

## **Iran and Iraq**

### **Michael Eisenstadt**

- The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime provided Iran with a historic opportunity to transform its traditional Iraqi enemy into a partner or ally.
- A long, porous border and extensive political, economic, religious and cultural ties provide Iran the potential for significant influence in Iraq.
- Iranian attempts to wield this influence, however, have often backfired, leading to a nationalist backlash by Iraqis and tensions with the Iraqi government.
- As the United States withdraws its forces from Iraq, the uncertain security situation will present both risks and opportunities for Iran.

### **Overview**

Since ancient times, Iraq and Iran have been the seats of rival states and empires. Mesopotamia, today's Iraq, was home to the Assyrian, Babylonian and medieval Abbasid empires. The Achaemenid, medieval Safavid and early-modern Qajar dynasties ruled in Persia.

Iraq has also held special significance for Iran ever since the Safavid dynasty made Shiism the state religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Shiite Islam was born in Iraq. The holy Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala are traditional Shiite centers of learning and destinations for religious pilgrims. For centuries, the holy cities have had a strong Persian presence. As a result, Iran views southern Iraq as part of its historic sphere of influence.

This ancient rivalry has continued into modern times. The newly established Islamic Republic tried to export its Islamic ideology to Iraq, providing Saddam Hussein a pretext for his 1980 invasion. The Iraqi leader in turn tried to strike a fatal blow against his foremost regional rival and to seize its oil wealth. Instead, the invasion produced a long, bloody and inconclusive eight-year war that killed and wounded well over 1 million people. The toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 by U.S. and coalition forces thus constituted an historic opportunity for Iran to expand its influence in Iraq, and to transform it from an enemy into a partner or ally.

### **Political strategy**

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has tried to influence Iraqi politics by working with Shiite and Kurdish parties to create a weak federal state dominated by Shiites and amenable to Iranian influence. Tehran has also supported Shiite insurgent groups and militias, and enhanced its soft power in the economic, religious and informational domains.

Iran's goal is to unite Iraq's Shiite parties so that they can translate their demographic weight into political influence, thereby consolidating Shiite primacy for the first time. Tehran has encouraged its closest allies – the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Dawa and the Sadrists to participate in politics and help shape Iraq's nascent institutions. It has backed a range of disparate parties and movements to maximize its options and ensure its interests are advanced, no matter which Iraqi party came out on top.

### Local allies

- The **Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq** (ISCI) was established in Tehran in 1982 by expatriate Iraqis, and was based there until returning to Iraq in 2003. Its militia, the **Badr Corps**, was trained and controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and fought alongside Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War. After 2003, thousands of Badr militiamen entered southern Iraq from Iran to help secure that part of the country. Many were subsequently integrated into the Iraqi security forces, particularly the army and the national police.
- **Dawa**, founded in the late 1950s, enjoyed the Islamic Republic's support during the latter phase of its underground existence in Iraq. After 2003, Dawa joined the political process, but its potential was limited due to its lack of an armed militia. Its leader, Nuri al-Maliki, was selected by the more powerful ISCI and Sadrists as a compromise choice for prime minister in 2005, but he has since used this position to build a power base in the government and the army – parts of which now function as a personal and party militia.

Maliki shares a general affinity with Tehran's Shiite Islamist worldview, but not its doctrine of clerical rule. Mindful of his dependence on Washington for survival, he has tried to tread a middle path between Tehran and Washington, and has avoided a full-fledged embrace of Tehran.

- The **Sadrists** have emerged as a major force in politics and the Iraqi street since 2003. Their leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, has played on his family name as the sole surviving son of the revered Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who was murdered by regime agents in 1999. His populist, anti-American rhetoric, and the muscle and patronage offered by his Jaysh al Mahdi (Mahdi Army) militia, have gained him support among the Shiite urban poor.

Though politically aligned with ISCI and Dawa, the Sadrists have also had a contentious and violent relationship with both parties. Sadr fled to Iran in 2007 to avoid being targeted by U.S. and Iraqi forces, and to pursue his religious studies. He reportedly hopes to become an ayatollah to acquire the key religious leadership credential he currently lacks.

- Kurdish parties – the **Kurdish Democratic Party** (KDP) and the **Patriotic Union of Kurdistan** (PUK) – have long-standing ties with Iran. Kurdish guerillas (Peshmerga) fought alongside Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. And Tehran armed the PUK during its fighting with the KDP from 1994 to 1998. Iran continues to enjoy close ties with the PUK and KDP, as well as Iraq’s northern Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). But Tehran has conducted occasional cross-border artillery strikes against Iranian Kurdish guerillas based in northern Iraq.

### **Modes of influence**

Iran exercises its influence through its embassy in Baghdad and consulates in Basra, Karbala, Irbil and Suleimaniyah. Both of its post-2003 ambassadors – Hassan Kazemi-Qomi and Hassan Danaifar, who was born in Iraq but whose family was expelled by Saddam Hussein – served in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) elite Qods Force. Their appointments reflect the role Iran’s security services play in formulating and executing policy in Iraq. The Qods Force is the IRGC unit in charge of Iran’s most sensitive covert foreign operations.

Iran reportedly tried to influence the outcome of the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections and 2009 provincial elections by funding and advising its preferred candidates. Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani reportedly played a key role in negotiations to form an Iraqi government in 2005. He also reportedly brokered ceasefires between the Supreme Council and the Mahdi Army in 2007, and between the Iraqi government and the Mahdi Army in 2008. Iran unsuccessfully encouraged ISCI, Dawa and the Sadrists to run for the 2010 elections in a unified bloc. Following the 2010 election, Iranian Majles Speaker Ali Larijani reportedly played a key role in prodding these parties to form a coalition government.

Iran has also been vying for Iraqi “hearts and minds” through Arabic language news and entertainment broadcasts into Iraq (and the Arab world) over the *al-Alam* television network. The programs reflect Tehran’s propaganda line on news relating to the region. *Al-Alam* was launched on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

### **Militias and insurgents**

Iran has encouraged its Iraqi political allies to work with the United States. But its Qods Force has armed, trained and funded militias associated with these parties, as well as radical insurgent groups that attack U.S. forces. These groups could provide Tehran the means to retaliate against U.S. forces in Iraq, should the United States or Israel attack Iran’s nuclear facilities.

After 2003, Iran initially focused its resources on its traditional allies in ISCI’s Badr Corps. But it soon expanded its aid to include the Sadrists’ Mahdi Army, associated

special groups and even some Sunni insurgent groups. It sometimes used Arabic-speaking Lebanese Hezbollah operatives to facilitate these efforts.

Iran's support for the Mahdi Army has proven particularly problematic. The Sadrist militia underwent a dramatic expansion after 2003, which led it to incorporate many criminal elements. The militia's radical agenda and its competition for power within the Shiite community soon brought it into conflict with both the Supreme Council and the Iraqi government, thereby undermining Iranian efforts to unify the Shiite community.

Iran has also reportedly facilitated the activities of the Ansar al-Islam, a Salafi jihadist group in northern Iraq, which provided leverage over the Kurdish regional government and an entrée into Sunni jihadist circles.

By 2010, Iran had narrowed its support to three armed Shiite groups: Sadr's Promised Day Brigade – the successor to the Mahdi Army – and two special groups: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (League of the Righteous) and Kata'ib Hezbollah (Battalions of Hezbollah). Iranian advisors reportedly returned to Iraq in mid-2010 with Kata'ib Hezbollah operatives trained in Iran to conduct attacks on U.S. forces as they drew down. Their goal was to create the impression that the United States was forced out of Iraq.

## **Trade**

Iran has strengthened trade and economic ties with Iraq for financial gain, and to obtain leverage over its neighbor. Iran is Iraq's largest trade partner. Trade between the two countries reportedly reached \$7 billion in 2009. Iranian exports to Iraq – the lion's share of the total – is mainly fresh produce and processed foodstuffs, cheap consumer goods and cars. Iraqi exports to Iran include crude and refined oil products, sulfur and iron. Iranian investors and construction firms are also active in Baghdad, predominantly Shiite southern Iraq and Kurdistan.

Iranian dumping of cheap, subsidized food products and consumer goods into Iraq, however, has undercut Iraq's agricultural and light industrial sectors, and generated resentment among Iraqis. Iran's damming and diversion of rivers feeding the Shatt al-Arab waterway has also undermined Iraqi agriculture in the south and hindered efforts to revive Iraq's marshlands. And while Iran has made up for Iraq's electricity shortages by supplying about 5 percent of its needs (the proportion is actually much higher for several provinces that border Iran), many Iraqis believe that Iran manipulates these supplies for political ends.

## **Religious influence**

Iran has been working to ensure the primacy of clerics trained in Qom, steeped in the Islamic Republic's official ideology, over clerics trained in the relatively non-

political “quietist” tradition of Najaf’s academies. Its goal is to ensure that its version of Islam is the dominant ideology among Shiites world-wide.

Iran may now be poised to achieve this goal, due to:

- Its lavish use of state funds for the activities of its politicized clerics.
- The 2010 death of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Fadlallah, an influential Lebanese cleric trained in Najaf.
- And the advanced age of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani – the foremost member of the Najaf school and *marja*, or source of emulation, for perhaps 80 percent of all Shiites. He was born in 1930 and is reportedly ailing.

Iraq has also become a major destination for Iranian religious tourists. Some 40,000 Iranians visit holy sites in Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya and Samarra each month. Iran reportedly invests tens of millions of dollars annually for construction and improvement of tourist facilities for its pilgrims.

### **Limits of influence**

Despite significant investments to expand its influence in Iraq, Iran’s efforts have yielded only mixed results. The goal of Shiite unity in Iraq has proven elusive. Relations among its Iraqi clients have frequently been fraught with tensions and violence, and it has spent much time and effort mediating among them. Tehran’s meddling in Iraqi politics has also been a liability for its local allies, contributing to the Supreme Council’s extremely poor showing in 2009 provincial elections and 2010 parliamentary elections.

Tehran also failed to block two key pacts – the Security Agreement and the Strategic Framework Agreement – between Iraq and the United States. It did succeed in obtaining a provision in the Security Agreement ensuring that Iraq would not be used as springboard for an attack on Iran. But these agreements mean that Iran faces the possibility of Iraq having a long-term strategic partnership with the United States.

Finally, various Iranian policies have stoked anti-Iranian sentiment in Iraq. They include the dumping of subsidized products on the Iraqi market; the diversion of rivers feeding the Shatt al-Arab; occasional artillery strikes on northern Kurdish villages; and provocations, such as the temporary occupation of an oil well in the Fakka oil field in Maysan province in December 2009.

### **Outstanding issues**

Iraq and Iran have made some progress in recent years in resolving sources of tension and conflict dating to the Iran-Iraq War. Both now accept the terms of the 1975 Algiers Accord for demarcating land and water boundaries. Since the 1990s, they have been exchanging the bodies of war dead, although 75,000 remain unaccounted for. In 2005, Baghdad accepted responsibility for starting the Iran-Iraq War. But Iran is seeking

reparations for war damages, and Iraq is still seeking the return of 153 civilian and military aircraft flown to Iran at the start of the 1991 Gulf War.

The fate of the 3,400 Iranian members of the oppositionist Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) located in Camp Ashraf, in Iraq, remains unresolved. The MEK is the largest Iranian opposition group in exile. Iran would like Iraq to close the camp down and turn over members of the group for trial. Many Iraqis would also like them to be deported, as they are accused of helping the former regime put down popular uprisings in the Kurdish north and the Shiite south in 1991.

### **The future**

- Iran-Iraq relations will continue to be bedeviled by a variety of unresolved issues dating to the Iran-Iraq War and by an Iranian tendency to pursue policies viewed as harmful to Iraqi interests.
- Geography, politics, economics and religion ensure that Iran will retain a modicum of influence in Iraq. And there will always be some Iraqis willing to work on behalf of Iran, for ideological and mercenary reasons.
- The most powerful constraints on Iranian influence in Iraq are Iran's own policies and high-handed behavior, Iraqi nationalism and U.S. information activities that highlight Iranian meddling in Iraq.
- Over the long-term, Iraq's relations with Iran will depend largely on its security situation, the political complexion of its government, and the type of long-term relationship it forges with the United States and its Arab neighbors.

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