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European Languages	زبانهای اروپائی

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02.07.2025

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Refusing the leash: How Iraq shut its skies to Tel Aviv and held the line with Washington

As a tentative ceasefire holds between Iran and Israel, Baghdad digs in – asserting sovereignty, pushing back on airspace violations, and refusing to be the ignition point for renewed regional war.

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When Israel launched war against Iran in June, Iraq was never far from the fire, geographically or politically. Fighter jets, missiles, and drones streaked across Iraqi skies, raising alarms from the borderlands to Baghdad.

Iraq was not a party to the confrontation, yet, as always, found itself caught in the crosshairs – not by choice, but by historical burden, geography, and alliances it never fully embraced.

Pinned between an ideological proximity to Tehran and a reformist alignment with Washington, Baghdad chose the rope's midpoint – a stance not of balance but of survival. As one government adviser tells *The Cradle*:

"We chose to stay in the middle. Not because we like poise, but because falling in any direction means burning the whole house."

Baghdad, between flames and sovereignty

At the height of the regional conflagration, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's government had little room to maneuver outside of one option: preventive diplomacy.

Drones and warplanes crossed Iraq as though its sovereignty were optional, and mutual strikes between Tehran and Tel Aviv threatened to collapse even Baghdad's neutrality.

But Baghdad held together. It refused to be used – no bases offered, no skies granted, no alignments declared. The closure of Iraqi airspace, while framed as a technical security measure, was in truth a declaration of sovereignty: Iraq is not a conduit for aggression; it is not a backyard for others' wars.

Behind this decision were messages on two fronts. To Tehran: Iraq will not be a springboard against you. To Washington: Strategic partnership is not measured in airspace handovers, but in maintaining internal stability.

The government held the stick from the middle, not out of fear, but out of sober awareness that slipping in any direction could turn Baghdad into a powder keg.

“Iraq, which was not in the heart of the battle, chose to be at the heart of wisdom,” a political advisor to the Iraqi government tells *The Cradle* of Baghdad's delicate posture.

“It did not raise the banner of bias, did not remain silent out of fear, but stood in a rare area of sovereignty – where neutrality is formulated as a courageous decision, not an ambiguous escape.”

A parliament of paralysis, not policy

As missiles flew, 55 parliamentarians called for an emergency session. But instead of unity, the chamber descended into fear and confusion, issuing only toothless condemnations. Behind closed doors, factions split along ideological and geopolitical lines – some pushed for solidarity with Iran in the name of faith and geography, others clung to neutrality as if it were a lifeline.

In the end, nothing decisive emerged. Parliament became a mirror of Iraq's fractured political street – a confused stillness, waiting for the storm to pass without demanding shelter.

At that session, the legislature embodied official Iraq: no fateful decision, no bold alignment, just an attempt to buy time until others declared the war's end.

Najaf's ‘quiet’ power: Iraq's moral compass in war

From the seminary and shrine city of Najaf, the Shia religious authority chose silence with a purpose. When Iraq’s top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, eventually spoke, he issued two carefully calibrated statements.

First, a condemnation of Tel Aviv's attacks on Iranian civilians and scientists. Second, a warning about catastrophic consequences for regional security, urging restraint and a return to reason and international law.

Yet despite his and the hawza's (religious seminary) immense influence, no political directives were issued – only a framework for sovereignty rooted in moral clarity: no to war, no to entangling Iraq, yes to protecting blood and state. The marjaiya (Shia religious authority) spoke not with the noise of politics, but with the weight of history.

This silence, deliberate and principled, served as a subtle form of guidance to the political class – a reminder that Iraq's highest religious authority does not speak often, but when it does, it carries the voice of the nation.

Yet to call Najaf apolitical or quiescent is both exaggerated and analytically lazy. Its interventions may be sparing, but they are never neutral. Sistani's 2014 fatwa, after all, led to the establishment of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in its fight against ISIS – many of whose factions are part of the region's Axis of Resistance, and have vowed to intervene.

Shia factions: deterrence without ignition

In the war's early days, resistance factions close to Tehran remained unusually quiet. Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba observed rather than reacted. No threats, no mobilizations – only silence and calculation.

That silence was deliberate. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Secretary-General Qais al-Khazali eventually placed blame squarely on Washington and Tel Aviv but avoided incitement or direct mobilization. Kataib Hezbollah issued only a warning:

"We closely monitor the movements of the American enemy in the region, and if Washington intervenes in the war, we will act immediately against its interests and bases without hesitation."

This was not indecision or a revision of ideology, but maturity and a recalibration of tactics. After years of exhausting conflict, the factions understood the cost of escalation. Deterrence now meant discipline, not provocation. These groups, long embedded in Iraq's political and military architecture, understood that acting without consensus could cost them both local legitimacy and strategic ground.

Sunni and Kurdish stances: active neutrality

Sunni political leaders inform *The Cradle* that their abstention from the fray was not cowardice, but realism. Iraq, they argue, lacks the tools or mandate to participate in a war launched from elsewhere, between two other states. During the fire, their calls focused on calm, stability, and protecting the internal front.

This was not political evasion but a recognition of limits. Iraq is still in recovery mode, balancing competing security interests and fragmented governance.

In the Kurdistan Region, the stance was clearer. Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Nechirvan Barzani declared Erbil would not be a battleground, even as 11 drones landed on its soil. The response was threefold: restraint, tight coordination with Baghdad, and diplomatic balance with both Tehran and Washington.

The Kurdish leadership, bound by geopolitical pragmatism and proximity to US interests, understood that neutrality had to be more than passive – it had to be structured.

For both Sunni and Kurdish forces, abstaining from war was an act of sovereignty. But this posture also reflected the limits of that sovereignty, particularly in the Kurdish case, where so-called neutrality has long masked strategic dependence on US military presence and alignment with western and Israeli designs for northern Iraq.

Iraq's security apparatus: alert but contained

Iraq's security forces acted with quiet urgency. Border controls were tightened, and several drone infiltration attempts were intercepted before reaching their targets. However, two drones did manage to strike radar systems at Camp Taji, a US military installation, and the Imam Ali base in Dhi Qar just hours before the ceasefire, inflicting significant damage and raising concerns about efforts to compromise Iraq's defensive posture.

Baghdad launched an urgent investigation. Was this random? Or a warning from a third party unwilling to let Iraq stay out of the fray?

Though the government avoided naming culprits, the message to all actors was unmistakable: Only the Iraqi state must command this land. Any rogue action, even by allied factions, would undermine years of fragile stability.

There is still ambiguity over who benefits from dragging Iraq into a direct confrontation. But the security establishment, despite limited air defense capacities, has increasingly drawn red lines around the country’s autonomy.

The war rattled Iraq's markets. The dinar dipped, imports stalled, and anxiety gripped the commercial sectors. The Central Bank responded swiftly, stabilizing the currency and cushioning the impact with fiscal interventions.

Meanwhile, surging oil prices opened new opportunities. Iraq stepped in where Iran's role temporarily diminished, signing more than $7 billion in new investment deals. It signaled that Baghdad could still attract capital despite a smoke-laden sky.

But the lesson here is deeper: Economic sovereignty demands more than price gains or contracts. It requires confidence from investors, from citizens, from institutions. And Baghdad, despite the surrounding inferno, managed to hold that line.

As economists tell *The Cradle*, Iraq's financial stability depends not only on revenue, but on the state's ability to manage public anxiety.

Not Tehran’s proxy, not Washington’s pawn

In its official testimony to the UN Security Council on 20 June, Baghdad recorded more than 50 airspace violations by Israeli aircraft crossing its skies en route to targets inside Iran.

They demanded an immediate and binding halt to all air violations infringing on Iraq’s sovereignty, along with international guarantees to protect its skies from any further aggression, regardless of source. Baghdad also called for technical support to enhance its defensive capabilities in line with the scale of regional threats.

These demands were not a rhetoric of diplomatic protocol, but an attempt to draw clear boundaries in the map of the regional conflict, and to establish what must be self-evident: that Iraq is not a strategic vacuum, nor a sky without sovereignty, nor a land open to possibilities.

Wars reveal more than battlefields; they expose the moral imagination of states. Baghdad, though limited in its military deterrence, is demonstrating political resolve. Its engagement at the UN was not weakness, but self-respect, refusing to be reduced to an overflight corridor or a proxy battleground.

The Iraqi state has managed to maneuver diplomatically without surrendering its dialogue with Washington or straining ties with Tehran. In doing so, Baghdad redefined neutrality, not as passivity, but as an active stance demanding constant assertion and negotiation.

Iraq’s survival no longer hinges on choosing sides. It depends on choosing sovereignty and compelling the world to honor it.

This war proved one thing: Iraq is no longer just a passive arena. It is now a political actor, shaping outcomes not through force, but through refusal. And in this refusal lies its power.

JUL 1, 2025