

“Made in Iran”: The Iranian Involvement in Iraq

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Evidence of Iran’s involvement in Iraq has mounted in recent years. The military assistance Iran supplies the Shiite militias in Iraq in the form of financing, training, and armaments, primarily through the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, has drawn most of the attention. At the same time, Iranian involvement in Iraq has assumed several non-military dimensions, whereby Iran is seeking to forge a state with Shiite dominance sharing Iran’s interests, a state that would not threaten Iran’s standing in the region and would be as free of American influence as possible. This essay seeks to examine the nature of this involvement and the motivation behind it, as well as its limits and potential ramifications.

Iran shares its longest land border, some 1,500 km, with Iraq, and is keenly interested in the old/new state-in-the-making. It seeks to nurture the large Shiite stronghold (while weakening the Sunni identity) in southern Iraq, which controls the strategic access to the Gulf and about half of all Iraqi oil reserves. As early as 2007, Ahmadinejad announced that “Iran is prepared to fill the vacuum left by the Americans retreating from Iraq,”¹ and indeed, Iranian involvement in Iraq is motivated by what Iran views as its natural sphere of influence. It is fed by concern about the future nature of an Iraqi state, Tehran’s ambitions for regional hegemony, and the understanding that Iraq is an important component in attaining that hegemony. Until the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Iraq was Iran’s primary rival for control of the region; at least for the foreseeable future, the military balance of power clearly favors Iran. Iran is also seeking to maintain the not inconsiderable gains it has made (largely courtesy of the US) with the weakening of the Iraqi state and the

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rise of its Shiite element. The fact that the 50,000 US soldiers remaining in Iraq are scheduled – unless a new agreement is signed – to leave by the end of 2011 is liable to propel Iran to intervene in Iraq even more, so that the state is further aligned with Iranian interests.

The fear that Iraq will not be able to stand on its own and may de facto become an Iranian satellite is not without foundation. As the American forces in Iraq thin out, Iraq's neighbors are liable to be increasingly motivated to have an even greater say in the workings of the state and try to fill the vacuum that will be created by the withdrawal. Indeed, since 2003 all the countries bordering Iraq have attempted to increase their influence there to advance their own particular interests, but Iranian involvement in Iraq has exceeded other foreign influence. This involvement is evident in several and often overlapping areas, among them the military, political, religious, and economic sectors.

The Quds Force and the Shiite Militias

Since 2003, Iraq's inherent weakness has opened the door for external involvement from Iran as a way for Tehran to expand its influence, reduce the risk to its national security, and help it gain hegemony in the Gulf region. In this context, the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards – a force established in the early 1990s in order to promote Iran's interests beyond Iranian borders via military, political, and economic means – supplies financing, equipment, and arms to Shiite militias in Iraq. Training includes methods for surveillance of targets and rigging and detonating powerful roadside bombs, which have caused the deaths of many Iraqi and American soldiers.²

Among the leading American concerns in recent years is the tactical military assistance given by Iran to the Shiite militias. Commanders in the US military who served in southern Iraq testified that Iran has posted Quds Force representatives there in civilian dress to gather intelligence and maintain contact with pro-Iranian factions, particularly in Shiite provinces. The major function of these Iranian "diplomats" is to identify and train Iraqi fighters, set up safe transit routes for activists and arms between Iraq and Iran, and aid militias in terrorist activities.³ American intelligence has reported that Iran also works with Hizbollah operatives (who speak Arabic and are seen as seasoned veterans), even though in

the past Iranian senior officials pledged to the Americans to stop this type of activity.⁴

The fact that the Iran-Iraq border is for the most part unmanned made it possible for Iran after the fall of Saddam Hussein to have many operatives infiltrate into southern Iraq in order to bolster the Iranian influence there. According to various estimates, over 1.5 million people have crossed the border;⁵ many of them are exiles, but others, led by members of the Revolutionary Guards, came at Iran's behest. Since 2003, Revolutionary Guards Quds Force personnel have moved around Iraq under diplomatic cover in order to avoid leaving Iranian fingerprints and maintain their anonymity; to a large extent, to use General Petraeus' expression, they serve as the executive arm of Iran's foreign policy in Iraq.⁶ Former Iranian ambassador Hassan Kazemi-Qomi was himself an officer in the Revolutionary Guards; before that, he operated in Lebanon in a consulting position with Hizbollah. Similarly, current Iranian ambassador Hassan Danafar served in the Revolutionary Guards Navy. Nor is Iranian involvement in the Kurdish region new. Over the last decade, Iranian intelligence personnel have operated there virtually unopposed in what has long since become an autonomous Kurdish state,⁷ as evidenced by the fact that in 2007 American soldiers apprehended (and released in 2009) five "Iranian diplomats" in the capital Erbil, on suspicion they had assisted Shiite armed forces.

Iraqi security forces, with American help, routinely carry out raids along the Iranian border and have even built bases near the border in order to foil arms smuggling from Iran to Iraq. From time to time, arms such as rockets, mortar bombs, artillery shells, ammunition, and RPGs stamped "made in Iran" are discovered in large quantities.⁸ In addition, the 2008 Battle of Basra between the Iran-allied Mahdi army (Jaish al-Mahdi) and American and Iraqi forces weakened the militia significantly and caused its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, in exile in Qom since 2007, to declare that he was shifting his activity from the military to the political and social arena. In practice, his followers split into smaller armed groups, such as the Hizbollah Brigades, which are under Iranian auspices.

Despite the links between the Shiite religious leaderships in Iran and Iraq, there is little probability that Iraqi Shiites will subordinate their national loyalty to their religious beliefs and side with Iran over Iraq.

The American Defense Department claims that since 2009 Iran has reduced the number of militias it supports, although it has improved training and upgraded the arms it supplies.⁹ It is unclear what lies behind the selective reduction of Iranian support for the Shiite militias. Was it the result of growing American pressure, or a trust-building move for the incoming Obama administration and the adjustment in the administration's policy towards Iran? Was it an understanding that at this stage it is necessary to stress political influence that will not generate antagonism towards Iran in Iraq? In mid 2010 General Ray Odierno, the former commander of US forces in Iraq, stated that Iran continues to arm and train militias within its own borders, but is currently more interested in intelligence operations and political influence. In his opinion, the militias intend to take advantage of the American withdrawal and carry out attacks against the forces, in order to reap a propaganda victory by creating the image of an American withdrawal under fire.¹⁰

While Iran has signed a string of agreements with Iraq, including agreements on military cooperation, it is liable – certainly in the absence of American forces – to exploit both its military advantage and Iraqi instability to “solve” the problems of the minorities and border disputes. Indeed, it seems that in the past year, perhaps in light of the continuing American withdrawal, Iran has felt freer to make aggressive moves against Iraq: on several occasions, Iranian military forces penetrated deep into Iraqi territory, whether to capture, at least temporarily, a disputed oilfield (December 2009) or to act more aggressively than in the past against Kurdish rebels.¹¹ In December 2010, Iran even held a ground maneuver near the Iraqi border, unusual in its scope and location.¹² To date, these actions have not elicited a determined Iraqi (or American) response beyond a faint call for the need to respect Iraqi sovereignty.

The Political Dimension

Iranian interests, particularly the drive to bring about Shiite dominance in Iraq have to date coincided, albeit indirectly, with American interests, as the United States has sought to promote a model of representative democracy in Iraq. The fact that Iraq's population is 60 percent Shiite has helped. The Iranian interest, i.e., translating the demographic advantage into more political influence in Iraq, has made many strides forward: for the first time in the history of modern Iraq, Shiites hold the reins of state.

During Saddam Hussein's rule, Iran granted asylum to a host of Iraqi opposition organizations, and part of its ability to affect Iraqi politics today is linked to the fact that the individuals comprising a significant portion of the Iraqi political map formerly resided in Iran. Beyond political asylum, Iran supplied these opposition organizations with financial, organizational, and logistical assistance, thereby contributing to the development of a dependent relationship on personal as well as ideological levels.¹³

Iran failed to prevent the signing of agreements late in the Bush administration on strategic relations between Iraq and the United States. Yet because of the pressure Iran exerted on the al-Maliki government, the timetable obligates the withdrawal of US forces and a paragraph forbids Iraq from attacking neighboring countries from its territory. Another example of the extent of Iranian influence is the direct involvement of Quds Force Commanding Officer Sulemani: according to reports, he is one of the signatories on a 2008 ceasefire agreement between Iraqi government forces and Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army signed in Basra.¹⁴

Already a few years ago, the Americans warned of Iranian involvement in Iraq's internal political arena: "They can change the election results with roadside bombs, killings, assassinations of important candidates. And they can do this so that other elements will be blamed."¹⁵ As part of its military activity, Iran's political power relies on its use of proxies, and when incriminated, its ability to deny affiliation with them.

Many observers speculated that following the March 2010 elections the establishment of a government would be delayed, but no one expected the intensity of the conflict over the election results themselves. However, the tensions should have come as no surprise, as the government's composition will largely determine the future of the Iraqi state for years to come and perhaps also the scope of external involvement in its internal matters. Thus, all of Iraq's neighbors were prompted in one way or another – through direct financial assistance, propaganda, or falsification and fraud – to fashion a favorable (from their own perspectives) Iraqi government. Of Iraq's neighbors, Iran apparently

The future relationship between the US and Iraq will likely be the leading factor regarding Iran's ability to intervene in Iraq's internal matters.

enjoys the most influence in Iraq, primarily because it does not shy away from maintaining ties with almost every political entity in Iraq.

US military commanders claimed there was intelligence evidence of Iranian attempts to influence the election results through financial and military assistance via various proxies in Iraqi politics.¹⁶ Secretary of State Clinton too, in a hearing before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, noted that the United States was doing all it could to promote widespread participation in the elections to counteract the effect of Iranian efforts to manipulate the results through bribery and financial support of candidates.¹⁷ Before the elections, the Justice and Accountability Commission, whose legal validity is unclear, was asked to make sure that the candidates would not include former Ba'athists. In practice, the JAC banned hundreds of candidates, mostly Sunnis or secular Shiites, in a transparent – though ultimately unsuccessful – attempt to cast Iraqi politics in an Iranian mold.

Iran has exerted much effort to unite the Shiite political factions in Iraq so that they can form a government. Indeed, the political pilgrimage to Iran immediately after the elections demonstrated just how significant its role was in shaping the future government of Iraq. Delegations from all parties came to Tehran; even Ayad Allawi, who had accused Iran of negative interference in Iraq and an attempt to keep him from being appointed prime minister, paid a call.¹⁸ Allawi, who seems to enjoy considerable Saudi Arabian support despite his being Shiite, won many votes among Sunnis. He managed to convince them he would see to restoring their rights and would protect their interests. That he is an outspoken secularist whose party includes many prominent Sunni leaders apparently helped his candidacy. Another reason for the support he garnered is linked to the hostility many Sunnis feel towards Iran and the fear of its influence.¹⁹ Iran did not conceal its desire for the Shiite blocs to overcome their differences and take advantage of their numerical advantage in order to choose the next Iraqi prime minister, which is exactly what happened.²⁰ Moreover, the political clout of Iran's most prominent representative in the government – Muqtada al-Sadr (40 seats) – and his ability to tip the scales one way or the other greatly allows him to steer future Iraqi politics according to the wishes of his patrons.

The Religious Dimension

The Shiites, who represent 60-65 percent of Iraq's population, have taken control of centers of power in the country, but their sense of loyalty to Iraq has so far prevented an even bigger bloodbath and maintained the framework of the state. Thus despite the links between the Shiite religious leaderships in Iran and Iraq, there is little probability that Iraqi Shiites will subordinate their national loyalty to their religious beliefs and side with Iran over Iraq. Over the years, Shiites in Iraq, with a few exceptions, have identified with the Iraqi nation and have distinguished themselves from their Iranian brothers.²¹

In addition, most Shiites reject the principle of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (the absolute guardianship of Islamic clerics) as formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini. The religious authorities in Najaf, headed by Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most senior Shiite cleric in Iraq (with higher religious authority than Khamenei himself), have more than once expressed their opposition to the idea that the supreme authority in Iraq would be simultaneously religious and political, like the model applied in Iran. Likewise, the Iraqi Shiites are not a homogenous bloc, as there are significant political and ideological rivalries between various groups that are locked in struggle with one another. In the recent parliamentary elections and unlike in the past, Ayatollah Sistani refrained from even veiled involvement or expressions of support for one political party or another. After the elections he worked to establish as broad-based a government as possible that would represent all ethnic groups and would comprise most of the large parties, including the Allawi-led bloc.

However, religious affinities have not erased cross-border competition. Iran, as a Shiite nation, would presumably be interested in strengthening the Iraqi Shiite component. The flourishing of the Shiite holy cities of Najaf (where tradition places the burial place of Ali, the founder of Shia and its first imam) and Karbala, more holy than Qom in Iran, is likely to steal the primacy Iran's Shia has enjoyed to date. Moreover, strengthening the religious elite in Iraq at the expense of its Iranian counterpart is likely to play into the hands of those in Iran – especially in the opposition – who would like to promote pluralism and challenge the religious authority at the base of the Tehran regime, particularly with regard to the authority of the supreme leader.²² However, the death of Najaf-born Ayatollah Fadlallah, who had refused to recognize Khamenei as the *marja-i taqlid*

("source of emulation" or "religious reference")²³ for the entire Shiite community, and the fact that Ayatollah Sistani is old and in poor health are likely to help Iran ensure the supremacy of Qom.

Thus although Iran uses the religious element to strengthen its hold on Iraqi Shiites, especially for political gain (e.g., influencing voters before the elections), its leverage here is not guaranteed. A survey carried out in Iraq after the last elections indicated that only 17 percent of Shiites view the Iranian leadership and Ahmadinejad in a positive light. Forty-three percent of Iraqi Shiites said they view Iran's links to Iraqi politicians in a negative light, and only 18 percent viewed these ties positively.²⁴

Economic and Bilateral Ties

Iran plays a significant role in Iraq's economy, and alongside Turkey is Iraq's largest trading partner and its main export destination (excluding oil). Trade between the nations is primarily unidirectional, and years of sanctions and the ongoing fighting have rendered Iraq dependent on Iranian goods. According to estimates, since 2003 trade between the two nations has grown by 30 percent.²⁵ Although there is no precise data about the current scope of trade between the two countries, the estimate is that in 2009 it totaled \$4 billion, and the countries have announced their intentions to double that number.²⁶ The only place outside Iran where the Iranian currency – the rial – is used as a medium of exchange is southern Iraq. Furthermore, two large Iranian banks operate in Iraq, and Iranian goods – from Iranian-made vehicles through concrete construction blocks to foodstuffs – flood Iraqi markets; most of them are subsidized.²⁷

Around the time of Ahmadinejad's visit to Iraq in March 2008, the first visit of an Iranian president in Iraq since the Islamic Revolution, Iran announced the extension of \$1 billion in credit for Iranian exports to Iraq. This sum is matched by a similar amount allotted for the construction of an airport in Najaf on behalf of the tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims visiting the city every month. Seven agreements on cooperation in security, customs and tariffs, industry, education, the environment, transportation, and the development of a free trade zone near the shared border in the region of Basra were signed.²⁸ In March 2009 both former president Rafsanjani and Speaker of the Majlis Larijani visited Iraq and affirmed Iran's desire to help in the reconstruction of Iraq.

While Iran plays an important role in the reconstruction of Iraq, its involvement has helped foster a state of codependence between the states. Since 2003, the two have signed a long string of economic agreements, and Iran appointed a special committee headed by President Ahmadinejad charged with examining ways of further developing the economic ties with Iraq.²⁹ Apparently the United States does not oppose the development of economic ties between Iran and Iraq, and may even view them as contributing to Iraqi stability, although it must ensure that this trade does not violate the sanctions in place against Iran. In this context, it has been reported that oil smuggling into Iran is increasing, especially from Kurdish regions, whether because of its low monetary cost or because of a desire to circumvent the limitations on Iran. It is not inconceivable that as international pressure mounts, Iraq could increasingly serve as a primary Iranian tool for evading the sanctions.

The geographical proximity makes it easier for Iran to exert influence on its weaker neighbor. For example, Iran is responsible for a considerable part of Iraq's electricity supply, which suffers from a chronic shortage.³⁰ In addition, on several occasions Iraq has accused Iran (as well as Turkey) of using the water shortage in order to pressure the Iraqi government to expel the Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq from Iraq. This is apparently a reference to the diversion of water and construction of dams, which have reduced the flow of the Karun River (the water source for the Basra region) and the Sirwan River flowing into the Shatt al-Arab. Iran has also tried to win Iraqi (and Arab) sympathy by means of operating Arab-language media, such as the Iranian al-Alam TV station, which went on the air on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003.

In order to strengthen the bilateral ties overall, Iran has expanded the number of its diplomatic representatives in Iraq. The first Iranian consulate opened in 2003 in Iraqi Kurdistan; by June 2010, when Iran opened a new consulate in Najaf, it joined consulates located in Erbil, Karbala, Basra, and Sulaymaniyah. Iran thus boasts the largest

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number of consulates of any of the 35 countries with diplomatic missions in Iraq,³¹ as well as the country's largest embassy, situated in Baghdad.

The United States

The fact that Iraq abuts the revisionist, would-be nuclear capable Islamic Republic; the desire to turn Iraq into a successful democratic model (the first such in the Arab world); the tremendous oil and gas reserves in Iraq; and the moral imperative stemming from the extended occupation are all reasons for Iraq to remain a central part of the United States approach to the region. The future relationship between the US and Iraq will likely be the leading factor regarding Iran's ability to intervene in Iraq's internal matters. By exposing and disrupting Iran's activities (such as apprehending Revolutionary Guards personnel), the Americans have tried to provide evidence for Iran's involvement in Iraq, perhaps hoping that this would drive a wedge between Iran and the Iraqi elites. UN Security Council resolutions on Iran include an explicit ban on arms supplies from Iran to third parties, a limitation designed in part to rein in the military support it provides to Shiite militias in Iraq. The American administration has likewise issued several executive orders granting the Treasury Department the authority to freeze assets of "certain persons who threaten stabilization efforts in Iraq," including senior Quds Force personnel who were added to this list in January 2008.

In addition, the United States has tried to decrease Iran's involvement in Iraq, or alternatively to change its negative nature by means of engaging in a direct dialogue between the nations. As part of the lessons generated by the Iraq Study Group, which recommended engaging in dialogue with all of Iraq's neighbors, a dialogue (at the level of ambassadors) with Iran, focusing on Iraqi stability, was launched in May 2007, but in the spring of 2008 Iran ended the talks with apparently no results. The timetable for the withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq is also tied to the Iranian nuclear issue. As American soldiers are stationed on Iraqi soil, certainly in their current numbers, they are considered by many to be likely targets for attack by Iran in response to any attack on its nuclear facilities.

What about a possible American-Iranian dialogue? Theoretically, any arrangement the sides come to on the nuclear issue is likely to contribute to a smoother withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, and it is not inconceivable that in exchange for Iranian assistance in stabilizing the

arena, the United States may show greater flexibility on the nuclear question. The current American intelligence assessment indicates that Iran cannot acquire military nuclear capabilities before 2013. If this assessment is accurate, the United States will be able to withdraw its troops without the fear of Iranian attacks, and thereby conduct talks with Iran over the future of Iraq as well as its nuclear status. If the American forces are in fact vulnerable to an Iranian response, it is in America's best interests to continue the talks as long as possible and not resort to the military option before their withdrawal. Even under optimal circumstances, it is unreasonable to think that the American withdrawal from Iraq will be complete before the end of 2011. However, it is not clear whether the United States is willing to wait until then to resolve the nuclear issue, unless it is possible to reach a compromise with Iran whereby inspection of its nuclear activities is tightened.

The withdrawal of American forces from Iraq will give the United States greater freedom in planning its military action in the Gulf and allow it to present a more credible – albeit veiled – military threat against Iran. Iran itself not only admitted supporting the militias but also gladly linked its continued support for them to progress of the nuclear program. Sir John Sawers, the head of the British intelligence service MI6, said that as early as 2005, "the Iranians wanted to be able to strike a deal whereby they stopped killing our [British] forces in Iraq in return for them being allowed to carry on with their nuclear programme."³²

Increased Iranian involvement in Iraq is liable to generate a need for America to increase its military presence in the Gulf in order to defend its allies, certainly after concluding the withdrawal of its forces from Iraq. The challenge that the United States is facing now is how to cement its ties with Iraq so as to allow Iraq to regain its former strength in a way that does not threaten its weaker neighbors. The United States will have to establish an attractive strategic partnership with Iraq that will serve as a substitute for Iran's influence; it can even hint to Iraq, which is dependent on American economic and military assistance, that its assistance is contingent on Baghdad distancing itself from Tehran. Furthermore, the US could send a message to Iran that any assistance to militias inside Iraq will be repaid with similar American assistance to opposition groups inside Iran.

Nonetheless, the United States understands that Iranian involvement in Iraq is a reality. In a hearing before the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, America's former ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill, said it was important to steer Iran's influence to more positive channels and focus it, for instance, on religious tourism and trade, and at the same time to reduce its negative involvement, which too often was characterized by its conduct in Iraq.³³ The possibility of a rift between the United States and the Iraqi government over policies towards Iran is only one of the questions that will be answered after the withdrawal of American forces. Another question still open is: will the other issues in dispute between Tehran and Washington, specifically the nuclear program, not interfere with an attempt to put Iraq on the right path?

Conclusion

Iranian involvement in Iraq has received much attention since the beginning of the war but remains among the least understood of the elements. The discussion above has tried to demonstrate that for all its extent, this involvement is also significantly limited in certain ways, and that despite the concerns of the Sunni Arab world it is difficult to see Iran as being in control – certainly not absolutely – of Iraq. There is no question that Iran has essential interests in Iraq and takes keen note of events there. In recent years, Iraq has become an arena of struggle between Iran and Arab nations that are quite hesitant in warming their relations with Iraq because they view the al-Maliki government as Iran's lackey.³⁴

What about Israel? After the American withdrawal, Iraq is liable to present a greater threat against Israel, if only because of a possible blow to the prestige of the United States in the Middle East, especially if the government in Baghdad becomes an Iranian proxy. Such a scenario is liable to create territorial contiguity that would make it easier for pro-Iranian terrorist groups to set up bases for activating attacks against Israel and for Iran to send arms to Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas; it would improve Iran's regional status, and under certain circumstances possibly lead to a direct military confrontation with the IDF (which incidentally could also be viewed as a positive development). At this stage, it is unclear if this also has ramifications for other questions such as a possible Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley in a future permanent settlement with

the Palestinians, as well as the expected deterioration in the security of the moderate Arab states, such as the Gulf states and Jordan.

The goals of Iran's policies are to limit American dominance in the region, prevent the growth of a threat from Iraq, and use Iraq as a platform for Iranian influence on the region as a whole. However, it is possible that within the Iranian elite there are also historical considerations (revenge for the crimes committed by Saddam Hussein) and an economic agenda (the desire for compensation for the ravages of that war), which they can gain only from a weak Iraq. Iran in a sense patronizes its neighbor to the west and sees its involvement there as entirely natural: in the short term, in order to prevent an attack against it from Iraq and to weaken the central government in Baghdad to make it easier for Iran to exert its influence there, and in the long term in order to prevent to the extent possible the development of a competing model – a moderate, secular Shiite state with democratic trappings.

Finally, Iran's involvement seeks to rein in Kurdish nationalism, prevent Iraq from becoming a hotbed for Iranian opposition elements; prevent Iraqi criticism of Iranian policy (including criticism of its nuclear program); prevent Iraq from joining an anti-Iranian coalition; keep Iraqi oil export quotas low; reduce Sunni Arab involvement in Iraq to the extent possible; and damage any long term relationship between Iraq and the United States. Even if it seems as if in recent years Iran has made a move towards exerting a softer influence over Iraq, it still benefits if it maintains close contact with Shiite militias for use as leverage to affect Iraqi policies (not necessarily linked to the identity of the government or the scope of America's presence in Iraq) and as insurance against future eventualities. Iran is not interested in the deterioration of Iraq's internal situation, because instability there is liable to spill over into Iran. However, should the central government in Baghdad weaken, Iran may strengthen its hold on the Shiite south.³⁵ Iran is not the only one seeking to influence and shape the future Iraqi state, but it is the most involved in Iraqi society and has perhaps the most to lose should its influence there wane.

Iran cannot control Iraq, but it can influence it so that Iraq does not threaten Iran's essential interests or allow American forces to do so. To be sure, Iraq's problems are mostly unconnected to the involvement of any external element, but its weakness allows such involvement

an easier entry. Iran's influence on Iraq is almost inevitable, if only for historic, ethnic, and geographical reasons. Still, raising awareness of Iran's negative function in Iraq may increase opposition to it in Iraq and strengthen international pressure on Iran even more. The withdrawal of the American forces is viewed in Iran as a success and as an opening to expand its influence on the region in general and on Iraq in particular. How Iran expands its influence depends to a large extent on the Iraqi elite and the manner in which Iraq balances its neighbors, as well as the role the United States will play in the future Iraqi state, which will undoubtedly intensify should Iran attain nuclear capabilities. In such a case, it is not inconceivable that Iraq, like other nations in the sphere, will decide that it had best fall in line with Tehran's interests.

Notes

- 1 Megan Greenwell, "Riots at Iraqi Religious Festival Leave 28 Dead," *Washington Post*, August 29, 2007.
- 2 Michael Gordon and Andrew Lehen, "Leaked Reports Detail Iran's Aid for Iraqi Militias," *New York Times*, October 22, 2010. See also Greg Miller and Peter Finn, "Secret Iraq War Files Offer Grim New Details," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2010.
- 3 Steven Lee Myers and Thom Shanker, "Attacks on Baghdad Green Zone Surge," *New York Times*, September 29, 2010.
- 4 Defense Intelligence Agency, Unclassified Report to Congress on the Military Power of Iran, April 2010, http://media.washingtontimes.com/media/docs/2010/Apr/20/Iran_Military_Report.pdf.
- 5 Uzi Rabi, "The Shiite Storm: The Iranian Vision and the Arab Concern," in Uzi Rabi, ed., *Iranian Time* (HaKibbutz HaMeuhad Press, 2008).
- 6 Statement of General David H. Petraeus, US Army Commander, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the posture of the US Central Command, March 16, 2010, <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2010/03%20March/Petraeus%2003-16-10.pdf>.
- 7 The Kurdish Peshmerga Forces assisted Iran through the Iran-Iraq War, and even armed the forces of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the latter's struggle against the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) from 1994-98. Tehran continues to maintain good relations with both organizations as well as with the autonomous government in the province. See also Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," in *The Iran Premier: Power, Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010). Iran has a history of being present in Iraqi Kurdistan. For example, in 1995 it even sent intelligence and security forces into Iraqi Kurdistan to aid a revolt against Saddam Hussein. For more, see Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate*

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- 8 Gabriel Gatehouse, "US Fears Iranian Influence in Iraq," *BBC News*, March 2, 2010.
 - 9 "Iran's Activities and Influence in Iraq," Congressional Research Service Report to the Congress, June 2009. See also Department of Defense, Iraq Stability Report, July 2009.
 - 10 "Odierno: Militants Trained in Iran Prepare to Attack US Bases in Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 13, 2010.
 - 11 *New York Times*, June 16, 2010.
 - 12 Nasser Karimi, "Iran Conducts Large Military Exercise," *Washington Post*, December 13, 2010.
 - 13 Ofra Banjo, "The Fall of the Ba'ath: The Struggles of the Iraqi Elites," in Tamar Yagnes, ed., *Generational Changes in the Middle East* (The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and Africa Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2005).
 - 14 According to various reports, the difficulties Sulemani encountered in trying to unite the Shiite parties after the 2010 elections caused him to be replaced by Speaker of the Majlis Larijani.
 - 15 See, e.g., "The U.S. Army: Concern Iran Will Assassinate Senior Officials in Iraq," *Haaretz*, October 9, 2008.
 - 16 Thom Shanker, "General Says 2 Iraqi Politicians Have Ties to Iran," *New York Times*, February 17, 2010.
 - 17 *AP*, February 25, 2010.
 - 18 Interview with Ayad Allawi, *Spiegel-online*, August 29, 2010.
 - 19 Kanan Makiya, "The Iraqi Elections of 2010 and 2005," *Middle East Brief* No. 42, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, June 2010.
 - 20 Al-Sadr's ugly relationship with al-Maliki is related to the latter's having in 2008 instructed the Iraqi army (with American backing) to eliminate al-Sadr's armed militias.
 - 21 In the Iran-Iraq War, Iraqi Shiites, with the exception of a few small rebel groups, fought alongside Saddam Hussein.
 - 22 On the first anniversary of the Iranian election riots, protest movement leader Mehdi Karroubi criticized the broad authority of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, saying that "since his powers were expanded in 1989, he has wielded greater authority than God granted even to the Twelve Shiite Imams." He added that God himself would not have allowed himself to treat his creatures as Khamenei treats the Iranians. *Memri*, June 20, 2010.
 - 23 A Shiite term referring to the most senior cleric whose customs and conduct should be emulated.
 - 24 David Pollock, "What Arabs Really Think about Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 2010.
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- 32 Bridget Kendall, "Iran in 'Backroom' Offers to West," *BBC News*, February 20, 2009.
- 33 Ambassador Christopher R. Hill, US House Foreign Affairs Committee, September 10, 2009.
- 34 The daily newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, which to a large extent reflects the Saudi position, has repeatedly raised the topic of Iran's negative involvement in Iraq. See, e.g., Abd al-Rahman al-Rashad, "Who Operates the Shi'a and the Sunna?" *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 2, 2010.
- 35 Ron Tira, "Shifting Tectonic Plates: Basic Assumptions on the Peace Process Revisited," *Strategic Assessment* 12, no. 1 (2009): 91-107, [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1244445236.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1244445236.pdf).