

The Limits of Iran's Soft Power

Michael Eisenstadt

Political change sweeping the Middle East has heightened concerns about a shifting balance of power in Iran's favor. But Tehran's experience in Iraq provides critical insights into the limits of the Islamic Republic's regional influence, and its propensity to be its own worst enemy in dealing with its Arab neighbors.

Iran enjoys many natural advantages in Iraq. It has a long porous border. It has longstanding ties with key Shiite and Kurdish politicians, parties, and paramilitary groups. It has religious and cultural affinities. And it maintains extensive trade and economic relations. But its efforts over the past eight years to influence developments have yielded mixed results.

Tehran has developed a sophisticated approach to project influence in Iraq that employs traditional instruments of national power—diplomacy, information, military links, and economic ties—as well as elements unique to Iran, such as connections to transnational Shiite clerical networks.

Iran has provided advice, mediation, and financial support to its political allies. It has offered arms, financing, and training to militias and insurgent groups. And it has used its “soft power” in the economic, religious, and informational domains to expand its influence and become the key external power broker in Iraq.

But Tehran's implementation has often been disjointed and clumsy:

- While seeking to unite Iraq's Shiite parties to maximize their electoral heft, Iran has repeatedly split off radical elements to create “special groups” to serve as armed surrogates. Groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haqq have contributed to the political fragmentation of Iraqi Shiite politics and to intra-Shiite tensions, thereby undermining Shiite unity.
- While ostensibly supportive of the Iraqi government, Iran has also supported militias that undermined the authority of the government and that have used Iranian-supplied arms to pursue vendettas and settle scores with other Shiite groups.
- While striving to win Iraqi hearts and minds through Arabic radio and TV broadcasts, Iran has undermined these efforts by its own actions, such as the seizure of the Fakka oil well in December 2009, the dumping of subsidized produce and manufactured goods on the Iraqi market, and the shelling of villages in northern Iraq where Iranian Kurdish groups are based.

Iran may hope to fragment the Shiite community to keep it weak and dependent on Tehran, ensuring Tehran will be needed to mediate. But these actions have also made close ties to Tehran a political liability for some of its allies. They have also generated a healthy suspicion of Iran's goals and methods.

Iran will continue to influence Iraq through political allies and soft power. But it is likely to reduce its reliance on militias and insurgent groups, which can no longer operate openly and which will have difficulty justifying their actions once U.S. forces leave.

Politically, the unstable and fractious nature of the new Iraqi government ensures Iran a role as mediator in the future. Muqtada Sadr has already threatened nonviolent resistance if services do not improve within six months.

For Iran, soft power encompasses the various non-kinetic elements of national power, though there is nothing soft about the way in which it wields this influence:

- *Reputation and image management:* Tehran presents itself as a reliable partner and ally and pushes a triumphalist narrative that claims God and history are on its side. These messages have been undercut by a tendency to over-promise and under-deliver assistance to its friends, its own domestic political problems, and a tendency to lecture and condescend toward Arabs.
- *Economic leverage:* Tehran has strengthened trade and investment in Iraq for profit and for leverage. It has, however, often used business deals to bolster local allies, and dumped cheap, subsidized produce and consumer goods in Iraq, undercutting the latter's agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Iran supplies about 10 percent of Iraq's overall electricity needs, but many Iraqis believe Tehran manipulates its delivery for political ends. All these actions have engendered resentment in Iraq.
- *Export of revolutionary Islam:* Tehran seeks the primacy of its brand of Islam in Shiite communities around the world by funding the activities of clerics trained in Qom and steeped in the ideology of clerical rule. When the ailing Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali Sistani eventually dies, Iran may finally be poised to achieve this goal. Tehran also seeks to create bonds of solidarity with Shiite communities around the world that can serve as external bases of support for its policies and as allies should it be attacked. And Iran has created a virtual army of Hizballah clones in Iraq—including the Promised Day Brigades, Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, and Kataib Hizballah—to do its bidding.
- *Propaganda and spin:* Iran has been vying for Iraqi "hearts and minds" through Arabic-language news and entertainment broadcasts that reflect Tehran's propaganda line. But Iranian actions have often undercut these efforts. Polling data since 2003 has consistently shown that Iraqis of all stripes (including Shiites) distrust Iran and do not consider its form of governance a viable model

for Iraq. These popular attitudes explain why Tehran will continue to lean heavily on soft power, its security services, and covert action to project influence in Iraq.

U.S. officials tend to be wedded to a hard power approach to strategy and statecraft that underestimates the importance of Iranian soft power. Washington has fretted that the Iraqi military will be unprepared to secure the country's airspace and waters after U.S. forces leave. But Iranian soft power actually poses the greater long-term threat to Iraqi sovereignty and independence.

Tehran's soft power in Iraq has often underperformed, mainly due to maladroit implementation. Baghdad's ability to counter Iran's soft power will depend on its success in rectifying lopsided trade imbalances and dependencies in the electricity sector, and developing its oil and gas sector. And Washington's most potent means of countering Iranian influence in Iraq (and beyond) is the publication of detailed, credible information about how Iran operates--which is likely to find a receptive audience in the region.

So assessments of Iran as the big winner in Iraq and the main beneficiary of the Arab Spring are premature. The formation in December 2010 of a new Iraqi government, which includes many of Tehran's closest allies, and the impending U.S. military withdrawal certainly present new opportunities for Iran to extend its reach in Iraq. But it is still unclear whether Iranian influence will continue to be self-limiting after the U.S. withdrawal, or whether Tehran will succeed in transforming Iraq into a client state via a gradual process of Lebanon-ization.

Over the long run, the reach of Iran's influence in Iraq will depend on the security situation, the political complexion of the Iraqi government, the type of long-term relationship the United States builds with Iraq, and the overall tenor of Iran-Arab and Sunni-Shiite relations in the Gulf following Saudi and UAE intervention in Bahrain. But it is Iraq's reemergence as a major oil exporter, which will almost certainly heighten tensions between the two oil-exporting neighbors, which may be the most important factor influencing the future of Iran-Iraq relations.