case	Party readiness	Iraqi access	Domestic obstruction	Diplomatic function	Observable effect	Evidence confidence	Reached stage
Iran–Saudi Arabia	High	High	Limited	Sustained facilitation	Repeated contact; preparatory contribution to normalisation	High	Pre-negotiation / early negotiation
Iran–Jordan	Limited	Moderate–high	Indeterminate	Reported good offices	No verified sustained process	Low	Initial contact
Iran–Egypt	Limited in 2022; later increasing	Reported	Indeterminate	Reported message transmission / facilitation	No effect attributable to Iraq	Low	Uncertain
Türkiye–Assad regime	Low	Moderate–high	Limited	Attempted facilitation	No sustained negotiation	Moderate	Pre-negotiation failed

Source: Author’s compilation.

The comparison suggests that party readiness is an important explanatory condition. Iraq did not create Saudi or Iranian interest in lowering tensions; it offered a practical channel through which both sides could test that interest. In the Türkiye–Syria case, however, communication was not the main problem. The two governments disagreed over what talks should address and under what conditions they should begin. This contrast supports treating readiness as a scope condition, not as an Iraqi diplomatic asset.

Iraq’s main source of agency is its access to both sides. Baghdad’s ties with Iran, Arab states, Türkiye and Syria allow senior officials to cross political divides that limit other actors. Yet access produced a verified contribution only when the parties accepted repeated contact. The weaker-evidence cases show why broad bilateral ties or a one-sided announcement should not be taken as proof of an active process.

Domestic fragmentation matters, but not in every case or to the same degree. It remained manageable during the Saudi–Iranian talks and was not the main reason the Türkiye–Syria initiative stalled. It is more relevant to Iran–Jordan as a credibility concern, although the Tower 22 attack cannot

explain the limited progress of the 2022 initiative. More broadly, hybrid armed networks may create a gap between official diplomacy and coercive action, making it harder for Baghdad to speak with a single authoritative voice (Haddad, 2020, pp. 57-59; Mansour, 2021, pp. 18-31).

The findings also sharpen the idea of active neutrality. Iraq did not keep the same distance from every side, nor did it set aside its existing political, economic, or security ties. Instead, it stayed connected to rival networks while avoiding full alignment in the specific dispute under discussion. In a January 2025 account of al-Sudani's interview, the Iraqi Prime Minister's Media Office described Iraq's parallel relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the United States as an advantage in narrowing regional differences (Iraqi Prime Minister's Media Office, 2025). Active neutrality is therefore a way of using relationships, not evidence of complete independence.

The evidence also points to a possible sequence in mediation. Iraq appears most useful in opening channels, protecting confidential contact and building early trust. Later stages may require a stronger sponsor able to provide guarantees, incentives, implementation support, or wider diplomatic weight. The Saudi–Iranian case fits this pattern: talks hosted by Iraq and Oman came before China sponsored the final agreement. This does not prove that the mediators coordinated their roles. Türkiye–Syria also shows that stronger leverage may help, but cannot replace a basic willingness to negotiate. Different mediators can complement one another only when the parties are ready to bargain.

The quality of the evidence is equally important. Iraq's role is easiest to exaggerate when talks are secret and governments benefit from presenting themselves as regionally influential. By keeping Iran–Egypt as a shadow case and classifying Iran–Jordan only as reported good offices, the study does not treat Iraqi statements as equal to jointly confirmed processes. It also avoids assuming that weak documentation means no diplomacy occurred. The conclusion is therefore limited to Iraq's observable contribution, not every confidential contact it may have pursued.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined when Iraq can make an effective contribution as an intermediary in Middle Eastern interstate disputes. The cases suggest that Baghdad has developed a useful but limited diplomatic role. Across the cases examined, Iraq appears most useful in opening confidential channels, passing messages, maintaining early contact and offering an acceptable venue. Its ability to alter strategic priorities, impose agreements, provide guarantees, or enforce implementation remains much weaker.

The three conditions play different roles. Party readiness sets the basic limits of Iraqi diplomacy. The Saudi–Iranian talks moved forward because both sides wanted to reduce immediate risks, while Türkiye–Syria stalled because they could not agree on the aims or order of negotiations. Iraq's main strengths are access to both sides and acceptance as a workable channel. Domestic non-obstruction supports credibility and continuity, but its impact differs across cases and cannot be assumed from every regional violent incident. The findings therefore assess diplomatic function, visible effects and evidence separately rather than using a simple success-or-failure label.

The article also refines the idea of active neutrality. It does not result from party readiness or the absence of domestic opposition. Rather, it is an issue-based practice in which Iraq keeps working ties with rival governments, avoids taking one side in a specific dispute, and uses its relationships to support communication. Contested sovereignty does not remove diplomatic agency, but makes it fragile and dependent on networks. The same ties that create access can also weaken autonomy, confidentiality and trust in state control.

The Iraqi case also expands mediation research beyond major powers and coherent small-state mediators. It shows that access, trust and local knowledge can matter even when material leverage is limited, especially before formal negotiations begin. The Saudi–Iranian case points to a possible sequence: a regional intermediary opens the channel, followed by a stronger sponsor at the final stage. This remains a tentative claim. Further research should test whether similar patterns appear elsewhere and whether they reflect coordination or simple succession.

The policy implications follow from these findings. Since effective initiatives often rely on personal contacts, Iraq should preserve these networks while placing the knowledge they generate on a firmer institutional basis. A small mediation and dialogue-support unit could be created within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Prime Minister's Office. It should work through a formal coordination mechanism that includes the foreign ministry, the prime minister's office and relevant security bodies.

The aim is not to create more bureaucracy, but to ensure continuity, authorised communication, secure records and a clear line between public diplomacy and confidential dialogue.

Iraq should also focus on the stages where it has the strongest advantage. These include good offices, secure communication, agenda setting and technical talks on border security, water, trade and energy. Baghdad should not present itself as a guarantor when it lacks the authority or resources to enforce commitments. Regional or international partners may provide stronger leverage later in the process, but their role should complement Iraq's function. They cannot create a willingness to negotiate where none exists.

The confidential nature of these initiatives, together with the lack of elite interviews and internal diplomatic records, limits the study's ability to isolate Iraq's contribution from party readiness, rival intermediaries and wider regional changes. Public documentation may also understate confidential contacts while official accounts may overstate Iraqi influence; the evidence-confidence coding reduces but cannot eliminate this problem. Evidentiary asymmetry across the cases means that the comparison is more reliable in identifying Iraq's observable diplomatic functions and the stages reached than in estimating the magnitude of its causal effect. The findings should therefore be read as conditional assessments of plausible contribution rather than tests of necessity or sufficiency. Future research could draw on interviews, internal records and comparisons with Oman and Qatar to test whether the proposed conditions are necessary, sufficient, or simply increase the likelihood of effective mediation. The findings suggest that Iraq may be evolving beyond its traditional role as an arena for regional rivalry, although its diplomatic role remains conditional, facilitative, and strongest before final political agreement.

A wider lesson concerns how diplomatic agency should be studied in fragmented states. It cannot be measured only through formal sovereignty, material power, or public announcements. Greater attention should be given to the function performed, access accepted by the parties, continuity of the process and any visible contribution made despite internal divisions. This approach may also apply to states where formal institutions coexist with powerful parties, militias, or patronage networks.

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