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**Iraq, the United States, and the Iranian Factor**

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**United States pressure on Iraq to comply with the sanctions against Iran, along with President Trump's statement about using "US troops in Iraq as a base from which to strike extremists in Syria if necessary" and "to watch Iran," has sparked tension between Iraq and the United States. The leadership in Baghdad was quick to protest the US intentions, and a bill is under debate in the Iraqi parliament that would prohibit the presence of US forces in Iraq. This tension has spurred Iran to reinforce its efforts to ensure its interests in Iraq. However, despite the tension, Iraq and the United States presumably have an interest in a continued US military presence, especially given Baghdad's recognition that US military assistance will be needed in the coming years. Nonetheless, the current political reality in Iraq, specifically against the background of the increased strength in the last elections of Shiite elements that are identified with Iran and opposed to the United States, requires that the US administration show greater sensitivity and deeper understanding of intra-Iraqi political nuances.**

Following the establishment in October 2018 of the new government in Iraq, which relies in part on the support of pro-Iranian Shiite elements, and against the background of increased tension between the United States and Iran and particularly the renewed sanctions, the divisions between Baghdad and Washington have deepened.

The United States administration is eager to end Iraq's energy purchases from Iran, despite Baghdad's high level of dependence on gas and electricity imports from Iran. In return, it is trying, seemingly without much success so far, to encourage the Gulf states to become an alternative to Iran. At first, Iraq received a half-year exemption on implementing the sanctions on Iran regarding gas imports, and a three-month exemption on electricity imports. These exemptions are set to expire, and senior Iraqi officials have made clear that these demands ignore Iraq's needs and Iraq has no intention of being part of the sanctions regime against Iran. Meanwhile, in contrast with his decision to remove the US forces from Syria and Afghanistan, President Donald Trump stated that he has no plans to remove US forces from Iraq (approximately 5,200 soldiers). Following his visit to American bases in Iraq, Trump emphasized his sense of the major investment in military facilities in the country, and made clear that even though the campaign waged

against the Islamic State has finished, he sees "US troops in Iraq as a base from which to strike extremists in Syria if necessary" and "to watch Iran."

This statement by President Trump contradicts the position of intelligence and operations figures, who continue to emphasize that the only objective of the forces in Iraq remains to aid the Iraqi army in its struggle against terrorists. A report published by the Pentagon in February 2019 states that Iraq's security forces will need many more years of assistance in order to reach an operational level that enables them to wage an independent struggle against terrorists, including the Islamic State.

As in the past, it seems that now too the President's statements do not reflect a policy change resulting from systematic administrative work by the United States leadership, and were certainly said without coordinating with the Iraqi government. His words were met with widespread opposition across the Iraqi political system. Iraqi President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi were quick to emphasize Iraq's sovereignty and independence, and stated that US forces do not have a mandate to "watch" Iran, and that they will not let Iraq be a staging ground for a struggle against Iran. These declarations earned the support of the senior Shiite leader in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who noted that "Iraq aspires to have good and balanced relations with all of its neighbors based on mutual interests and without intervention in internal affairs."

Even before Trump's declarations, figures within the Shiite militias began to promote legislation in the Iraqi parliament that would limit the movement and activity of the US forces, and perhaps even prohibit their presence entirely in Iraq. The President's declarations provided a tailwind for these efforts, and it was reported that Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Fatah Alliance (comprising the Shiite militias connected to Iran), and the party of Muqtada al-Sadr (a well-known opponent of the US presence, as well as the Iranian presence) agreed to continue to promote the legislation. The need to respond to the US President even prompted moderate Iraqi politicians to highlight nationalist messages and emphasize that they will not support the undermining of Iraq's sovereignty and its authority to determine the missions of the US forces within its territory.

During the Obama presidency, the United States and Iraq did not succeed in reaching a security agreement (SOFA) that would allow some of the US forces to remain, and thus in 2011 it was decided to remove all of the forces from Iraq. Today, the presence of US forces in Iraq is the result of an explicit request from the Iraqi government, made in 2014 following the Islamic State's takeover of large parts of the country. According to the agreements, this presence was only intended for missions against terrorists. The new Iraqi government, which is supported by a fragile coalition of Shiite elements, approved the continued US presence, but it is trying as much as possible to avoid being drawn into the

conflict between the United States and Iran. At the same time, it is clear to the Iraqi leadership that despite the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the threat of Islamic terrorism has not yet subsided and Iraq needs American support to help the security forces with their missions.

In an attempt to contain damage, US diplomatic and military figures, first and foremost acting Secretary of Defense Pat Shanahan, who came to Baghdad in mid February 2019, have clarified to the Iraqi leadership that the administration respects Iraq's sovereignty and intends to uphold the agreements reached with its government. However, President Trump's failure to meet with the Iraqi leadership in Baghdad during his December 2018 visit to American bases in Iraq was seen as an insult, and contributed to criticism of the United States. In addition, the resignation of Brett McGurk that same month as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, who had spent many hours with the Iraqi leadership, has increased the mounting tension between Baghdad and Washington. Today there is no senior American representative conducting ongoing discourse on the strategic level. None of this helps the quiet discussions that are reportedly underway in order to achieve Iraqi agreement for commando operations and attacks on Islamic State outposts in Syria from Iraqi territory.

The internal discussion in Iraq regarding the future of the American forces has spurred Iran to expand its political intervention, both direct and through its allies, in order to ensure its interests. Iran, which shares a long border with Iraq, ascribes great importance to a sympathetic government in Baghdad, and over the past two decades has invested considerably in solidifying its influence within the military, economic, social, and religious establishments in Iraq. An agreement on scientific-technological cooperation was signed recently, between the countries, and there are discussions about expanding banking relations. Moreover, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Zarif visited Iraq this past month, accompanied by a large political and economic delegation. In addition to meeting with government leaders in Baghdad, Zarif met with a series of leaders from all communities - including the commander of the al-Nujaba militia, which is supported by Quds Force and was also responsible for sending forces to Syria, and the heads of the Sunni tribes in Iraq - and visited Kurdistan.

Iran sees the continued US military presence in Iraq as a direct threat to its interests, and has conveyed a clear deterrent message to the Baghdad government regarding the consequences of a military confrontation. The commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad Ali Jafari, declared that the Iranian missile attack on the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan in northern Iraq (September 2018) should serve as a message to all of Iran's enemies, and especially the superpowers, who believe that they can impose their will on Iran. In addition, Iran reportedly recently transferred ballistic

missiles to Shiite militias that it supports in Iraq. Iran has denied this report, but it is entirely possible that it indeed seeks to transfer advanced military products to Shiite militias in order to improve their capabilities, in the case of a military confrontation between Iran and the United States and/or Israel, or in the case of a confrontation between them and the central government in Baghdad.

In the final analysis, it is likely that despite the tension between Iraq and the United States, both countries have an interest in the continued US military presence in Iraq – especially given the recognition in Baghdad that US military assistance will be required in the coming years. However, the current political reality in Iraq, with the increased strength in the last elections of Shiite elements that are identified with Iran and the delicate issue of US involvement, as well as Iraq's desire not to be caught in the middle between the United States and Iran, narrows the US room to maneuver and demands greater sensitivity and deeper understanding of intra-Iraqi nuances on the part of the administration.

As for Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman referred to the possibility that Israel might also take action against Iranian targets in Iraq. Against this background, Israel must consider US interests in the Iraqi arena, as well as the current sensitivities with the new government in Baghdad. It is unlikely that the United States would agree to the implementation of an Israeli policy of expanding its military measures against the Iranian presence to Iraqi territory as well, in part due to concerns about possible harm to its forces in Iraq. This joins additional considerations, including Israel's relations with the Kurds, who are part of the Iraqi government.