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Iraq as a Conflict Arena between the United States and Iran

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The US administration blamed Iran for the September 2018 rocket attacks against the US consulate building in Basra, Iraq, claiming they were carried out by Shiite militia forces. The administration announced the transfer of its diplomatic staff to the embassy in Baghdad, and senior US officials have threatened that Iran will pay a heavy price if it strikes American targets. Although the US statements relate to Iran's overall activity in the Middle East, they seem to place special emphasis on Iraq's potential to become more of a conflict arena between the United States and Iran, a conflict already underway regarding the respective influence on the establishment of the new Iraqi government following the parliamentary elections of May 2018. Israeli threats to take action against Iranian targets in Iraq require that full coordination first be achieved between Israel and the United States, particularly in light of US concerns regarding Iranian intentions to strike at American targets and the administration's sensitivity regarding continued stability within Iraq.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced recently that in light of the significant increased threat posed by Iran and its Shiite allied militias in Iraq, it was decided to evacuate US diplomatic personnel "temporarily" from the consulate in Basra and relocate them to the US Embassy in Baghdad. The statement lays responsibility for the rocket fire toward the US consulate building on the Quds Force, under the leadership of Qassem Suleimani, and charges that the attacks were carried out by Shiite militia forces. According to Pompeo, the United States will regard Iran as responsible for any harm to US personnel and property and will respond quickly and resolutely, even if the attack is carried out by local militias. The statement followed two incidents in recent weeks in which small numbers of rockets were fired at the area of the US consulate but resulted in no casualties.

Tensions in the Basra region in southern Iraq, where the majority of the population is Shiite, have increased in recent months. Demonstrations accompanied by violent incidents have been waged against the Iraqi government's failure to respond effectively to the hardships of the local population. Protests have also targeted Iran, and including setting fire to the Iranian consulate in Basra. The unrest has been mirrored on the political level, when outgoing Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was charged with direct

responsibility for the situation. Pro-Iranian elements accused the Americans of fanning the flames of the demonstrations against Iran.

It is unclear whether the evacuation of the US consulate in Basra stemmed from concrete information by the United States linking Iran to the rocket fire, or whether the fire was even aimed at the consulate in the first place. Moreover, according to media reports, over the past year the State Department already considered closing the consulate in Basra due to budget cutbacks. The State Department announcement appears to have been issued soon after the White House quickly accused the Iran-supported Shiite militias of carrying out the attacks, and sits well with the administration's interest in highlighting Iran's subversive activity in the region. In this framework, the anti-Iran rhetoric of senior US officials, led by National Security Advisor John Bolton, has also intensified significantly. Its main thrust has been the threat that Iran "will pay a price like few countries have ever paid" if it harms US interests.

Although the statements by the US administration have addressed Iran's overall activity in the region, they appear to be emphasizing the potential of a confrontation in Iraq. First and foremost, this stems from the US perception of this arena as posing the greatest danger, in light of the extensive presence of US military and civilian personnel operating throughout the country, and in light of past experience, which saw many US soldiers attacked by Shiite militias under Iranian supervision. The American media has reported that US intelligence possesses information indicating that the Shiite militias and other elements under Iranian auspices intend to carry out attacks against American targets and interests. Presumably the US administration envisions that the more the overall campaign against Iran gains momentum, particularly after the sanctions in the energy and banking realms go into effect in early November, the greater Iran's motivation will be to demonstrate its power.

In tandem, the United States and Iran are currently engaged in lobbying campaigns among the various political elements in Iraq in an effort to ensure that the government that is established following the May 2018 parliamentary elections will reflect their respective interests. America's ally, outgoing Prime Minister Abadi, will not remain in his current position, after Muqtada al-Sadr, whose party won the largest number of seats in the elections, and religious Shiite leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani lost confidence in him and demanded that the next government consist of technocrats. Against this background, the task of building a government was assigned to former Vice President, Finance Minister, and Oil Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi (a Shiite who is currently considered to be an independent, although in the past he was a member of the party that represented the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, which maintains close relations with Iran).

In recent years, US policy in Iraq has relied primarily on personal connections with Prime Minister Abadi and on the cooperation with the Iraqi army formed in the common war to defeat the Islamic State. In the campaign against ISIS, the United States turned a blind eye to Iran's role and its use of the Shiite militias. Today, these militias constitute Iran's major means of influence within the political arena in Iraq, after al-Amiri's Fatah Alliance, which was associated with Iran, became the second largest party in the parliament.

Iran regards its influence in Iraq, with which it shares a long border, as a central element of its national security concept. It is also part of its efforts to establish overall regional influence and ensure a land supply route that links Iran, via Iraq, to Syria and Lebanon. The defeat of the Islamic State and the failure of the Kurdish referendum in northern Iraq have played into Iran's hands. Still, the reestablishment of the central administration in Baghdad has posed a significant challenge to Tehran, after outgoing Prime Minister Abadi adopted an independent policy vis-à-vis Iran and conveyed his objection to its crude intervention, led by the Quds Force, in Iraqi affairs. Although senior Iranian and Iraqi officials have emphasized that the relations between the two countries remain strong, concern remains in Tehran regarding the possible erosion of its status.

In light of Iran's intensifying confrontation with the United States and its mounting economic crisis, Tehran finds it essential to maintain its influence in Iraq, particularly in the event of a future clash with the United States. The Iranian leadership strives to send a message of deterrence to the United States regarding the implications of a military clash. On September 8, the Revolutionary Guards launched a missile attack against the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) in northern Iraq. Revolutionary Guards commander Mohammad Ali Jafari declared that the attack was meant to send a message to all the enemies of Iran, and particularly the superpowers, who think they can impose their will on Iran. A recently published report also indicates that Iran transferred ballistic missiles to the Shiite militias it supports in Iraq. Although Iran has denied this report, Iran might indeed strive to transfer advanced military equipment to the Shiite militias in order to improve their capabilities in the event of a military confrontation between Iran and the United States and/or Israel, or a confrontation between them and the central government in Baghdad.

From Israel's perspective, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman have related to the possibility of Israel's taking action against Iranian targets in Iraq, after years when the Iraqi arena received little attention from decision makers in Israel. In this context, and particularly in light of the possibility that Iraq could become a greater conflict arena between the United States and Iran, it is critical that there be full coordination between Israel and the United States. This is of particular importance

due to American concerns regarding the possibility of deterioration vis-à-vis Iran, as well as the importance to the US administration regarding stability in Iraq as a major element of the ability to affect developments in the campaign against ISIS, which, though declared a success, is not yet complete.