

## Iran in Iraq: An Area of Strategic Influence

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Since the Islamic Revolution, Iraq has been and remains the central arena for Iranian foreign policy for several reasons. Iran set its sights on Iraq as the first target for exporting the Revolution because of Iraq's Shiite majority, which suffered severe discrimination and even oppression under the various Sunni-dominated regimes since 1920. Iraq is also home to the Shia's four holy cities (Najaf, Karbala, Kazimain, and Samarra). Strategic rivalry between the two countries, both of which sought hegemony in the Persian Gulf, heightened the ideological conflict between the Shiite Islamic Republic and the Ba'ath regime, which advocated secular Arab nationalism. The Iraqi border is Iran's longest land border (1450 km), and there are many unresolved disputes between the two countries regarding the precise route of the border. The Iran-Iraq War was the cruelest in modern Middle Eastern history. Iran lost over 200,000 people, and some 700,000 soldiers and civilians were wounded; its cities were bombarded by missiles and its soldiers were attacked with chemical weapons. In 1988, however, Iran, without gaining its objectives, was forced to agree to a ceasefire that was essentially a return to the pre-war situation.<sup>1</sup> As a lesson of the war, Iran was determined to enhance its influence in Iraq, in order to preclude any threat from it in the future. Concurrently, it was also important to Iran to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq, fearing that the secession of the Kurdish region in Iraq would have an effect on its own Kurdish minority and encourage it to press for independence.

Moreover, Iraq under Shiite control stood to become an important player in the consolidation of a regional Shiite bloc and the anti-American and anti-

Israel “resistance axis” under Iranian leadership. The axis’s other members include Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and (the Sunni) Hamas. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and its deepening involvement there, Iran has sought to turn Iraq into part of a contiguous land bridge under Shiite-Iranian control, leading from its western border to Lebanon, so that it would be able transfer supplies directly to Hezbollah, and in particular establish its hegemonic status in the region. In early September 2016, Ali Akbar Velayati, adviser on international affairs to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, explained this strategy by stating that cooperation between Iran, Iraq, and Syria was essential to save the region from the United States and “the Zionist regime.” He described it as “a resistance chain,” so that “if one link was removed, the whole chain would come apart.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Advancing Iranian Interests in Iraq**

Iranian leaders expressed public opposition to the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003, which to them reflected US imperial ambitions. For a while, they feared that Iran would be next in line, and were concerned with what looked like American encirclement, due to the US presence in the Gulf and Afghanistan. However, as time passed it became clear that Iran was the main strategic beneficiary from this war. The fall of Iraq’s leader Saddam Hussein marked the end of a bitter strategic foe and rival, and prompted the shift of power in Iraq to the Shiite majority after a thousand years of Sunni hegemony. These changes served Iran’s objective to turn Iraq into an Iranian client state free of American or Turkish influence. In addition, many of Iraq’s new leaders had been exiles in Iran. Not only were they grateful to Iran; they also recognized the need for Iranian backing in view of the Sunni resentment to their loss of influence and the hostility of many Sunni Arab states toward Iraq.

Since 2003 Iran has worked in Iraq on three interconnected levels in order to consolidate its influence:

- a. The inter-state level: Iran persuaded the leaders of Iraq to sign a long list of cooperation agreements in the fields of security and economics. It initiated funding of urban reconstruction projects in Iraqi cities and assisted in the construction of power stations and schools. In return, Iraq supported Iranian policy in Lebanon and Syria, and even helped it circumvent the economic sanctions imposed on it. The latest expression of

this policy is the memorandum of understanding to increase cooperation in the struggle against terror, signed by the two countries on July 23, 2017.<sup>3</sup>

- b. The party-movement level: While Saddam Hussein was in power, Iran granted asylum and assistance to Iraqi opposition organizations, of which the most prominent were the General Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, led by Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, and the Da'wah Party. Iran stepped up its activity after 2003, and exerted heavy pressure on the various Shiite parties to form a unified bloc in Iraq, in spite of the rifts between them, in order to preserve Shiite hegemony. Iran also armed and trained the Shiite militias that operated under the patronage of the various parties. In addition, Iran did not limit its efforts to the Shiite sector and was active with Arab-Sunni and Kurdish parties and movements as well, particularly Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Thanks to these contacts, Iran established itself as an arbitrator among the various Shiite factions, and even influence the shaping of decisions of the Iraqi government.<sup>4</sup>
- c. The military-strategic level: Iraq's military-strategic importance for Iran is manifested, inter alia, by the fact that Iran's three ambassadors in Baghdad since 2003, including the current one, Brigadier Iraj Masjadi, who took office in March 2017, were senior officers in the Revolutionary Guards (Pasadaran).<sup>5</sup>

### **The Struggle for Hegemony in the Shiite World**

From the early nineteenth century until the establishment of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime, the city of Najaf was the most important center of Shiite learning and religious leadership. Unlike the official doctrine in Iran whereby the supreme political leader had to be a cleric, leading religious figures in Iraq presented alternative models for the relations between religion and state. Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani (born 1930), considered the foremost contemporary Shiite jurist, advocated only indirect clerical involvement in politics as spiritual guides and advisers behind the scenes, and publicly supported the parliamentary regime set up in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

Iran was worried that thanks to its sanctity, Najaf would once again rise as the leading Shiite center that would compete with the religious center in Qom in Iran, and more ominously, that the political model there would appeal to large segments of the Iranian public. In order to prevent these developments and to gain control of Najaf, Iran operated in two principal

ways: dozens of senior Iraqi Shiite clerics who had lived in Iran and were loyal to the Iranian regime returned to Najaf in order to gradually take over its community of learning (*hawza 'ilmiyya* from the inside. Iran understands that it cannot undermine the status of Sistani, but it is cultivating the next generation of religious figures who are loyal to it, so that they will lead Najaf after his death. At the same time, Khamenei's office in Qom has offered generous payments to teachers in religious colleges in Najaf and very large scholarships to their students in order to "buy" their loyalty. Hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims who visit the holy Shiite cities each year have become a very significant factor in the local economies of these cities, and even of Iraq as a whole, and therefore serve as a lever for Iranian influence. In addition, Iranian charities have built mosques, religious seminaries, and clinics in Najaf, Baghdad, and other Shiite population centers, in order to highlight Iranian generosity.<sup>7</sup>

Its efforts notwithstanding, Iran has encountered many difficulties in achieving hegemony in Iraq. The ethnic tension between Arabs and Iranians has not disappeared even among Shiites, and has perhaps even increased due to the fear of Iranian hegemony and the massive economic involvement that marginalized Iraqi companies. As a result, the party that was most closely identified with the official Iranian line failed in the parliamentary elections in 2010. It changed its name from the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution to the Supreme Council of Iraq in order to highlight its Iraqi identity and blur its proximity to the Iranian model of government. By contrast, the Shiite Da'wah party led by then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki worked to strengthen the alliance with Iran but sought to maintain some independence and avoid becoming an absolute Iranian satellite. Moreover, the many splits among the Shiite movements, mainly on personal grounds, "ensure" that there will always be those who object to too much Iranian patronage.<sup>8</sup>

### **Foreign Forces and the Struggle for Hegemony in Iraq**

Another rival creating difficulty for Iran was Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkey has its own hegemonic ambitions as the leader of the Sunni camp – at least in its self-perception – and as the representative of an alternative to the Iranian model for religion and state relations in Islam. Thus, while Iran supported Maliki's Shiite government, Turkey became the protector of the Sunni minority and for a while even the ally of the Kurds

in Iraq. In the economic field, Iranian companies were defeated by Turkish companies in Iraq, including in the Shiite south.<sup>9</sup>

The surprising achievements of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in capturing significant parts of Iraq and eastern Syria, and above all the capture of Mosul in June 2014, the second largest city in Iraq, posed a threat to Iran, but also opened up several possibilities. Iran found itself adjacent to an extreme Sunni-Salafi anti-Shiite entity on its western border that declared its intention to capture the holy Shia cities in Iraq and “purify” them of “the Shia filth.” In view of the gravity of the threat, since the Islamic State appeared to be on the brink of capturing Baghdad, Iran threatened that should the Islamic State attack the Shiite holy cities, Iran would send its army into Iraq, something it had previously avoided. At the same time, the growing chaos in the Arab world cast Iran in a positive light among Western countries, particularly the United States, as a stable country that could play a central role in the efforts against the Salafi jihadi threat and in any political arrangement in the region. Apparently, the focus on the Islamic State as the greatest danger to regional peace and the change in the image of Iran were among the factors that led the Obama administration to soften its position in the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program and yield to Iranian demands on a series of technical issues. The Islamic State threat also helped Iran strengthen its influence over the weak Iraqi government and over the Kurds. Iran took advantage of the developments in Iraq in order to reinforce its arguments in support of the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad, for allegedly fighting fanatical Sunni-Salafi terror and not against a popular revolt. In the economic sphere, the Islamic State conquests hindered the transfer of goods from Turkey to Baghdad and southern Iraq, and helped Iran to expand its economic activity in these areas and tighten its economic hold on Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

The Islamic State threat created a partial confluence of interests between Iran and the US, and even some indirect cooperation between them. While Iranian President Hassan Rouhani expressed willingness for significant cooperation with the US in the struggle against Salafi terror, Khamenei adopted a cunning approach. He approved tactical cooperation with the US, but rejected any strategic alliance, accusing the US and Israel of inciting the split between the Sunnis and Shiites, and of responsibility for the formation of the Islamic State. It seems that Khamenei has pursued the traditional Iranian line, which is ready to let other countries shed their blood in the fight against Iran’s enemies, while the Islamic Republic maintains its ideological purity.<sup>11</sup>

The threat from the Islamic State did not put an end to the splits among the various Shiite groups in Iraq. Haider al-'Abadi, appointed Prime Minister in September 2014 to replace the failing Nouri al-Maliki, needs Iran, but is careful to avoid becoming its puppet. In response, Iran transferred its patronage to al-Maliki in order to undermine al-'Abadi, causing an internal rift in the dominant Dawah party. The young radical leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who had previously enjoyed Iranian patronage, adopted an independent and even anti-Iranian policy because he felt that the Iranians had exploited him.

In view of the collapse of the regular Iraqi army in Mosul and the threat to Baghdad, tens of thousands of Iraqi Shiites answered the call of their religious leaders, led by Sistani, to enlist in the Shiite militias, known collectively as the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Sha'bi) in order to fight the Islamic State. According to various sources, the total number of members of these militias is close to 110,000. Three of these militias are loyal to Sistani or to al-Sadr. However, the commanders of the three largest militias, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr organization, and Kata'ib Hizbullah, are considered Iranian proxies in Iraqi politics.<sup>12</sup>

Al-'Abadi, who understood the threat to his rule from these militias, announced in July 2016 that they would be subordinate to the regular Iraqi army. However, as these militias have not been dissolved as independent forces, and nor were they subordinated to the authority of the government, it appears that this merging could turn them into a lever for Iranian influence within the ranks of the Iraqi army, and even in the broader Iraqi political system. Thus, while the government promised to pay the salaries of the militia soldiers, the administration of the payments was given to the militia commanders, who are close to Iran and who managed to discriminate against militias that opposed them. Qais al-Khaz'ali, commander of the 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, announced in February 2017 that the militias would refuse to give up their independent status, and that "they will be present in the political arena just as they are present on the battlefield."<sup>13</sup> In early August 2017 the pro-Iranian militias took a further step and announced their intention of setting up a joint political bloc in order to take part in elections to the Iraqi parliament. On the other hand, relations between the al-'Abbas Brigades militia, which supports Sistani, and the army grew stronger. In other words, while Iran is increasing its efforts to make the militias that it patronizes a powerful lever of influence in the military and political fields, it also encounters opposition to these efforts.<sup>14</sup> The sense of the threat of

major Iranian influence facilitated a meeting between Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman and al-'Abadi, the first such meeting since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.<sup>15</sup>

Iraq also served as an important source of Shiite volunteers recruited to fight in Syria in order to help Assad put down the revolt against the regime. In 2003, a faction led by Sheikh Akram al-Ka'bi split from the 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and set up the Islamic Resistance Hezbollah Movement – the Elect, whose main purpose was to fight alongside the Assad regime in Syria. The extent of al-Ka'bi's commitment to Iran was evident in his statements from November 2016, that his men would fight with the Houthis in Yemen and even against the Iraqi government if Khamenei ordered them to do so. On March 11, 2017, al-Ka'bi announced the formation within his organization of a unit to liberate the Golan, and boasted that the "resistance" could defeat "the axis of evil" (Saudi Arabia and the United States) and the Zionist entity. This announcement was intended to send two messages, one that the Shiite militias would continue their activity according to their ideological and political agenda even after the liberation of Mosul from the Islamic State, and two, that the Iraqi Shiite militia was a tool for advancing Iran's objective of opening another front against Israel to help Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>16</sup>

According to the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, General Muhammad Bakeri, the Shiite militias have become an integral part of the Iranian defense system. At the same time, they are part of a broader strategic move to bring together an Arab military force as an instrument for promoting Iran's regional aspirations. Another expression of this policy was the August 18, 2016 statement by Brigadier Muhammad 'Ali Falaki of the Revolutionary Guards, regarding the establishment of the Shiite Liberation Army under the command of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, which is responsible for the Revolutionary Guards' activities beyond the Iranian borders. The new force, which includes Iraqis, Afghans, and Lebanese and is designed to fight in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and wherever Shiites need protection, is in fact a code name for all the Shiite militias under the influence and authority of Iran.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Shiite militias did not play a direct part in the liberation of Mosul from the Islamic State, since the US made its aerial assistance to the fighting conditional on their absence, they still managed to take over important territory around the city, and ensured that Iran would also have influence in this region. Even worse, their brutal treatment of the Sunni

population, particularly in the Diyala district, including expulsion of tens of thousands of Sunnis from their homes, threatens to deepen the religious-ethnic rift in Iraq for many years to come.<sup>18</sup>

Iran has always preferred to use proxies instead of its own forces, not only to avoid fatalities among its own soldiers, but also to avoid arousing national opposition in Iraq to the presence of foreign forces, and in order to maintain its image as a state that does not harbor expansionist goals. At a conference on history and nationalism in Iran, Hujjat al-Islam 'Ali Yunesi, adviser to President Rouhani on minority affairs, raised the vision of "greater Iran" whose culture, civilization, religion, and spirit extends from China's border in the east to the Persian Gulf in the west, from the northern part of the Indian sub-continent in the south to the northern Caucasus in the north. As for Iraq, he stated that "in the current situation, Iraq is not only a region of our cultural influence, but also an identity, a culture, a center, and also our capital. This issue exists today, as in the past, because it is not possible to divide the territory of Iran and Iraq, nor is it possible to dismantle our culture... The purpose of this union is not to eliminate borders, but for all the states in the Iranian area to draw closer because their interests and their security are linked to each other." Yunesi clarified that this vision does not mean that Iran must control Iraq or other countries, but "they should know our position, and reach historical self-recognition, in other words think about the global dimension but act as Iranians." His words, which sparked angry reactions in Iraq, were also strongly criticized by many leading figures in Iran, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, because they presented Iran as an imperialist power.<sup>19</sup>

The Islamic State threat enabled Iran to increase its influence over the Kurds in Iraq, who since 2003 enjoyed almost complete independence and became very close to Turkey. Shortly after capturing Mosul, Islamic State fighters defeated the Kurdish Peshmerga militia and threatened Irbil, the capital of the Kurdish region. While the Western countries, led by the United States, were undecided over the proper response, Iran quickly took action. Qassem Soleimani came to Irbil at the head of a delegation of advisers to help the Kurds and reorganize their forces. Iran likewise sent weapons and intelligence information that enabled the Kurds to halt the advance of the Islamic State.<sup>20</sup> This assistance was also intended to send a political message to the Kurds, namely, that they were too weak without Iranian support and



that they should not think of independence, but be satisfied with the status of an autonomous region within Iraq.

Since Masoud Barzani, leader of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government, raised the idea in March 2017 of a referendum over national independence, Iran worked at two levels to dissuade the Kurds from this step. Apart from the declarations by the Iranian Foreign Ministry regarding the need to maintain Iraqi territorial integrity, Qassem Soleimani visited Irbil several times to warn the Kurdish leaders of the consequences of such a move, apparently including implied threats about preventing the passage of goods between eastern Kurdistan and Iran. Iran fears that an independent Kurdish state in Iraq will encourage the Kurds in Iranian territory to likewise demand independence. Iran is also wary of the Salafist influence in Iraq on the Kurds in Iran, who are primarily Sunni. The terror attack of June 7, 2017 on the Iranian parliament and the tomb of Khomeini by Kurdish fighters loyal to the Islamic State demonstrated how radical Sunni terror has leaked into Iranian territory.<sup>21</sup> After the referendum was held in Kurdistan on October 2, 2017, Iran worked again on two levels. Following their practiced method of “divide and conquer,” the Iranians reached understandings with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party, whereby the PUK would withdraw its forces peacefully from the oil-rich Kirkuk area, and in exchange receive Iranian protection in east Kurdistan once they severed ties with their rival Barzani. At the same time, the Shiite militias controlled by Iran helped the Iraqi military take over Kirkuk. Thus, Iran succeeded in foiling the Kurds’ independent aspirations, at least for the foreseeable future.<sup>22</sup>

## **Conclusion**

At the time of this writing it appears that Iran is succeeding in realizing its main strategic objectives in Iraq. It has substantial influence on the government and political system in Iraq, thanks to its de facto control of the largest military force in Iraq, the Shiite militias, and also thanks to its strong influence over the various Shiite parties, even if they do not wish to look like its puppets. This status has received indirect approval from the United States as well. On the other hand, the ethnic tension between Arabs and Iranians, and the deep rift among the Shiite elite in Iraq, as well as the deep enmity between Shiites and Sunnis, make it hard for Iran to achieve full control over the Iraqi political system.

Iran failed in its efforts to stop the Kurds from holding a referendum on independence. However, it managed to block the Kurdish drive toward independence, and possibly even reverse it by a skillful combination of political and military pressure. At the broader strategic level, Iraq is a central link in Iran's efforts to create a strategic axis under its own leadership and a contiguous Shiite-dominated territory from its western border to the Mediterranean Sea. An expression of Iran's confidence can be found in the statements by various military commanders that Iran has extended its strategic border in the war against its enemies to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and to North Africa, and that its status as a regional power is recognized by all the major parties in the region.<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

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