



# Iran's Influence in Iraq

## Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach

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Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights,  
and Ahmed Ali

Policy Focus #111 | April 2011



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# Executive Summary

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THE OVERTHROW OF THE REGIME of Saddam Hussein in 2003 provided the Islamic Republic of Iran with a historic opportunity to transform its relationship with Iraq—formerly one of its most implacable enemies. Iran has used the long, porous border with Iraq, longstanding ties with key Iraqi politicians, parties, and armed groups, and its soft power in the economic, religious, and informational domains to expand its influence and thus establish itself as the key external power broker in Iraq.

## Political Allies

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. It has encouraged its closest allies—the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Badr Organization (ISCI's former militia), the Islamic Dawa Party, and more recently the Sadrist—to participate in politics and help shape Iraq's nascent institutions.

Tehran's goal is to unite Iraq's Shiite parties so that they can translate their demographic weight (some 60 percent of the country's population) into political influence, thereby consolidating Shiite control over the government. To this end, Iran attempted to influence the outcome of the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections as well as the 2009 provincial elections by funding and advising its preferred candidates, and by encouraging its Shiite allies to run in a unified list, to prevent the Shiite vote from being split. Additionally, to ensure that its interests are secured no matter who comes out on top, Tehran has hedged its bets by backing a number of Shiite parties and movements. It has also sought to preserve its traditionally good relations with the major Kurdish parties to secure its influence in parts of northern Iraq.

Tehran exercises its influence through its embassy in Baghdad and consulates in Basra, Karbala, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyah. Both of its post-2003 ambassadors served in the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary

Guard Corps (responsible for covert operations abroad), underscoring the role Iran's security services play in formulating and implementing policy in Iraq. These security services have sometimes used Arabic-speaking Lebanese Hizballah operatives to facilitate support for insurgent groups and militias.

The formation in December 2010 of the second government of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki marked a milestone in Tehran's efforts to unify its Shiite political allies in Iraq. This government, however, may well prove unstable, as it combines various parties that have engaged in violent conflicts in the not-too-distant-past. It therefore remains to be seen whether Tehran will finally succeed in forging its fractious Shiite clients into a sustainable, unified political front or whether its efforts to do so will ultimately be frustrated. Regardless, the present situation ensures Iran a role as political mediator should fissures emerge in the ruling coalition.

The post-2003 period has shown the limitations of Iran's influence over its Shiite clients in Iraq, who will accept Iranian support when self-interest dictates they do so and seek support elsewhere when it does not. Recent years have also shown that Tehran's activities in the Iraqi political arena have frequently been poorly coordinated with its other activities in Iraq—such as support for militant groups—indicating a lack of coherence to Iran's whole-of-government approach to Iraq.

## Militias and Insurgents

While Iran, since 2003, has encouraged its Iraqi political allies to work with the United States and participate in the nascent democratic political process, it has also armed, trained, and funded Shiite militias and Shiite—and, on occasion, Sunni—insurgents to work toward a humiliating defeat for the United States that would deter future U.S. military interventions in the region.

Iran may have also used its Shiite militant proxies to stoke sectarian tensions and to foment political

violence, only to then step in diplomatically to resolve these conflicts—thereby ensuring for itself a role as mediator in Iraq. These armed groups also provide Tehran with an alternative source of influence should its political allies prove unreliable, and the means to retaliate against U.S. forces in Iraq should Iran's nuclear infrastructure be attacked by the United States or Israel.

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 Sadrist's Mahdi Army, associated special groups, and even some Sunni insurgent groups. As these groups joined the political process, Iran splintered off radical elements to form new covert special groups, a technique first used when it formed the radical Lebanese Hizballah organization in the early 1980s.

By 2010, Iran had narrowed its support to three armed Shiite groups: Muqtada al-Sadr's Promised Day Brigade—the successor to the Mahdi Army—and two special groups: Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (League of the Righteous) and Kataib Hizballah (Battalions of Hizballah). But Iran's support for the Mahdi Army has proved particularly problematic, since the militia's radical agenda and its competition for power within the Shiite community soon brought it into conflict with both ISCI and the Iraqi government, thereby undermining Iranian efforts to unify the Shiite community.

Following the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, Tehran may use its support for these Shiite militias and insurgent groups to press the Iraqi government to curtail its relationship with the United States and as a source of leverage on other issues. Emulating Hizballah in Lebanon, some Iranian-sponsored special groups may also attempt to leverage their influence on the street and previous resistance activities against the United States as an entree into politics. Should this occur, Tehran is likely to once again split off radical elements from these organizations to form new special groups—contributing to the further fragmentation of the Shiite community and, ironically, undermining its own efforts to politically unify its Iraqi allies.

## Soft Power

Iran has woven soft-power activities into its whole-of-government approach to projecting influence in Iraq. To this end, it has enacted protectionist measures and trade policies to Iraq's disadvantage, tried to co-opt the transnational Shiite clerical network based in Najaf, and attempted to influence Iraqi public opinion through information activities. While U.S. and Iraqi military officials have fretted that the Iraqi military will be unprepared to secure the country's airspace and territorial waters when U.S. forces leave by the end of 2011, Iranian soft power probably constitutes the greater long-term threat to Iraqi sovereignty and independence.

**Economic ties.** Iran has strengthened trade and economic ties with Iraq for financial gain and to achieve leverage over its neighbor. Trade between the two countries reportedly reached \$7 billion in 2009, although the balance is skewed largely in Tehran's favor. In dumping cheap, subsidized food products and consumer goods into Iraq, the Islamic Republic has undercut its neighbor's agricultural and manufacturing sectors, and generated resentment among Iraqis. Iran's damming and diversion of rivers feeding the Shatt al-Arab waterway has 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 10 percent of its needs (the percentage is actually much higher for several provinces that border Iran), many Iraqis believe that Iran manipulates these supplies for political ends.

**Export of revolutionary Islam.** One of the Islamic Republic's foremost objectives since the Islamic Revolution has been to secure the primacy of its official ideology in Shiite communities around the world. By backing Iranian clerics trained in Qom and steeped in the official ideology of clerical rule rather than clerics trained in the quietist tradition of the religious seminaries of Najaf, Iran may now be poised to achieve this goal, aided by the lavish use of state monies to fund the activities of its politicized clerics. Furthermore, the 2010 death of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Fadlallah, an

influential Lebanese cleric trained in Najaf, and the advanced age and poor health of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the foremost member of the Najaf school and *marja*, or source of emulation, for perhaps 80 percent of all Shiites worldwide, renders the Najaf school vulnerable to Iranian influence.

Iraq has also become a major destination for Iranian religious tourists. Each month, some 40,000 Iranians visit Iraq's holy cities, with an estimated three to four million visiting during the annual Ashura commemorations. Najaf, a traditional center of the Shiite world and emerging as an important Iraqi political center, perhaps second to Baghdad, has become the focus of Iranian investment that disproportionately benefits Tehran's local political allies. In this way, Iran buys influence in Iraq.

**Information, propaganda, and public opinion.** Alongside its other efforts, Iran has been vying for Iraqi hearts and minds through Arabic-language news and entertainment programs that reflect Tehran's slant on news relating to Iraq and the region. These propaganda efforts, however, have met with only limited success and have been unable to compensate for Iranian actions that have produced an anti-Iran backlash, even in Shiite regions.

Polling data since 2003 have consistently shown that large numbers of Iraqis (including Shiites) believe that Iran has had a predominantly negative influence on Iraqi politics and do not consider Iran's form of governance a viable model for Iraq. Despite Iran's information activities, this perception has remained fairly constant since 2003.

Public opinion in Iraq has its limits, however. Iraqi politics on the national level involve a small elite engaged in dealmaking and horsetrading behind closed doors, where public opinion plays a marginal role and Iran is able to act behind the scenes. Iraqi attitudes, however, explain why Tehran will continue to lean heavily on soft power, its security services, and covert action to project influence in Iraq.

### Limits of Iran's Influence

Despite investing significant resources to expand its influence in Iraq, Iran has achieved only mixed results.

Relations among its Iraqi clients have frequently been fraught with tensions and violence, and Iran has spent much time and effort in a mediating role, managing problems it helped create. Tehran's meddling in Iraqi politics has frequently been a political liability for its local allies.

Tehran failed to block the signing of the Security Agreement and the Strategic Framework Agreement between Iraq and the United States, though it did succeed in obtaining a provision in the Security Agreement ensuring that Iraq would not be used as a springboard for an attack on Iran.

Finally, some of Tehran's policies have stoked anti-Iranian sentiment in Iraq. Alongside the dumping of subsidized products on the Iraqi market and the diversion of rivers feeding the Shatt al-Arab, occasional artillery strikes on northern Kurdish villages and provocations such as the temporary occupation in December 2009 of an oil well in the Fakka oil field in Maysan province have done little to endear Iran to the Iraqi populace.

### Policy Recommendations

Iran's attempts to wield its influence in Iraq have thus far yielded only mixed results, though the formation of a new government that incorporates many of Tehran's closest Iraqi allies, and the impending U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, will present new opportunities for Iran to extend its reach. Such a move is likely to generate further Iraqi pushback, though it remains to be seen whether Iranian influence will continue to be "self-limiting" or whether this emerging reality will create new opportunities for Tehran to transform Iraq into a weak client state via a gradual process of "Lebanonization."

Over the long run, the nature of the relationship between Iraq and Iran will depend largely on the security situation in Iraq, the political complexion of the Iraqi government, and the type of long-term relationship Iraq builds with its Arab neighbors and the United States. Moreover, Iraq's reemergence as a major oil exporter, likely at Iran's expense, will almost certainly heighten tensions between the two oil-exporting nations.

Thus, while assessments of Iran as the big “winner” in Iraq are premature, they may yet prove prescient if the United States does not work energetically to counter Iranian influence there in the years to come. For these reasons, Washington needs to continue to

- support stabilization efforts by the Iraqi Security Forces,
- press for marginalization of Sadrists and other extremists in the new government,
- build the kind of relationship described in the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement, and
- aid in the development of Iraq's oil and energy sectors.

If the post-2011 level of U.S. engagement with Iraq is modest, Iran—which enjoys closer, more varied, and more extensive ties with Iraq than does the United States or any state in the region—will almost certainly seek to expand its influence to confirm its position as the paramount outside power in Iraq, with adverse consequences for U.S. influence throughout the region and U.S. efforts to deter and contain an increasingly assertive Iran.

Such an eventuality can be averted, and U.S. interests in Iraq advanced, only if the United States continues to engage Iraq on a wide variety of fronts—diplomatic, economic, informational, and military—and to counter Iran's whole-of-government approach to Iraq with a whole-of-government approach of its own.

# Introduction

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THE OVERTHROW OF THE REGIME of Saddam Hussein in 2003 provided the Islamic Republic of Iran with a historic opportunity to transform its relationship with Iraq—formerly one of its most implacable enemies. Iran has used the long, porous border with Iraq, longstanding ties with key Iraqi politicians, parties, and armed groups, and a burgeoning economic relationship to weaken the central government, expand its own influence, and establish itself as a key power broker in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

Despite possessing numerous sources of leverage, Iran has thus far achieved only mixed results. Like Washington, Tehran has discovered that its influence in Iraq has limits. However, the formation of a new government under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that incorporates many of Tehran's closest allies, and the impending U.S. military withdrawal, will present new opportunities for Iran to further expand its influence in Iraq. Thus, while assessments of Iran as the big “winner” in Iraq are premature, they may yet prove prescient if the United States does not work energetically to counter Iranian influence there in the years to come.

The United States has a compelling interest in the establishment of a peaceful, constructive relationship

between Iraq and Iran, even as it must also ensure that Iraq remains a key U.S. regional partner not beholden to Iranian interests. U.S. and Iraqi interests are therefore ill served by Iranian policies that foment instability in Iraq, that subvert the state's democratic process, or that seek to establish unhealthy trade and energy-sector dependencies that Tehran can use as a source of leverage over provincial governments or over Baghdad.

If the post-2011 level of U.S. engagement with Iraq is modest, Iran—which enjoys closer, more varied, and more extensive ties with Iraq and Iraqis than does the United States or any state in the region—will almost certainly seek to expand its influence to become the paramount outside power in Iraq, with adverse consequences for U.S. influence throughout the region and for U.S. efforts to deter and contain an increasingly assertive Iran. Such an eventuality can be averted, and U.S. interests in Iraq advanced, only if the United States continues to engage Iraq on a wide variety of fronts—diplomatic, economic, informational, and military—and to counter Iran's whole-of-government approach to exerting influence in Iraq with a whole-of-government approach of its own.

# 1 | Historical Background

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IN ANCIENT TIMES, rival empires ruled the territories that constitute modern-day Iraq and Iran. The Assyrian and Babylonian empires held sway in Mesopotamia, while the Median and Achaemenid Empires dominated the Iranian plateau. However, for much of the 2,500 years since Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, Iraq and Iran have formed a single political unit, though Iraq at times marked a contested border, whether between the Roman and Sassanid empires or between the Ottomans and the Safavids. The Treaty of Qasr Shirin, signed in 1639 CE by the Ottoman and Safavid empires, ceded Mesopotamia to the former, establishing a border that has been remarkably stable ever since, despite several intervening wars.<sup>2</sup>

Iraq has held special significance for Iran ever since the Safavids made Shiism the state religion in the sixteenth century. Shiite Islam was born in Iraq, and the Iraqi cities of Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, and Kadhimiyyah are traditional destinations for religious pilgrims from Iran and elsewhere, and centers of Shiite learning. For this reason, a strong Persian presence existed in Najaf and Karbala through the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the long history of common rule and because of the Shiite connection, Iran views southern and central Iraq as parts of its historic sphere of influence. Conversely, given that southwestern Iran has a large Arab population (many of them Sunni Muslims) and constitutes a geographic extension of the plains of southern Iraq (set off from the Iranian plateau to the north and east), this area has often been closely tied to Iraq.

The rivalry of recent centuries has intensified considerably in recent decades. In attempting to export

its Islamic Revolution to Iraq, the newly established Islamic Republic provided Saddam Hussein with a pretext for invading Iran in 1980. By doing so, he aimed to strike a fatal blow against his main regional rival, to seize its oil wealth, and to gain unrestricted access to the Gulf. Instead, the action led to a long, bloody, and inconclusive eight-year war that killed and wounded well in excess of a million people.

The toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 by U.S. and coalition forces thus constituted a historic opportunity for Iran to weaken Iraq and expand its influence over its neighbor. But it also posed a number of risks for Tehran: that Iraq might emerge as a well-armed ally of the United States, completing the U.S. military encirclement of the Islamic Republic; that a successful democracy in Iraq might undermine the legitimacy and appeal of the Islamic Republic; and that the quietistic model of Islamic jurisprudence taught in Najaf, freed from Saddam's repressive shackles, could threaten the Islamic Republic's efforts to impose its form of politicized Islam on the broader Shiite world. Clearly, the removal of Saddam represented a moment of both promise and danger.

Since the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, Iran has tried to influence developments in Iraq by working with Iraqi Shiite parties with which it has longstanding ties, as well as with emergent Shiite forces and the Kurds, to create a weak federal state dominated by the Shiites and amenable to Iranian influence. Iran has likewise supported Shiite (and occasionally Sunni) insurgent groups and militias, and has sought to enhance its soft power in the economic, religious, and informational domains.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 | Tehran's Political Strategy

IRAN'S POLITICAL GOAL is to unite Iraq's Shiite parties so that they can translate their demographic weight (approximately 60 percent of the country's population) into political influence, thereby consolidating Shiite control over the government. As part of its long-term strategy to exercise influence in Iraq, Tehran has sought leverage through Shiite political parties that it helped establish and has supported for more than three decades. It has also acted to preserve its traditionally good relations with the major Kurdish parties to secure its influence in parts of northern Iraq.

### Electoral Politics

Iran has encouraged its closest allies in Iraq—the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (or ISCI, formerly SCIRI, which it helped found), the Badr Organization (ISCI's former militia), the Islamic Dawa Party, and, more recently, the Sadrists—to participate in the post-2003 political process and to compete in every election on a single list, in order to prevent the Shiite vote from being split among several competing parties.

Moreover, Tehran has hedged its bets by backing a number of Shiite parties and movements, rather than putting all its eggs in one basket, to ensure that its interests are secured, no matter who comes out on top.<sup>5</sup> And it has supported an alliance between its Shiite allies and key Kurdish parties with which it also has longstanding ties, in order to ensure a viable governing coalition.

Tehran's allies played a key role in shaping the 2005 constitution and Iraq's nascent political institutions,<sup>6</sup> and Iran reportedly tried to influence the outcome of Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2010, and provincial elections in 2009, by funding and advising its preferred candidates.<sup>7</sup>

Iranian support to Iraq's Shiite political lists stems not only from shared ideological affinities and religious solidarities and a common past opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein but also from the recognition that these Islamist groups offer Iran a better potential outcome than that offered by secular nationalist

groupings, such as Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyah coalition, whose political base includes many Arab nationalists and former regime supporters who strongly oppose Iranian influence in Iraq. Iran's vision for Iraqi politics is thus by default, if not by design, heavily sectarian, and in diametrical opposition to the U.S. vision of an Iraqi government that is inclusive and representative.

The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—the joint Shiite list that competed in the January 2005 and December 2005 parliamentary elections—included ISCI, the Badr Organization, Dawa, the Sadrist Trend, the Islamic Fadhila Party, and other small Iraqi Shiite parties that have enjoyed varying levels of support from Iran. The UIA was able to garner the majority of the vote in both elections, and consequently played a major role in framing the Iraqi constitution, and in the governments that were formed following these elections. The UIA was also backed in the January 2005 elections by Iraq's most revered Shiite religious authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, despite his differences with the Qom-based religious establishment regarding the doctrine of clerical rule (*velayat-e faqih*).

The UIA-led governments always had the tricky task of balancing their own interests with those of their Iranian patron. For instance, Iran opposed a security agreement between Iraq and the United States. By contrast, the Iraqi government clearly believed that an agreement was in its interest. In the end, Iraq signed a security agreement with the United States in November 2008, though the deal included language ensuring that Iraq would not be used as a springboard or corridor for attacks on Iran and established a timetable for a U.S. military withdrawal, in accordance with Iranian demands.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the first major action by the Iraqi government to check Iranian influence was the crackdown in April–June 2008 by Prime Minister Maliki on the Mahdi Army and special groups in Basra and Baghdad. Coined Operation Charge of the Knights, the effort caused considerable damage to Iranian-backed groups as well as a breach in Maliki's relationship with Qasem

Soleimani, Iran's point man in Iraq and commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF).<sup>9</sup> By the time intensive Iranian diplomacy ended the operation, a range of Iranian-influenced militant and criminal leaders had been run to ground in Iraq or had fled to Iran. (Since the summer of 2010, however, these groups have been allowed some breathing space and begun to reestablish their presence in Iraq.)

In this and other cases, Iran has been confounded by the contradictions in its own policy. Tehran has often supported the Iraqi government on the one hand while, on the other, backing violent militias that undermined Iraqi government authority. A telling case played out from mid-2006 through mid-2007 when IRGC-QF paramilitary support to an expanded range of Shiite militant factions resulted in an escalation of intra-Shiite violence that was eventually reined in by Soleimani after Iraqi Shiite politicians démarched Tehran.<sup>10</sup> (More recently, the October 1, 2010, decision by the Sadrist to support a second Maliki premiership brought about an immediate reduction in the then-escalating rocketfire by Iran-backed Shiite militants against the International Zone, providing an example of Iran's ability to scale back violence when the interests of its allies and proxies are aligned.<sup>11</sup>)

The unified front that the Iraqi Shiite parties presented on the national level in 2005 could not be sustained, however, and the UIA parties ran separately in the January 2009 provincial elections. While Maliki's State of Law Alliance (SLA) list performed well in the central and southern provinces, its main competitor, ISCI, experienced a collapse in public support, despite running a well-organized and well-resourced campaign. Many attributed ISCI's poor showing to its widely publicized ties to Tehran. Some of ISCI's competitors tried to portray themselves as "one hundred percent Iraqi," implying that ISCI was otherwise, given its close ties to Iran.<sup>12</sup>

Realizing the potentially harmful implications of a split in the Iraqi Shiite vote, Iran encouraged the UIA to resurrect itself for the March 2010 parliamentary elections. Maliki, however, formed his own list (SLA) and won more votes and seats than the other Iraqi Shiite parties, which competed under the umbrella of the

Iraqi National Alliance (INA). During the electoral campaign, Iran's closest ally, ISCI, attempted to secure votes by patronage extended through the Shahid al-Mihrab Foundation, which, inter alia, underwrites the wedding costs for young Iraqis and distributes assistance to needy families.<sup>13</sup>

Some of Iran's actions in the run-up to elections further harmed its allies. In December 2009, Iranian forces took over an oil well in the Fakka oil field located on the Iran-Iraq border in Maysan province. The Iraqi government responded timidly, despite popular sentiment highly critical of Iran, even in largely Shiite regions. The takeover placed Dawa and the INA in a difficult spot, as they tried to balance their ties with Tehran with the need to avoid being seen as weak in dealing with a foreign threat only a few months prior to elections.

In the March 7, 2010, national elections, Iraqiyah, a more secular and nationalist cross-sectarian list headed by former prime minister Ayad Allawi, won a plurality of seats (91 of 325). Iran's immediate postelection policy centered on preventing Allawi from forming a government. To that end, all the major Shiite lists were invited to Tehran for meetings, where the SLA and INA were encouraged to form a single coalition—an effort that bore fruit with the formation of the National Alliance (NA) in May 2010.

In August 2010, Tehran quietly floated the idea of a second Maliki premiership, even though previously he had not been its preferred choice.<sup>14</sup> Remarkably, Iran's longstanding ally, ISCI, rejected this idea, at one point indicating it might even back an Iraqiyah-led bloc. After Tehran finally succeeded in pressuring the Sadrist to support Maliki for a second term, and after several additional rounds of negotiation, ISCI, and then Iraqiyah, agreed to accept a second term for Maliki, enabling him to finally put together a new government.

The second Maliki government, however, may well prove unstable, as it combines various parties that have engaged in violent conflicts in the recent past. It therefore remains to be seen whether Tehran will finally succeed in forging its fractious Shiite clients into a sustainable, unified political front, or whether its efforts to do so will once again be frustrated.

The experience of the last several elections has shown the limitations of Iran's influence over its Shiite clients in Iraq, who will accept Iranian support when self-interest dictates they do so, and seek support elsewhere when it does not. Recent years have also shown that Tehran's activities in the Iraqi political arena have frequently been poorly coordinated with its other activities in Iraq—such as its support for militant groups or its handling of border disputes—indicating a lack of coordination in Iran's whole-of-government approach to Iraq.

### Political Allies

ISCI was established in Tehran in 1982 by expatriate Iraqis, and continued to base itself in Iran until moving to Iraq in 2003. The organization's cofounder and head, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, was killed in August 2003 by an al-Qaeda car bomb in Najaf, after which ISCI was led by his brother Abdulaziz al-Hakim until the latter's death in August 2009. It is now led by his nephew Ammar al-Hakim. In the previous parliament, ISCI held more than 30 seats out of a total of 275; it now holds only 8 seats in a parliament with 325 seats.

ISCI's militia, the Badr Organization (formerly Badr Corps), was trained and controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and fought alongside Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>15</sup> After 2003, thousands of Badr militiamen entered southern Iraq from Iran to help secure that part of the country.<sup>16</sup> Many were subsequently integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces, particularly the army and the Ministry of Interior's intelligence and special forces organizations.<sup>17</sup> Badr has demonstrated increasing independence with each successive leadership transition in ISCI since 2003, perhaps reflecting diminishing confidence in ISCI's younger, less experienced current leadership.<sup>18</sup> Badr controls nine seats in the current parliament.

The Islamic Dawa Party, founded in 1957, enjoyed the support of the Islamic Republic during the latter phases of its underground existence in Iraq. After 2003, Dawa joined the political process, but its lack of an armed militia limited its potential. The party's

leader, Nouri al-Maliki, was selected by the more powerful ISCI and Sadrists as a compromise choice for prime minister in April 2006, but he has since used this position to build a power base in the government and the army—with parts of the latter now functioning as a personal and party militia.<sup>19</sup>

While Maliki shares a general affinity with Tehran's Shiite Islamist worldview (though not its doctrine of clerical rule) he has been mindful of his dependence on Washington for survival and has thus tried to tread a middle path between the two powers, avoiding both open embrace and criticism of Tehran. This may change in the future, however, with U.S. forces set to withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011.<sup>20</sup> Dawa commanded only thirteen seats in the last parliament; Maliki's SLA holds eighty-nine seats in the current parliament.

The Sadrists have emerged as a major force in politics and on 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 in 1999 by agents of Saddam Hussein's regime. He has also employed populist, anti-American rhetoric, and tapped the muscle and patronage offered by his Mahdi Army militia (a.k.a. Jaish al-Mahdi, or JAM) to gain support among the Shiite urban poor for his political organization, the Office of the Martyr Sadr. The Mahdi Army was deeply involved in sectarian cleansing and looting during Iraq's civil war of 2006–2007.

Religious in orientation, the Sadrist movement embraces a variant of Iran's doctrine of clerical rule. Sadr's sights are fixed on long-term dominance of the Iraqi clerical establishment and the creation of a system of government in southern and central Iraq that fuses elements of Hassan Nasrallah's charismatic leadership of the Lebanese Hizballah with the Iranian model of clerical rule—albeit with an Iraqi cleric, presumably Sadr himself, atop the structure.

While aligned politically with ISCI and Dawa, the Sadrists have had a contentious and violent relationship with both groups. Sadr fled to Iran in 2007 to avoid being targeted by U.S. and Iraqi forces under the control of Prime Minister Maliki, though he claimed his stay was to burnish his religious leadership

credentials by studying to become an ayatollah.<sup>21</sup> He returned to Iraq briefly in January 2011 and again in February. Likewise, his relationship with Iran is anything but straightforward, with Sadr reportedly threatening to leave Iran for Lebanon if the Islamic Republic continued to pressure him to accept Prime Minister Maliki for a second term. Eventually, however, Sadr relented.<sup>22</sup>

One Iranian lever over Sadr has been Ayatollah Kadhim Hussaini al-Haeri, a claimant to the leadership of the Sadrist Trend.<sup>23</sup> The Qom-based Haeri has functioned as Sadr's mentor and *marja* since the death of Sadr's father, and at one time Sadr served as Haeri's representative in Najaf, although their relationship has been strained in recent years as a result of Sadr's radical stances on a number of issues. Sadr is rumored to have continued his studies under Haeri during his stay in Iran between 2007 and 2011.<sup>24</sup>

The Sadrists held 32 seats in the outgoing 275-seat parliament, and have roughly maintained this share with 40 seats in the new 325-seat parliament. This is a significant achievement in light of the backlash against the Sadrist movement in the 2009 provincial elections, when Iraqi Shiites punished the movement for empowering religious vigilantes and criminals in the ranks of the Mahdi Army. The Sadrist movement's comeback appears to be due, at least in part, to careful Iranian coaching on electoral strategy, including advice from Iranian political scientists regarding the optimal selection and placement of candidates.<sup>25</sup> The support appears to have paid off, with the Sadrists displacing ISCI as Prime Minister Maliki's main Shiite partner (or rival) within the political system, securing seven ministries in the new government (albeit some of the less significant ministries).

Another aspect of Iran's political influence was exposed in the lead-up to the March 7, 2010, elections in the actions of the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC), the successor to the De-Baathification Committee. This evolving entity has, since 2003, been dominated by the Shiite politicians Ahmed Chalabi and Ali al-Lami, two veteran interlocutors between Iran and the Iraqi Shiite factions.<sup>26</sup> The AJC proved to be a forum in which Iran's allies still dominated,

despite their political setbacks in 2008–2009, giving members a very effective means to undermine the hesitant beginnings of a cross-sectarian nationalist agenda in Iraqi politics by steering the debate back to sectarianism and the Baathist past of many Iraqi politicians. In effect, Iran's allies identified a fulcrum where they could use their temporarily limited political influence to produce a strategic outcome—the scuttling of a nationalist alliance of Maliki and Allawi supporters, which would have been a disaster for ISCI, the Sadrists, and Iran.

Finally, Iran has longstanding ties with Iraq's main Kurdish parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Kurdish *peshmerga* guerrillas fought with Iran against Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War, and Tehran armed the PUK during its fighting with the KDP from 1994 to 1998.<sup>27</sup>

Iran continues to enjoy close ties with the PUK and KDP and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) based in Irbil, although relations are strained regularly by Iranian cross-border artillery strikes and incursions into northern Iraq against guerrillas from the Iranian Kurdish Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PEJAK). Although the KDP and particularly the PUK have benefited from Iranian support, a certain measure of Tehran's influence over Kurdish leaders is rooted in the fear and intimidation the Iranians exert. Iran is also rapidly developing bilateral economic ties with the KRG that suit the needs of both Tehran and Irbil; the landlocked and cash-strapped KRG gains access to markets, while Iran can obtain refined fuel products and technology through the KRG, thereby circumventing international sanctions.

## Vectors of Influence

Iran formally exercises its influence through its embassy in Baghdad, along with consulates in Basra, Karbala, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyah. Both of its post-2003 ambassadors—Hassan Kazemi-Qomi and Hassan Danaifar (the latter was born in Iraq, but his family was expelled by Saddam Hussein)—are officers in the IRGC-QF, reflecting the central role played by this critical institution in formulating and implementing policy in Iraq.<sup>28</sup>

Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani reportedly played a key role in negotiations to form an Iraqi government in 2005, and to broker ceasefires between ISCI and the Mahdi Army in 2007 and between the Iraqi government and the Mahdi Army in 2008.<sup>29</sup> More recently, Iranian Majlis speaker Ali Larijani participated in negotiations to encourage ISCI, Dawa, and the Sadrists to run as a unified bloc in the 2010 elections and to form a governing coalition thereafter.<sup>30</sup>

Iranian proxies within the security forces are another key vector of influence. Between 2003 and 2005, sixteen thousand militia personnel were incorporated into the nascent Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). These so-called *dimaj* (direct accession) personnel lack any formal professional education as soldiers or policemen. The Shiite Islamist parties, and particularly the Badr Organization, provided most of the personnel incorporated into the ISF in this way.<sup>31</sup>

These recruits included many Iraqi Shiites who lived in exile in Iran throughout the 1980s and 1990s, who fought on the Iranian side during the Iran-Iraq War, and who either have dual Iraqi-Iranian citizenship or who were born in Iran and only received their Iraqi citizenship post-2003. The Badr recruits were often assigned to Iraqi army intelligence, Ministry of Interior special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams, and the ministry's National Information and Investigations Agency. Because, prior to 2003, Badr personnel were trained and controlled by the IRGC-QF during their stay in Iran, their integration into the ISF since then has produced a serious counterintelligence challenge.<sup>32</sup>

Iranian Qods Force operatives have also been directly implicated in efforts to arm, train, and finance militias and insurgent groups in Iraq. In December 2006, U.S. forces detained two senior IRGC-QF officers (including the senior Qods Force operations officer in Iraq) linked to attacks on American forces in a

predawn raid on the house of Badr Organization head Hadi al-Ameri, in a Baghdad compound belonging to ISCI chief Abdulaziz al-Hakim.<sup>33</sup> Five more Qods Force officers posing as diplomats were detained by U.S. forces in Irbil in January 2007 (though the apparent target of the raid, IRGC-QF Brig. Gen. Muhammad Jafari, was reportedly staying at Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani's guesthouse at the time).<sup>34</sup> And in September 2007, a Qods Force sector commander, Mahmoud Farhadi, posing as a visiting businessman, was detained by U.S. forces in Sulaymaniyah. He was reportedly in Iraq to arrange the transfer of arms to insurgent groups.<sup>35</sup> These incidents highlight the close ties between the IRGC-QF and prominent Iraqi politicians and officials and underscore the ease with which Qods Force personnel operate in Iraq.

A crude but important vector of Iranian power involves the distribution of money through a network of Iranian and Iraqi agents. Financial assistance is a simple and effective way to literally buy influence in Iraq because, as one Iraqi commented in reference to some of his countrymen, "They hate Iran, but they don't hate money."<sup>36</sup> In some cases, Iranian government funds are used to support political proxies in Iraq, contributing to the costs of operating political offices and social foundations such as ISCI's social and religious organization, the Shahid al-Mihrab Foundation.<sup>37</sup> In other cases, Iran has granted large sums of money to its Iraqi proxies so that they can buy property or invest in privatized state-owned enterprises, with the end goal of helping these proxies provide jobs and housing for potential supporters. The business interests of the Iranian regime are supported by collaborative schemes involving Iraqi businessmen, often former or current Badr members or Sadrists, who collude to dominate the cross-border business in religious tourism and the award of contracts by the federal government and provincial councils.<sup>38</sup>

## 3 | Support for Militias and Insurgents

WHILE ENCOURAGING ITS Iraqi political allies to work with the United States and to participate in the nascent democratic political process since 2003, Iran has also armed, trained, and funded Shiite militias and Shiite (and, on occasion, Sunni) insurgents, in order to provide its political allies with the means to undermine or eliminate political rivals, and to bring about a humiliating and chastening defeat for the United States that would deter future U.S. military interventions in the region. Indeed, according to U.S. ambassador James Jeffrey, Iranian-supported Shiite militias and insurgent groups may have been responsible for up to one quarter of all U.S. combat casualties in Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

Iran has also apparently used its Shiite militant proxies to stoke sectarian tensions and to foment political violence, only to then step in diplomatically to resolve these conflicts—thereby burnishing its image as an indispensable partner for Iraq.<sup>40</sup> These armed groups also provide Tehran with an additional source of influence should its political allies prove unreliable, and the means to retaliate against U.S. forces in Iraq should Iran’s nuclear infrastructure be attacked by the United States or Israel.<sup>41</sup>

Following the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, Tehran may use its support for these Shiite militias and insurgent groups to press the Iraqi government to curtail its relationship with the United States and as a source of leverage over the government on other issues. And some Iranian-sponsored special groups may seek to draw upon their record of resistance against the United States and their influence on the street as an entree into politics, much as Hizballah in Lebanon and Muqtada al-Sadr have done.<sup>42</sup>

The Islamic Republic has been sponsoring Iraqi paramilitary proxies for nearly the entire span of its thirty-year existence.<sup>43</sup> And many of the techniques used by Iran during the 1980s remain in use to this day. Thus, Iraqi government reporting on Iranian proxy operations from before 2003 noted a reliance on both overt and clandestine entities, foreshadowing

post-2003 support for overt organizations like ISCI and the paramilitary Badr Corps as well as underground special groups.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, many Iraqis who appeared in the 1970s as underground antiregime activists in Iraq and in the 1980s as exiled anti-Saddam insurgents in Iran have emerged in the past decade as politicians or anti-American leaders of special groups in post-Saddam Iraq.<sup>45</sup>

Following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in April 2003, Iran initially relied on its traditional allies in ISCI’s Badr Corps, which had conducted covert paramilitary operations in Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s under orders from the IRGC-QF.<sup>46</sup> As Badr joined the political process and became an overt organization, Iran expanded its proxy networks by splintering off radical figures from Badr, such as Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, as well as radical figures from Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia, such as Qais al-Khazali and Ismail al-Lami (a.k.a. Abu Dira—the notorious “Shiite Zarqawi”<sup>47</sup>), to form covert special groups.<sup>48</sup> This technique was first used by Iran in Lebanon to woo radical members of the more moderate Lebanese Shiite Amal Party to form the radical Hizballah movement.<sup>49</sup>

In creating these special groups, Iran also hoped to develop alternatives to the out-of-control Mahdi Army that it could more easily use to advance its interests. However, the boundaries between these groups are sometimes blurred. Thus, Badr personnel who have been integrated into Iraq’s security forces are believed to regularly provide tip-offs and targeting advice to “fellow travelers” in the special groups to facilitate their activities.<sup>50</sup>

Iran has supported its militant proxies using Qods Force operatives, both Iranian and Iraqi, supported by Arabic-speaking Lebanese Hizballah operatives.<sup>51</sup> It has transferred large quantities of weapons, explosives, and specialized equipment to militia and insurgent groups in Iraq since 2003, through official ports of entry and smuggling routes in Basra, Maysan, Wasit, and Diyala provinces, and the KRG, paying off

tribesmen and border guards to facilitate these activities.<sup>52</sup> Iran's armed forces support border smuggling activities by various means, including unmanned aerial vehicles, helicopters, visual surveillance, signals intelligence, and gunfire to intimidate and chase off Iraqi border patrols.<sup>53</sup>

Several thousand Shiite militia members are believed to have received training from the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hizballah in Iran and Lebanon during this time.<sup>54</sup> Evidence suggests that Iranian-backed facilitators fund attack cells lavishly, building up large arms caches in Iraq and paying thousands of dollars for individual attacks against U.S. forces—sums that many young unemployed Iraqis are loath to refuse.<sup>55</sup>

While Iran has focused most of its efforts on Shiite groups, it is also believed to have provided indirect military support to Sunni insurgent groups, including local al-Qaeda affiliates, though few details are available.<sup>56</sup> Salafi jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Islam have long utilized Iran as a transit route to and from Afghanistan, and as an operational base for attacks into the KRG and northern Iraq. Some senior KRG officials believe that Iran can adjust the level of threat posed by these groups and that the IRGC-QF has some measure of awareness of and perhaps even control over the activities of Ansar al-Islam within Iraq, possibly using this group to pressure the KRG to rein in anti-Iranian PEJAK operations.<sup>57</sup>

### Challenges for Iran's Proxy Strategy

Iran's support for the Mahdi Army quickly became problematic with the movement's dramatic expansion after 2003, its incorporation of numerous criminal elements, and the Sadrist movement's own fragmentation owing to disagreements over strategy, tactics, and Sadr's leadership. Moreover, the Mahdi Army's radical agenda and its competition for power within Iraq's Shiite community repeatedly brought it into conflict with ISCI and the Iraqi government, thereby undermining Iranian efforts to unify the Shiite community.

An unintended consequence of the IRGC-QFs support for a range of Shiite militia and insurgent groups (Badr, the Mahdi Army, and the special groups) was to contribute to internecine violence among them.

Following the July–August 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel, the IRGC-QF sought to build on and replicate the perceived success experienced by Hizballah by providing large numbers of advanced explosively formed penetrator (EFP) roadside bombs to a wide range of Shiite militant groups in Iraq. Some of these bombs were used for score settling, including the assassination of two provincial police chiefs and two provincial governors from rival parties in southern Iraq in the latter half of 2006. This escalating violence culminated in a bloody gunfight between armed ISCI and Mahdi Army personnel in the shrine city of Karbala in late August 2007.<sup>58</sup> After this incident, Iran scaled back its support for militant proxies in Iraq in order to prevent further bloodshed.<sup>59</sup>

By 2010, Iran had narrowed its military support to just three groups: the Sadrist movement's Promised Day Brigade (PDB), Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), and Kataib Hizballah (KH).<sup>60</sup> The PDB was created to replace the Mahdi Army as the armed wing of Muqtada al-Sadr's movement, with its formation announced in June 2008. The group's inception resulted from a compromise among the militant cadres in the Sadrist movement, allowing a select group of Sadrist fighters to remain under a clear chain of command and strict discipline to avoid the decentralization that caused the Mahdi Army militia to fracture and run out of control. The PDB is believed to retain some independence from the IRGC-QF and has not been very active recently, though some PDB members have apparently collaborated with KH and AAH organizers in attacks on U.S. forces.<sup>61</sup> PDB took credit for a January 1, 2011, attack on Camp Echo in Diwaniyah, possibly presaging a ramp-up in activities in the wake of Sadr's return to Iraq.<sup>62</sup>

Asaib Ahl al-Haqq is led by Qais al-Khazali, who served as Sadr's chief spokesman until his dismissal during the summer uprising in 2004.<sup>63</sup> While AAH is an independent group that has pursued its own agenda relative to the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) and the Mahdi Army/PDB, it still belongs to the Sadrist movement, and some of its members and sympathizers may participate in mainstream Sadrist organizations. AAH has drawn on Iranian support to undertake

complex ambushes and to kidnap coalition forces, most notably the January 2007 abduction and killing of five U.S. soldiers from the Provincial Joint Coordination Center in Karbala, and the May 2007 kidnapping of British accounting consultant Peter Moore, and his four bodyguards (who were subsequently killed).<sup>64</sup>

On March 20, 2007, Khazali was captured by British forces along with his brother Laith and Hizballah operative Ali Musa Daqduq in Basra.<sup>65</sup> In time, Khazali was transferred to Iraqi custody and released in exchange for Moore in January 2010.<sup>66</sup> During Khazali's detention, AAH tried to balance its desire to obtain the release of its leader against the desire of many AAH members to continue attacks on U.S. forces.

As part of its efforts to facilitate Khazali's release, AAH ultimately agreed in August 2009 to renounce violence and to participate in the political process.<sup>67</sup> However, some members of AAH have continued to engage in violent activities in Baghdad and Maysan province, including the January 2010 kidnapping of U.S. military contractor Issa Salomi in Baghdad to pressure the Iraqi government to release AAH detainees. Salomi was released in March 2010.

As happened to the Mahdi Army, AAH may be evolving into an umbrella organization for a wide range of militants who seek to engage in violence based on a host of ideological, sectarian, commercial, or criminal motives. While Khazali is still believed to be in Iran, where he traveled immediately following his release, other notorious special group commanders such as Sadrist breakaway Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani and former Badr member Ismail al-Lami (a.k.a. Abu Dira) reportedly returned from Iran in summer 2010 to help replenish the ranks of AAH and perhaps spearhead its transformation into a political organization with a militia wing, à la Lebanese Hizballah.<sup>68</sup> The competition between OMS and AAH to be seen as the authentic voice of "resistance" by the urban and rural Shiite poor who make up the popular base of the Sadrist movement has sparked bitter rivalry between the two organizations.<sup>69</sup>

As AAH has generally ramped down its militant activities, Iran seems to have shifted its support toward the even more hardline Kataib Hizballah, headed by

veteran terrorist (and former member of parliament) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. KH was formed in early 2007 as a vehicle for the IRGC-QF to deploy its most experienced operators and most sensitive equipment. Since then, it has developed into a compact, disciplined movement of fewer than four hundred men under IRGC-QF control. Improved Iranian advice and training have produced recent modest improvements in tactical performance.<sup>70</sup> Money for KH is believed to be routed from Iran to militant recruits via mosques and husseiniyahs (Shiite religious spaces) in Wasit, Maysan, and Basra provinces.<sup>71</sup> Iranian advisors reportedly returned to Iraq in mid-2010 with KH operatives trained in Iran to conduct attacks on departing U.S. forces, to create the impression that the United States was forced out of Iraq by the Shiite resistance organizations, supported by Iran.<sup>72</sup>

Mortar and rocket attacks against U.S. bases are a signature tactic of the special groups. In 2010, an average of twenty-two indirect fire attacks a month were conducted by special groups on U.S. bases. The attacks usually entailed 107-millimeter rockets fired singly or in pairs, though Iranian-made 122-millimeter rockets are increasingly launched from improvised multiple-rocket-launcher trucks in salvos of as many as sixteen to twenty. Very large Iranian-made 240-millimeter rockets are also used occasionally, as are improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs).<sup>73</sup>

Throughout the summer of 2010, special groups' rocket attacks on the U.S. embassy compound in Baghdad and Basra Air Station became more regular and more accurate, in part owing to declining U.S. aerial surveillance and ground and river patrolling. During 2010, 148 mortar and rocket attacks hit Baghdad, including 49 during a three-month period in late summer.<sup>74</sup> And while most of these attacks were not lethal, one U.S. soldier and three U.S.-contracted security guards were killed by indirect fire in the International Zone and Basra between June and August 2010.<sup>75</sup>

Significantly, indirect fire on the International Zone slackened immediately after the October 1, 2010, announcement that the Sadrist bloc had endorsed the reappointment of Maliki as prime minister, dropping from over a dozen attacks per month to three or four

incidents per month. Nevertheless, indirect fire attacks against Baghdad's government and diplomatic quarter are a political lever that Iran can utilize if a future Iraqi government shows too much independence or pursues policies contrary to Iran's interests.<sup>76</sup>

Iranian-backed special groups have also made extensive use of armor-piercing EFP roadside bombs manufactured in Iran and smuggled into Iraq to attack U.S. military vehicles and Western commercial personal security details. EFP attacks are associated exclusively with Iranian-sponsored special groups and are another signature tactic of these groups.

The EFP continues to be the most advanced form of roadside bomb in Iraq, and while countermeasures have reduced the danger they pose, they have historically achieved the highest per-incident lethality of any insurgent weapon, causing hundreds of U.S. combat deaths.<sup>77</sup> EFP use has dropped, however, from around sixty per month at the height of the "surge" in U.S. troops in 2007 to an average of thirteen per month in 2010.

At the time of this writing, attacks on U.S. logistical columns are focused on the southernmost end of the supply chain, where roads converge between Nasariyah and Basra, probably a reflection of the gradual shutdown of U.S. bases along the Euphrates. Other attacks target the ongoing missions in Karbala, Najaf, Dhi Qar, Maysan, and Basra, striking U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team and consulate missions or U.S. military trainers.<sup>78</sup> A reduced U.S. presence in the cities is forcing Iranian-backed cells to target U.S. logistical bases and highway convoys in southern Iraq, and to activate EFP cells in areas where they were previously rarely active, such as in Abu Ghraib, Khalis, Muqadiyah, and Kirkuk.<sup>79</sup> A trickle of Iraqi civilian or military fatalities still results from EFPs, even though Qods Force-trained "cache custodians" impose conditions on recipients of EFPs to prevent their use against Iraqis.<sup>80</sup>

Efficient intelligence-gathering for targeting is apparent in many EFP attacks, though weapons effectiveness and lethality remain very low due to poor emplacement and the limited size of devices, combined with U.S. countermeasures. However, Iranian-backed

cells continue to pose a serious threat, adapting to overcome U.S. protective measures. In late 2010, for instance, several attempts were made to use snipers to shoot U.S. soldiers in the armpit (under their body armor), resulting in the death of one U.S. soldier supporting a Provincial Reconstruction Team mission near al-Kut in Wasit province on December 8, 2010.<sup>81</sup>

Iran is also suspected of supporting militant operations to undermine stability and stoke sectarian tensions in Iraq. In the autumn of 2007, it was suspected of having commissioned attacks on Shiite targets in the hope that al-Qaeda would be blamed, thereby reigniting flagging sectarian violence. Thus, Iranian-backed special groups are believed to have been behind the bombing of a Baghdad market on November 23, 2007.<sup>82</sup> And Mahdi Army militants claimed that Iranian agents had paid members of their militia to conduct atrocities against other Shiites as part of this effort.<sup>83</sup> Hard evidence to support these claims, however, remains elusive.

With the Sadrists playing a key role in the new government, most if not all remaining detainees belonging to the Sadrist Trend are likely to be released, replenishing the ranks of the existing special groups. Indeed, reports indicate that such releases are already happening.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, elements from the PDB, AAH, and KH will probably be drawn into the security forces, as were Badr personnel in the post-2003 period, enabling them to facilitate the activities of special-group members outside of government.

Targeted attacks on U.S. forces are therefore likely to persist, if not increase, as a result of the new latitude enjoyed by such groups, and kidnapping of Western contractors or military personnel could become a significant risk. Furthermore, Tehran is likely to once again split off radical elements from those groups that adopt a more public profile or that seek to enter politics, in order to form new covert special groups. In this way, ironically, Tehran may likely if unwittingly contribute further to the fragmentation of Iraqi Shiite politics, and thereby undermine its efforts to unify the Shiite community.

## 4 | Soft Power

IRAN HAS WOVEN soft-power activities into its whole-of-government approach to projecting influence in Iraq. To this end, it has implemented protectionist measures and trade policies to Iraq's disadvantage, and attempted to co-opt the transnational Shiite clerical network based in Najaf and influence Iraqi public opinion through information activities.<sup>85</sup> And while U.S. and Iraqi military officials have fretted that Iraq's lack of combat aircraft and robust naval forces will leave its airspace and territorial waters vulnerable when U.S. forces leave in 2011, Iranian soft power probably constitutes the greater long-term threat to Iraqi sovereignty and independence.

### Economic Ties

Iran's trade with Iraq reportedly reached \$7 billion in 2009—second only to trade between Turkey and Iraq, which reportedly reached \$9 billion that year.<sup>86</sup> The balance of trade between Iran and Iraq, however, is strongly skewed in Iran's favor, in part due to Iranian protectionist policies and government subsidies. Iranian exporters gain significant tax breaks and other incentives, while the Islamic Republic imposes heavy import tariffs on Iraqi goods. Iranian exports to Iraq consist mainly of fresh produce, processed foodstuffs, cheap consumer goods, cars, and construction materials such as cement, glass, and bricks. Iraqi exports to Iran consist largely of crude and refined oil products.

Iran now operates five banks in Iraq, including a Bank Melli branch in Baghdad, an agricultural bank, and three retail banks with branches in Baghdad, Najaf, and Karbala. This development has allowed Iraqi banks to open letters of credit with Iranian banks, thereby facilitating trade. The Iranian government has also offered Iraq a number of billion-dollar soft loans to undertake projects in Iraq that use Iranian contractors and equipment.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, Iranian investors, parastatal foundations (*bonyads*), construction firms, and companies are very active in the largely Shiite south of the country, as well as in Baghdad and the KRG. Iranian foundations

have also helped build hospitals, clinics, and schools in southern and central Iraq, as part of Iran's efforts to win Iraqi "hearts and minds." Iranian firms lead in the field of housing construction in southern Iraq, which in the coming decade will represent a \$16 billion market in Basra province alone and a \$150 billion market nationwide, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development.<sup>88</sup> For their part, some Iranian industrial concerns are now considering setting up local subsidiaries in Iraq. For instance, Iranian firms that, for years, have been exporting iron to Iraq to aid in reconstruction are now exploring the possibility of setting up iron foundries there.<sup>89</sup>

The trade relationship, however, has had a downside. Iranian dumping of cheap, subsidized food products and consumer goods into Iraq has undercut Iraq's agricultural and manufacturing sectors, and generated resentment among Iraqis harmed by these policies. Though initial Iraqi efforts to reduce dependence on Iranian imports have mostly failed, as have politically motivated boycotts of Iranian products, most of the southern provinces have attempted repeatedly to protect their farmers from the dominance of Iranian food producers through short-term bans on Iranian imports.<sup>90</sup>

Likewise, Iran's damming and diversion of the rivers feeding the Shatt al-Arab waterway have helped undermine Iraqi agriculture in the south and hindered efforts to revive Iraq's marshlands. Iran has withheld water flows of the Kalal River, which flows into Wasit province, and of the Karun and Karkha rivers, which flow into Basra province.<sup>91</sup> In Basra, Iran's actions have been compounded by a four-year drought and the reduced flow of the Euphrates River caused by damming and diversion activities in Turkey and Syria. A steep decline in water quality in the Shatt al-Arab has resulted, sparking nothing less than a humanitarian crisis—crops and livestock have been killed and up to a quarter of the population of the al-Faw Peninsula has departed.<sup>92</sup>

Since 2003, Iraqi demand for electricity has grown dramatically, far outstripping supply. Iran has helped

make up for this shortfall by supplying some 8–9 percent of Iraq’s needs<sup>93</sup> (with the proportion much higher for several provinces that border Iran), though many Iraqis believe that Iran manipulates these supplies for political ends. Provinces such as Basra, Maysan, and Diyala rely to a significant extent upon Iranian-produced electricity, and Iran hopes to supply power to the KRG in the future.<sup>94</sup> In June 2010, Iran cut electrical supplies to Basra at the height of a summer heat wave. Given that the cut coincided with antigovernment protests launched by Iranian-backed political parties, many Basra residents viewed it as politically motivated, recalling similar power cuts when Iran’s local militia proxies were crushed by government forces in March 2008.<sup>95</sup>

Trade in oil and oil products between Iran and Iraq has also been significant. After 2003, fuel product shortages in some Iraqi border provinces (particularly Basra, Maysan, and Wasit) led local officials to approach Iran to fulfill their fuel needs. Moreover, at various times the two sides have engaged in oil swaps, with Iran accepting Iraqi crude oil in exchange for refined fuel product derivatives (such as cooking gas, heating oil, kerosene, and vehicle fuels).<sup>96</sup>

The oil relationship has not been without tensions. In November 2009, Iran staked a claim to the anchorage at Khor al-Amayah offshore oil terminal, suggesting that it is located in Iranian rather than Iraqi territorial waters. The incident underlined Iran’s ability to help or hinder Iraq’s reemergence as a major oil exporter as Iraq expands production—a development that could undercut Iran’s influence in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and, by depressing oil prices, reduce Iran’s oil income.<sup>97</sup> Should Iraq continue to experience bottlenecks in its underdeveloped southern export infrastructure, Iran could influence Iraqi oil export capacity by permitting or denying use of its ports across the border.

Perhaps most significant, Iran is a major conduit or destination for Iraqi oil products moved by tanker truck from the KRG. Although the KRG Ministry of Natural Resources denies that KRG-produced crude oil is being exported to Iran, few border security measures are in place to stop this kind of trade and the

KRG would certainly benefit from such sales. At any rate, the KRG admits to the export of refined oil products to Iran from the KRG, including KRG-produced fuels, while Kurdish truckers interviewed by the media admit that subsidized federal fuels, including expensive imported stocks, are resold to Iran.<sup>98</sup> If not quashed, the KRG–Iran trade in fuels—and Iran’s ability to work with criminal groups in Iraq to gain access to smuggled fuels from other areas—may one day become a significant check on international efforts to sanction Iranian fuel imports.

Iran also gains leverage over the KRG through the flow of refined oil products and goods, as Tehran is capable of cutting off cross-border trade if Erbil fails to meet certain Iranian demands—concerning, for instance, the KRG’s treatment of the Iranian Kurdish militant group PEJAK or of Iranian agents operating in Iraqi Kurdistan. Both are the cause of occasional diplomatic spats between Tehran and Erbil.

Iraq has also become a major destination for Iranian religious tourists. Some 40,000 Iranian pilgrims reportedly visit holy sites in Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiyah, and Samarra each month, with an estimated three to four million visiting Iraq during the annual Ashura commemorations.<sup>99</sup> The total number of religious tourists exceeds ten million annually when one includes pilgrims from elsewhere.<sup>100</sup> Thanks to Iranian government regulation, this lucrative trade is increasingly dominated by travel agencies controlled by the Iranian government or its Iraqi proxies. In addition, Iran reportedly provides \$20 million a year for the construction and improvement of tourist facilities for pilgrims in Najaf, and several million more for the other shrine cities.<sup>101</sup>

Nor is the flow one way: many Iraqis visit Iran each year for medical treatment because visas are easy to obtain and treatment in the Islamic Republic is affordable—and Iran often offers to pay part of the costs. Many more visit Mashhad and Qom for religious tourism, while thousands of Iraqi religious students live and study at seminaries in these cities.<sup>102</sup> Many other Iraqis (including senior members of the military and security services) frequently visit family members still living in Iran, a reminder of the blurred identity of many Iraqis

who were exiled in Iran for decades or born to Iraqi parents while they sought refuge in Iran.<sup>103</sup> Some Iraqis working along the Iranian border (including Iraqi border guards) transit the border daily, either because Iran offers more convenient shopping opportunities, or to stay overnight with family members.<sup>104</sup> A recent Iranian proposal to lift visa requirements for travel between Iran and Iraq could further boost tourism and trade, although such a move might also facilitate smuggling and Iranian intelligence activities in Iraq.<sup>105</sup>

While Iranian exports to Iraq are motivated in large part by economic considerations, the creation of lopsided trade imbalances through unfair business practices and the creation of dependencies in other areas may also be motivated by the desire to maximize leverage and by strategic considerations. Thus, Gholam Reza Jalali, a former IRGC officer who heads Iran's Passive Defense Organization (which is responsible for protecting the country's strategic infrastructure), has argued that Iran should reduce its vulnerability to a foreign attack by "establishing common interests and creating mutual dependence" with its neighbors, "for instance by means of pipelines"—presumably to strengthen its deterrent posture by ensuring that an attack on Iran would have ripple effects that would harm its neighbors, nearly all of which are partners or allies of the United States.<sup>106</sup>

Trade relations and joint infrastructure projects are inevitable and often mutually beneficial aspects of relations between neighboring countries (thus Canada and Mexico are top U.S. trade partners). Iraqi and U.S. interests would be well served by active and peaceful trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges between Iraq and Iran. And as long as Iraq cannot meet the domestic demand for cheap produce, processed food products, consumer goods, and electricity, it will rely on Iran for these products and services. For these reasons, Iran and Iraq will almost inevitably be major trade partners.

Moreover, both Iraq and Iran have compelling reasons for increased trade, given the inability of the Iraqi economy to meet domestic demand in many areas, and given international sanctions on Iran. But Iranian efforts to create such dependencies through unfair trade practices are also part of a strategy to use

all available instruments of national power to enhance its leverage over Iraq in order to influence its domestic politics, weaken the Iraqi state, and strengthen its deterrent posture vis-à-vis the United States. For this reason, Iraqi and U.S. policymakers have a compelling interest in working together to counter unfair Iranian trade practices and to rectify lopsided and unhealthy trade imbalances and dependencies.

## Export of Revolutionary Islam

Since the Islamic Revolution, one of the Islamic Republic's foremost objectives has been to secure the primacy of its official ideology in Shiite communities throughout the world. It has done so, in part, by backing Iranian clerics trained in Qom and steeped in the official ideology of clerical rule (*velayat-e faqih*) over clerics trained in the quietistic tradition of the religious seminaries (*hawzas*) of Najaf, in Iraq, which promote a more limited clerical role in politics.<sup>107</sup>

To Tehran's dismay, the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 created new opportunities for Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—foremost representative of the quietistic school and *marja* (source of emulation) for perhaps 80 percent of all Shiites worldwide—to further expand his activities in Iran. There, his representatives collect *khums* and *zakat* (religious taxes) from the faithful, and provide stipends to more than 65,000 religious students (out of a total of 250,000–300,000 in Iran) as well as charity to the needy—activities that have helped underwrite his popularity.<sup>108</sup> Sistani has also reportedly sought to limit the penetration of the *hawza* in Najaf by Iranian clerics and agents sent to Iraq since 2003.<sup>109</sup>

While Sistani's standing in Iran has been a source of concern for the Islamic Republic, the very scope of his activities there provides Tehran with leverage; should Tehran close his offices in Iran, Sistani would be denied a major source of income and influence. As a result, he has been careful not to openly criticize the clerical leadership of the Islamic Republic or its policies, or to challenge them through his actions.<sup>110</sup> And his few forays into Iraqi politics—such as his endorsement of the United Iraqi Alliance in 2005—have indirectly served Tehran's interests.

The Islamic Republic has spent prodigious sums of state monies to fund the activities of politicized clerics associated with Qom, in an effort to outspend the *marjas* based in Najaf and to co-opt the seminarians and masses under their influence, while funding propaganda activities to promote the Islamic Republic's version of Islam.<sup>111</sup> It does this not only out of religious conviction and political expediency but also because senior security officials believe that promoting a sense of solidarity with Iran among the world's Shiites will ensure that if Iran is ever attacked, Shiites everywhere will rally to its side, thereby strengthening its hand in its struggle with its enemies.<sup>112</sup>

The return of Muqtada al-Sadr to Iraq may be part of this long-term effort to co-opt the Najaf *hawza* and bring it closer to Iran. Sadr and his father before him were advocates for clerical rule, but under an Iraqi-born rather than Iranian Supreme Leader.<sup>113</sup> And on more than one occasion, Sadr's supporters have demonstrated their willingness to use force to gain ascendancy in Najaf. Sadr's return to Iraq would thus tip the balance in Najaf toward the Iranian model of clerical politics—or a hybrid of the Hizballah and Iranian models.

Thanks, then, to these efforts to promote its religious ideology, as well as the recent death of Najaf-trained Lebanese Grand Ayatollah Hussein Fadlallah (perhaps second only to Sistani in popularity in the Arab world) and Sistani's poor health and advanced age (he is eighty), Tehran may indeed be well positioned to further expand its influence over the transnational Shiite clerical network traditionally based in Najaf, once Sistani passes from the scene.<sup>114</sup>

Because of its traditional centrality in the Shiite world, Najaf (sometimes referred to as the "Shiite Vatican") has also been the focus of Iranian investment and other activities. Najaf is the site of the Imam Ali shrine (where the Imam Ali is buried) and the third most important pilgrimage destination for Shiite Muslims after Mecca and Medina. Millions of religious pilgrims visit Najaf each year from all over the Shiite world. They are a major source of revenue for the restaurateurs, hoteliers, shop owners, and tour guides who make a living off the religious tourism industry

(though some Iraqis complain that the Iranians award contracts only to their local political allies, and that Iranian pilgrims get preferential access to hotel rooms, cheap hotel rates, and religious shrines).<sup>115</sup> Najaf is also the traditional seat of Shiite learning, where the several thousand clerics who live and teach stand to gain new adherents from among the thousands of religious students who study in the city's seminaries and the pilgrims who visit.<sup>116</sup> And since 2003 and the rise of Iraq's Shiite religious parties, Najaf has emerged as perhaps the most important center of politics in Iraq outside of Baghdad.

For these reasons, Iran has tried to establish for itself an important role in the political, economic, and religious life of Najaf, by funding the construction of hotels, airports, medical clinics, and other infrastructure designed for religious tourism.<sup>117</sup> It has used all the instruments of national power to win "hearts and minds" in the city, including trade fairs, the marketing of pilgrimages by Iranian travel agencies, investments, and cash grants. By contrast, the lack of a U.S. diplomatic presence in Najaf will be a major constraint on America's ability to engage Shiite Muslims, especially those visiting from Iran, and to counter Iranian influence in Iraq and among Shiite communities around the world.<sup>118</sup>

### Information, Propaganda, and Public Opinion

Iran has been vying for Iraqi hearts and minds through Arabic-language radio and television news and entertainment broadcasts into Iraq that reflect the Islamic Republic's propaganda line on the country and the region. Al-Alam television, which was launched on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, is the best known of these outlets, though Iran sponsors several other TV and radio stations that broadcast in Arabic into Iraq and beyond.<sup>119</sup>

These efforts, however, have met with only limited success. Tehran's policies and actions have frequently produced an anti-Iranian backlash, even in Shiite regions. For instance, in November 2007, tribal leaders in southern Iraq circulated petitions condemning perceived Iranian efforts to destabilize Iraq. And in December 2009, Iran's temporary seizure of the Fakka

oil well sparked demonstrations throughout Iraq and condemnations by tribal leaders in the south.<sup>120</sup> Efforts by some Shiite politicians to soft-pedal Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs and Iranian violations of Iraqi sovereignty have also engendered resentment against Iran's local allies.<sup>121</sup>

Polling data since 2003 has consistently shown that large numbers of Iraqis (including Shiites) believe that Iran has a mostly negative influence on Iraqi politics and stability, and do not consider Iran's form of governance a viable model for Iraq:

- Only 3 percent of Iraqis polled in mid-2003 saw Iran's form of governance as a desirable model for Iraq (4.1 percent of Shiites), while only 21.6 percent believed that, over the coming five years, Iran would help Iraq (32.2 percent of Shiites) and 53.5 percent believed Iran would hurt Iraq (46.8 percent of Shiites).<sup>122</sup>
- An early 2004 poll showed that only 2.6 percent of respondents saw Iran as a model for Iraq, while only 4 percent wanted Iran to play a role in rebuilding Iraq and 19.5 percent did not want Iran to play such a role (the second highest percentage behind Israel, at 36.8 percent).<sup>123</sup>
- A mid-2004 poll showed that 59.99 percent of Iraqi respondents believed Iran had a negative influence on politics in Iraq, while only around 17 percent believed it had a positive influence.<sup>124</sup>
- A 2006 poll showed that 52 percent of Iraqi respondents believed Iran had a mostly negative influence on Iraq (93 percent of Sunnis and 63 percent of Kurds), while 30 percent of Shiites said Iran was having a mostly negative effect and 43 percent of Shiites said Iran was having a mostly positive effect.<sup>125</sup>
- According to a 2007 poll, 17 percent of Iraqi respondents believed Iran was playing a positive role in Iraq, and 67 percent believed it was playing a negative role.

- A similar poll taken later that year found that 79 percent believed Iran encouraged sectarian violence (99 percent of Sunnis and 62 percent of Shiites), though 66 percent also blamed Syria and 65 percent blamed Saudi Arabia for fanning sectarian violence.<sup>126</sup>
- A repeat of this poll in early 2009 showed that only 12 percent believed Iran was playing a positive role, and 68 percent believed it was playing a negative role.<sup>127</sup>

Perhaps the most comprehensive poll of Iraqi attitudes toward Iran held to date, in March 2010, found that 53 percent of Shiite Arabs had an unfavorable opinion of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinezhad and only 17 percent had a favorable opinion. (By way of comparison, 74 percent of Sunni Arabs had an unfavorable opinion and 8 percent had a favorable opinion.) And while many Iraqis had mixed opinions of Iranian policies toward Iranian pilgrims visiting Shiite holy sites, on water rights in areas bordering Iraq, and on the importation of inexpensive Iranian goods into Iraq, they believed that Iran played a major role in influencing the recent parliamentary elections, and had largely unfavorable views of Iran's ties with Iraqi political leaders (a 42 percent unfavorable rating among Shiites, 70 percent among Sunni Arabs).<sup>128</sup>

Finally, an August 2010 poll asking Iraqis which foreign countries were hindering the formation of an Iraqi government yielded the following responses: Iran (41.2 percent), United States (31.5 percent), Gulf states (11.6 percent), Saudi Arabia (8.9 percent), Turkey (5 percent), and Syria (2.3 percent).<sup>129</sup>

What this data shows is that Iraqis of all persuasions are suspicious of Iran and believe that it meddles in Iraqi politics. This perception has remained fairly constant since 2003, and has not been altered by Iranian information activities or propaganda. It appears to be rooted in deep-seated historical suspicions, Iraqi-Arab nationalism, continuing geopolitical rivalries, and the still-raw wounds of the bloody, eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Antipathy toward Iran among Iraqi Shiites can be traced to the particularly heavy toll the war took on the Shiite population, including much of the rank and

file of the Iraqi army, who endured great losses. Meanwhile, the majority of ground combat occurred in the largely Shiite provinces in the south, causing devastation from which this part of the country still has not recovered.

Public opinion has its limits, however. Much of Iraqi national-level politics occurs in a bubble (the International Zone) and involves elites engaging in deal making and horse trading behind closed doors, where public opinion plays a marginal role. The exigencies of parliamentary coalition building and maintenance,

moreover, will continue to magnify the importance of certain smaller parties that are close to Tehran (ISCI, Badr, and the Sadrists). These parties' constituencies tend to be less hostile toward Tehran, and more concerned with matters of sect, tribe, and patronage. Nonetheless, politicians ignore public attitudes toward Tehran at their own peril—particularly during the run-up to elections. These generally hostile public attitudes also explain why Tehran will continue to lean heavily on soft power, its security services, and covert action to project influence in Iraq.

## 5 | A Balance Sheet

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THE FALL OF SADDAM'S REGIME in 2003 was a moment of great opportunity and risk for Iran, though the process set in motion by that event has yet to run its course. Tehran has invested significant resources in Iraq. It has forged close ties with all the major Shiite and Kurdish parties and a number of key paramilitary actors, and has provided its political allies with sophisticated advice, mediation services, and financial support. These efforts, however, have yielded only mixed results. Moreover, some Iranian actions—its meddling in Iraqi politics, support for violent militias, and repeated violations of Iraqi sovereignty—have stoked resentment, underscoring the limitations of Tehran's often disjointed whole-of-government approach.

Iran has experienced its greatest success in Iraq in the political and economic spheres. Regarding politics, it helped form the current broad-based coalition government built around the Shiite National Alliance and its Kurdish partners, which will provide Tehran with new opportunities to project its influence in Iraq. However, the second Maliki government is riven by tensions and rivalries, and is unlikely to be stable. The goal of forging a cohesive and durable pan-Shiite bloc capable of dominating Iraqi politics is therefore likely to remain elusive, though the volatility of the governing coalition will guarantee Tehran a continuing role as mediator between contending factions.

Moreover, the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq is likely to generate further pushback, though it remains to be seen whether Iranian influence will continue to be “self-limiting”<sup>130</sup> or whether the new coalition government and the U.S. military withdrawal in late 2011 will create opportunities for Tehran to transform Iraq into a weak client state, through a gradual process of “Lebanonization,” via its proxies.

Other Iranian successes include the strong electoral showing of the Sadristes less than two years after they suffered severe setbacks both in the public eye and at the hands of the Iraqi government. (Ironically, the Sadristes' success owes at least in part to their self-portrayal

as an Islamo-nationalist movement that is less dependent on Tehran than are the other major Shiite parties.) And Tehran can take heart in its proxies' use of the Accountability and Justice Commission to veto the candidacy of prominent opposition politicians (much as the Guardian Council is used to weed out undesirable candidates in Iranian elections).

The Iranian government has arguably been much more effective at threading Iranian companies into the Iraqi economy than the U.S. government has been at encouraging U.S. investment there. Iranian firms enjoy a number of comparative advantages over the Americans: proximity to the market (which reduces shipping expenses); a strong foothold in niches in which it would be difficult for U.S. firms to compete, particularly the marketing of fresh produce, cheap canned foodstuffs, and inexpensive consumer goods; the comparative attractiveness of Iraq as a market for Iranian firms that have been shut out of other markets because of international sanctions versus for U.S. firms that have numerous opportunities on a global scale; the ability of Iran to exploit corruption, shortfalls in electricity production, and disputes between the federal and provincial governments to enhance its market share in Iraq; and support by the U.S. government for normal Iraq-Iran business ties (specifically, business opportunities that are not politically motivated or that do not provide a cover for Iranian intelligence activities—though it is hard to disentangle these various aspects of Iran's economic involvement in Iraq).

Furthermore, while the United States has a strong interest in seeing Iraq play a greater role as a producer of oil and gas—as part of the general U.S. energy strategy of encouraging more diverse sources of energy and an ample supply of oil—this does not necessarily translate into a strong interest in seeing U.S. energy firms win contracts in Iraq, so long as foreign firms that win contracts operate in accordance with free market principles. After all, U.S. shareholders own a large part of such international oil firms as BP, which is the largest oil producer in the United States.

Though Iran's paramilitary support to Iraqi militias and insurgents has sometimes been tactically effective, it has also harmed Iran-Iraq relations and further sullied Tehran's reputation. The support has thus come at a political price, and even some of Tehran's local allies are wary of its intentions. Correspondingly, security incidents in the south, including those clearly attributable to al-Qaeda and neo-Baathist groups, are often reflexively blamed on Iran.<sup>131</sup>

Perhaps the most effective element of Iran's involvement in the security sector has been its penetration of Iraqi state security organs through the Badr Organization and other groups. Removing such implants in the ministries of Interior and Defense, while preventing Sadrism influence in security and services ministries, should be a key focus for U.S. policy.

Given Iraq's economic circumstances, the pervasiveness of corruption, and its underdeveloped counterintelligence capabilities, there will always be Iraqis willing and able to work surreptitiously on behalf of Iranian interests for religious, ideological, or mercenary reasons. Until these fundamental problems can be addressed effectively, Iran will be able to recruit agents and allies in the Iraqi government and security forces.

Geography, politics, economics, and religion ensure that Iran will retain significant influence in Iraq for the foreseeable future. Continued low-level violence by a simmering neo-Baathist Sunni Arab insurgency in league with remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq, as well as by Shiite special groups, will ensure that the central government in Baghdad remains in need of foreign security assistance and support, as well as vulnerable to pressure by Tehran.<sup>132</sup> In individual provinces, a marked deterioration in the local security situation could create opportunities for Iran, as threatened parties seek the protection of foreign patrons.

Over the long run, the nature of the relationship between Iraq and Iran will depend largely on the security situation in Iraq, the political complexion of the Iraqi government, and the type of long-term relationship Iraq builds with its Arab neighbors and the United States. Moreover, Iraq's reemergence as a major oil exporter, likely at Iran's expense, will almost certainly heighten tensions between the two oil-exporting nations.

For these reasons, the United States needs to continue supporting Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) stabilization efforts, to continue pressing for the marginalization of Sadrists and other extremists in the new government, to build the kind of relationship described in the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement, and to continue aiding in the development of Iraq's oil sector. For its part, Iran will vigorously oppose a new agreement that formalizes U.S. security assistance to Iraq or that further extends the U.S. military presence.

At the time of this writing, Tehran appears to have complicated the process of renewing the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement—expending some of the political capital it gained through backing Maliki's bid for a second term as prime minister by pressing its Iraqi allies not to sign such an accord. Thus, on December 28, 2010, Maliki appeared to decisively rule out a new security accord, stating: "The last American soldier will leave Iraq. This agreement is not subject to extension, not subject to alteration. It is sealed." The return of Muqtada al-Sadr has further complicated matters. In his triumphal homecoming speech on January 8, 2011, Sadr reiterated his belief in "a legal and religious obligation" to resist "the occupation" (i.e., U.S. military presence) and underlined his movement's implacable opposition to a new U.S.-Iraq security agreement that might extend the U.S. military presence beyond 2011. He concluded by warning the government: "We're watching you."<sup>133</sup>

## Unresolved Issues

Iraq and Iran have made some progress in recent years in resolving sources of tension and conflict dating to the Iran-Iraq War. Since the 1990s they have been exchanging the bodies of war dead (though 75,000 remain unaccounted for), both now accept the terms of the 1975 Algiers Accord for demarcating the boundaries between the two countries, and in 2005, the Iraqi government accepted responsibility for starting the war.<sup>134</sup>

However, Iraq is still seeking the return of 153 civilian and military aircraft flown to Iran at the start of the 1991 Gulf War, while Iran is seeking reparations for war damages—a potential major source of tension between the two countries.<sup>135</sup>

The fate of the 3,400 Iranian members of the oppositionist Mujahedin-e Khalq organization located in Camp Ashraf, in Iraq, also remains unresolved. Iran would like Iraq to close down the camp and turn over group members for trial, whereas

many Iraqis would prefer that they be deported, as members of the group are accused of having helped Saddam's regime put down popular uprisings in the Kurdish north and the largely Shiite south in 1991.<sup>136</sup>

## 6 | Policy Recommendations

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BECAUSE OF IRAQ'S POTENTIAL role as a key player in the Persian Gulf and the Levant, the United States has a compelling interest in supporting a stable and independent Iraq that serves as a reliable strategic partner. Washington will stand a chance of achieving this goal if the Iraqi government is seen by most Iraqis as effective, legitimate, and reasonably representative; if the Iraqis can avoid further major bloodletting; and if the United States remains engaged in Iraq on diplomatic, economic, and military levels while working to counter Iran's whole-of-government approach to projecting influence with a whole-of-government approach of its own. In particular, countering Tehran's soft-power influence in Iraq deserves greater priority than it has received to date.

As Washington seeks to engage Tehran to create a more normal relationship with the Islamic Republic, it cannot afford to ignore Iran's apparent perception of the relationship as a zero-sum competition (which is how many U.S. allies in the region perceive it). Iran will attempt to portray a U.S. disengagement from Iraq as an acknowledgment of defeat, viewing it as an opportunity to further expand its influence in Iraq and to challenge U.S. interests elsewhere. Conversely, America's regional allies will see the U.S. departure as an abdication by Washington of its responsibilities, another sign of declining U.S. influence, and a further step toward the creation of an Iranian-inspired "Shiite crescent" stretching from Iran to Lebanon.

As yet, Iranian influence in Iraq has been limited, in part, by Iraqi politicians' ability to play the United States and Iran against each other and by U.S. efforts to build the capacity of the ISF, efforts that have given Iraqi leaders the confidence to push back against Iranian influence when it is in their self-interest to do so. If the United States fails to achieve the kind of partnership envisioned in the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement,<sup>137</sup> and should U.S. forces completely depart Iraq by the end of 2011 (as currently envisioned by the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement), the main external obstacles to expanded Iranian influence in Iraq will have been removed.

Thus, the United States needs to demonstrate that building the type of partnership envisioned in the Strategic Framework Agreement remains the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Iraq. Educational and cultural exchanges, assistance for Iraq's embattled agricultural sector, nongovernmental organization (NGO) support to civil society, governance, and Iraqi ministries, and investment—particularly in the oil, gas, and electricity sectors—are critical elements to this partnership and to reducing Iranian influence in Iraq. It is not clear that the United States is doing all it can to advance the vision set forth in the agreement—particularly in the realm of trade and investment.

Politics are also key. The United States will succeed in limiting malign Iranian influence in Iraq only if the Iraqi government shares its commitment to doing so, as well as to limiting the influence of parties (such as the Sadrist) that maintain militias, or that facilitate the activities of militant groups, that are supported by Tehran. Washington must make clear that building a "strategic partnership" with Baghdad will not be possible if the Iraqi government is not a serious partner to this effort. In the long run, however, the best counter to Iranian political influence is the cultivation by the United States of secular and cross-sectarian politicians and parties committed to a new nonsectarian politics.

As part of its efforts to promote good governance in Iraq, the United States should encourage the adoption of campaign finance laws that require political parties to be transparent about funding sources, thereby complicating foreign funding of political campaigns. The U.S. embassy should also closely monitor Iraqi government regulations and laws pertaining to education, health care, immigration and nationality, refugee resettlement, NGOs, and foreign media activities that could be exploited by Iran to broaden and deepen its influence in Iraq.

The United States needs to emphasize that while it supports mutually beneficial economic interactions between Iraq and Iran, it is committed to helping Iraq rectify lopsided trade imbalances and dependencies in

the electricity sector that provide Tehran with leverage over Iraqi provincial governments and Baghdad.

The United States should also reconsider its ill-advised decision not to open a consulate in Najaf. A consulate in Iraq's shadow political capital, and the "Shiite Vatican," would facilitate U.S. access to key Iraqi politicians and religious figures, contact with Iranian tourists and visitors to Iraq, and engagement of Shiite pilgrims from throughout the Muslim world.<sup>138</sup>

Finally, enabling Iraq to counter Iranian influence will mean maintaining a strong security relationship until the ISF can ensure internal security, secure the country's borders, and independently deter external interference and infringements of its sovereignty. If the Iraqi government asks, the United States should be prepared to establish such a security relationship, to include a relatively small, temporary residual military presence beyond 2011, to ensure that the U.S. military withdrawal occurs in a responsible manner.

As part of this effort, the United States should dramatically expand International Military Education and Training (IMET) and civilian police training opportunities for ISF personnel, and seek to limit Sadrist involvement in the security ministries.

Iraq's security forces should be invited to participate in regional security conferences, organizations, and activities that would be politically uncontroversial back in Baghdad, such as border security and counterterrorism conclaves and maritime security task forces. Development of Iraqi anticorruption, counterintelligence, and criminal investigation capabilities is also crucial to reducing Iranian influence in the ISF and government bureaucracies.

Finally, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad should consider retaining military staff elements that specialize in information operations—considered by U.S. officers in Iraq to be among the most potent means of countering Iranian influence in Iraq—to complement the embassy's public diplomacy efforts.<sup>139</sup> Information activities that highlight Iran's interference in Iraqi politics, support for violent armed groups, violations of Iraqi sovereignty, economic policies that keep Iraq weak, and exploitation of Iraq's dependence on Iranian electrical power supplies to advance its political agenda will continue to find a receptive audience in Iraq and may be the most effective means of strengthening Iraqi attitudes that constitute, in the long run, powerful constraints on Iranian influence in Iraq.

# Appendix: Tehran's Iraqi Partners

**Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis** (a.k.a. Jamal Jaafar Muhammad Ali al-Ibrahimi): A former terrorist and current head of the Kataib Hizballah special group, Abu Mahdi was born in Basra in 1949 and is an advisor to Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qasem Soleimani. His life story follows the arc of Iranian support for Iraqi Shi'ite proxies, from his 1979 exile to Iran as a member of the outlawed Dawa Party, to his subsequent collaboration with the IRGC-QF to conduct the bombing of the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait (1983), to the hijacking of a Kuwait Airways flight (1984) and the attempted assassination of the emir of Kuwait (1985). Abu Mahdi joined the Badr Corps while living in Iran in 1985, rising to become a deputy commander (2001) and an Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) insider.<sup>140</sup> In the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Abu Mahdi rejected the idea of Badr working with U.S. forces and resigned from the organization in November 2002.<sup>141</sup> Under Abu Mahdi's tutelage, Kataib Hizballah has developed since its inception in early 2007 into a compact, disciplined movement of fewer than four hundred men under IRGC-QF control.<sup>142</sup> Elected to parliament in December 2005, he has spent most of his time in recent years in Iran.<sup>143</sup>

**Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani** (a.k.a. Hamid al-Sheibani): A special group commander born in Nasariyah in 1960, Sheibani holds both Iraqi and Iranian citizenship. A former senior Badr Corps commander during the Saddam era, after 2003 he led the Sheibani Network, an Iranian-backed special group focusing on the distribution of explosively formed penetrator (EFP) roadside bombs.<sup>144</sup> He fled to Iran in 2007 but is believed to have returned to Iraq in late summer 2010.<sup>145</sup> His brother, known by his *kunya* (nickname) Abu Yasir al-Sheibani, was arrested in Iraq in March 2007 in connection with EFP weapons smuggling and use.<sup>146</sup>

**Ahmed Chalabi:** An Iraqi politician, Chalabi was born in Baghdad in 1944 and is the head of the Iraqi

National Congress and chairman of the Accountability and Justice (de-Baathification) Commission. A mathematician by training, he is a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Chicago. Chalabi is reported to have extraordinary access to the Iranian leadership.<sup>147</sup>

**Ali al-Adib:** Dawa Party deputy leader and close confidant of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Adib was born in Karbala in 1946 and received a bachelor's degree in literature and education from Baghdad University. From 1965 to the late 1970s he taught psychology and was involved in Iraqi government education and literacy programs. During this time he was also jailed for several years, and then fled to Iran in about 1980, where he headed the Dawa Party faction based in Tehran. Adib is close to former prime minister and former Dawa politician Ibrahim Jafari, and is a cousin of one of the founders of the Dawa Party, Muhammad Salih al-Adib. He became minister of higher education and acting minister of national reconciliation in December 2010.<sup>148</sup>

**Ali al-Lami:** Executive director of the Accountability and Justice (de-Baathification) Commission, Lami was born in Baghdad in 1964 and earned a Bachelor of Science in mathematics from the University of Salah al-Din in Irbil and a master's degree in mathematics from Baghdad University. Believed to have close ties to Shi'ite special groups and to Iran, he was detained by U.S. forces in August 2008 for his alleged role in the fatal June 24, 2008, bombing in Sadr City targeting an Iraqi Shi'ite politician working with the United States.<sup>149</sup> On February 16, 2010, Multinational Forces–Iraq commander Gen. Raymond Odierno stated that Ali al-Lami and Ahmed Chalabi “are clearly influenced by Iran.”<sup>150</sup>

**Ammar al-Hakim:** The leader of ISCI, a position he assumed shortly after the death of his father, Abdulaziz al-Hakim, in August 2009, Hakim was born in

1971 in Najaf to a prominent clerical family (he is the grandson of Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim). He has lived most of his life in Iran, where he fled with his family in 1979. He graduated from the Islamic Arabic University in Qom, where he subsequently taught Arabic language and Islamic jurisprudence. In 2003 he established the Shahid al-Mihrab Foundation, ISCI's social and religious organization.<sup>151</sup> Hakim's relative youth and inexperience have proved a liability as he has sought to manage the ISCI and Badr old guard, and his relations with Tehran appear to be strained as a result of his initial objection to a second term for Prime Minister Maliki.<sup>152</sup>

**Bayan Jabr Solagh al-Zubeidi:** A senior ISCI politician and former senior Badr Corps member, Jabr was born in 1946 in Maysan and trained as a civil engineer. A Shiite Turkmen who fled to Iran in 1982 after twelve members of his family were executed by Saddam's regime, he led ISCI's offices in Syria and Lebanon from 1988 onward and edited a number of ISCI newspapers. Jabr was elected to parliament to represent Baghdad in December 2005 and March 2010, and has served as minister of finance (2006–2010), minister of interior (2005–2006), and minister of housing and construction (2004). As minister of interior, he was accused of abetting the rise of sectarian death squads in the security forces under his control.<sup>153</sup>

**Hadi al-Ameri** (a.k.a. Abu Hassan): Secretary-general of the Badr Organization, Ameri has been a member of parliament since 2005. Born in 1956 in Khalis, Diyala province, Ameri left Iraq for Iran in the 1980s. He was active in ISCI and joined the Badr Corps in 1988. He participated in intelligence operations and was quickly promoted to chief-of-staff and later deputy commander of the Badr Corps. Ameri accepted the edict from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to work with the U.S. military and he entered the political process, joining parliament and overseeing the ostensible conversion of Badr to a civilian organization.<sup>154</sup> In fact, doubts remain over whether the movement truly "demobilized," since many elements joined the security forces while Ameri headed the parliamentary security

and defense committee. During a December 2006 raid on his Baghdad residence, U.S. forces found and detained several Iranian IRGC-QF officers.<sup>155</sup> Ameri was appointed Iraq's new minister of transportation in December 2010. He is also head of the al-Manar Company for Tourism, a tourist agency that facilitates visits to Iraq by Iranian pilgrims.

**Humam Baqr Abdulhamid Hamoudi:** A senior ISCI politician and Badr parliament member, Hamoudi served as chairman of the Constitution-Drafting Committee and of the Foreign Relations Committee in the January–December 2005 parliament. Re-elected in December 2005, he served as chairman of the Constitutional Review and Foreign Relations Committees of parliament. In summer 2009, he was appointed by ISCI chief Abdulaziz al-Hakim to lead the negotiations that spurred the formation of the National Alliance bloc. In the March 2010 elections, Hamoudi received only sixty-nine personal votes in Sulaymaniyah, as part of a successful ploy to win a compensation seat, based on an accurate assessment of his inability to exceed the electoral threshold and win a seat by conventional means. In February 2011, he was re-elected head of the parliament's Foreign Relations Committee.

**Ismail Hafidh al-Lami** (a.k.a. Abu Dira): Born in 1957 in the al-Thawra neighborhood of Baghdad (now Sadr City), Lami ran a fish market there before 2003. Nicknamed the "Shiite Zaraqawi," Lami joined the Mahdi Army and coordinated a series of high-profile attacks, including a daylight mass kidnapping of Sunni employees at the Ministry of Higher Education in November 2006, as well as a large number of sectarian murders.<sup>156</sup> In 2007–2008, Lami was the subject of an intense manhunt that resulted in the maiming of one of his sons in a U.S. airstrike. Lami fled to Iran in 2008 to avoid capture. He is reported to have returned to Baghdad in late summer 2010 and joined the League of the Righteous (Asaib Ahl al-Haqq).<sup>157</sup>

**Jalal al-Din al-Saghir:** A senior ISCI politician and Badr member, a former member of parliament, and imam of Buratha Mosque in Baghdad, Saghir lived

in exile in France prior to 2003, where he was chairman of Paris Mosque, returning to Iraq after Saddam's fall. He played a key role on the parliamentary constitution-drafting committee and the parliamentary committee charged with agreeing to amendments to the Iraqi constitution. In December 2005, Saghir was elected to the Iraqi Council of Representatives on the United Iraqi Alliance list. During the sectarian fighting in Baghdad, Buratha Mosque was searched by Iraqi forces in response to complaints that the mosque was a base for sectarian death squads. Saghir used the Buratha Mosque website to attack allies of Prime Minister Maliki during the electricity crisis of summer 2010. He downplayed news of Iran's occupation of the Fakka oil well in December 2009 and has followed the Iranian/Badr line on the need to turn over members of the anti-Tehran Mujahedin-e Khalq group to Iran. Saghir failed to land a seat in parliament in the March 2010 elections, probably owing to his perceived ties to Tehran, and is now the senior cleric within the ISCI party organization.<sup>158</sup>

**Kadhim al-Haeri:** An Iraqi religious scholar and ayatollah, Haeri was born in 1938 in Karbala and went to Iran in 1973 to teach in Qom. A student of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr (Muqtada al-Sadr's uncle) and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and a near contemporary and classmate of Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Haeri subscribes to the Iranian doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (clerical rule) and believes that Iraqis should accept Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as their religious and political authority. In 2003, Haeri designated Muqtada al-Sadr as his representative in Iraq but broke with him shortly thereafter, though some reports claim that he remains the latter's teacher and mentor.<sup>159</sup>

**Muqtada al-Sadr:** Leader of the Sadrist movement (Office of the Martyr Sadr) and its Mahdi Army/Promised Day Brigade militia, Sadr was born in 1973 in Baghdad, the youngest son of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. He studied in Najaf from 1988 to 1998 and ran the Sadr movement's youth magazine, *al-Huda*. When his father and two older

brothers were murdered by regime agents in 1999, Sadr became the patriarch of the family. Since 2003, he has struggled to hold together the movement founded by his father, in part due to tensions and disagreements with other key Iraqi Shiite personalities, including Muhammad al-Yaqubi (Fadhila), Qais al-Khazali (Asaib Ahl al-Haqq), the Hakim family (ISCI and Badr), and his father's spiritual heir, Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri. When his movement was targeted by U.S. and Iraqi security forces in 2007, Sadr fled to Iran, ostensibly to pursue his studies to become an ayatollah.<sup>160</sup> He visited Iraq in January 2011 and returned again in February.

**Oais al-Khazali:** Leader of the League of the Righteous (Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, or AAH), an Iranian-backed special group, Khazali was a student of Muqtada al-Sadr's father and served as Muqtada's spokesman until parting ways with him in 2004 over Sadr's decision to agree to a ceasefire with the U.S. military. In 2006 he established AAH, which was responsible for several high-profile attacks, including the January 2007 abduction and killing of five U.S. soldiers in Karbala and the May 2007 kidnapping of five Britons from the Ministry of Finance.<sup>161</sup> Khazali was captured by British forces alongside his brother Laith and Lebanese Hizballah operative Ali Musa Daqduq in Basra on March 20, 2007.<sup>162</sup> In time, Khazali was transferred to Iraqi custody and then released in exchange for kidnapped Briton Peter Moore in January 2010.<sup>163</sup> Though relatively young, Khazali is considered extremely intelligent and a potential future force in Iraqi politics. At present, he is believed to be in Iran.

**Tariq Najim Abdallah:** Former chief of staff and trusted advisor to Prime Minister Maliki, Abdallah was a member of the Iraqi team appointed by Maliki in 2008 (also including National Security Advisor Muwaffaq Rubaie and political advisor Sadiq al-Rikabi) to supersede the Ministry of Foreign Affairs team negotiating the terms of the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement.<sup>164</sup> He has also served as Maliki's personal emissary to Syria and Iran and was reportedly involved in negotiations with Muqtada al-Sadr in

Iran in 2010. Abdallah spent many years in exile in the United Kingdom, and in the past was rumored to be close to British intelligence, though other rumors suggest good ties to Tehran. Abdallah was reported to be Maliki's nominee to head the Iraqi National Intelligence Service in a new Iraqi government. In January 2011, however, he was reportedly relieved of his duties as chief of staff.<sup>165</sup>

**Yasin Majid:** Prime Minister Maliki's chief media advisor since 2006 and editor-in-chief of the Dawa Party's newspaper, *al-Bayan*, Majid was elected to the Council of Representatives in the March 2010 elections. Originally from Basra, he is reported to have lived in Iran in the 1980s, where he acquired Iranian citizenship while working as a BBC reporter (his wife reportedly also holds Iranian citizenship).<sup>166</sup>

# Notes

1. An earlier, much briefer version of this report was published by Michael Eisenstadt in *The Iran Primer*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/>.
2. Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). The Achaemenid, Seleucid, and Sassanid empires ruled the areas now constituting modern Iraq and Iran almost continuously from 539 BCE to 651 CE. The capital of the Sassanid Empire, Ctesiphon, was located just southeast of modern-day Baghdad. Since the seventh-century Islamic conquest, Iran has known periods without central rule, but nearly all the governments that controlled the Iranian plateau either controlled Iraq or fought continuously to do so.
3. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 13, 15–18, 20–21, 23.
4. Several excellent surveys of Iranian policy in Iraq have appeared since 2003. See Kenneth Katzman, *Iran-Iraq Relations*, Report for Congress (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, August 13, 2010), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22323.pdf>; Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and 'Other Means'*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, October 13, 2008), [http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iran\\_Iraq/CTC\\_Iran\\_Iraq\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iran_Iraq/CTC_Iran_Iraq_Final.pdf); Barbara Slavin, *Mullahs, Money, and Militias: How Iran Exerts Its Influence in the Middle East*, Special Report no. 206 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, June 2008), <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr206.pdf>; and International Crisis Group, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?* Middle East Report no. 38 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 21, 2005), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iran-gulf/iran/038-iran-in-iraq-how-much-influence.aspx>.
5. This policy of supporting a broad range of Iraqi parties and militias probably also reflects factional and institutional differences in the Iranian government. See Megan K. Stack, "Iran's Internal Divisions Play Out in Iraqi Arena," *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 2004, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/aug/12/world/fg-iran12/4>.
6. Tellingly, parties affiliated with Tehran formed a majority on Iraq's constitutional drafting committee in 2005. See Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy*, p. 40.
7. According to Vice President Joe Biden, Iran spent \$100 million on the most recent Iraqi election (though this figure seems improbably high). See WhiteHouse.gov, "Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the Veterans of Foreign Wars 111th National Convention," August 23, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/23/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-veterans-foreign-wars-111th-national-co>. See also David Ignatius, "Tehran's Vote-Buying in Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/24/AR2010022403479.html>, and David Ignatius, "Bush's Lost Iraqi Elections," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/29/AR2007082901930.html>. Iranian efforts to influence the December 2005 parliamentary elections also reportedly involved the smuggling into Iraq of thousands of forged ballots. See Dexter Filkins, "Police Seize Forged Ballots Headed for Iraq from Iran," *New York Times*, December 14, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/14/international/middleeast/14iraq.html>.
8. See Article 27 of the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement, "Deterrence of Security Threats," as cited in [http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/20081119\\_SOFA\\_FINAL\\_AGREED\\_TEXT.pdf](http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/20081119_SOFA_FINAL_AGREED_TEXT.pdf).
9. Leila Fadel, "Iranian General Played Key Role in Iraq Cease-Fire," March 31, 2008, McClatchy Newspapers, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2008/03/30/32055/iranian-general-played-key-role.html>.
10. Michael Knights, "Shia Backlash—Anti-Coalition Sadrist Factions in Iraq," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (June 2007), p. 7; Michael Knights, "Iran's Ongoing Proxy War in Iraq," PolicyWatch #1492 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 16, 2009), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3029>.
11. Based on statistics provided by the Olive Group, a Dubai-based private security company.
12. Robert H. Reid, "Iraq Elections a Setback for Iran," CBS News, February 4, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/02/04/ap/middleeast/main4775546.shtml>.
13. Slavin, *Mullahs, Money, and Militias*, p. 11.
14. Iraqi politician, interview by authors (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali), September 2010.
15. International Crisis Group, *Shiite Politics in Iraq: Role of the Supreme Council*, Middle East Report no. 70 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, November 15, 2007), pp. 3–5, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/iraq/070-shiite-politics-in-iraq-the-role-of-the-supreme-council.aspx>.
16. Cameron W. Barr, "Iran-Backed Forces Join Those Vying for Influence in N. Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0306/p07s01-woiq.html>; Michael Ware, "Inside Iran's Secret War for Iraq," *Time*, August 22, 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,109374700.html>.
17. Michael Knights, "Iraq's Security Forces: Standing Up or Falling Down?" *Jane's Intelligence Review* (November 2010), p. 12.
18. Iraqi political insiders suggest that Badr leaders such as Hadi al-Ameri respected and obeyed long-term ISCI leader Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim but have had less confidence in his successors, particularly the young Ammar al-Hakim. Iraqi government official, interview by Knights, October 2010.
19. For a good general introduction to the Islamic Dawa Party, see Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (London: Scribner, 2008), pp. 31–41, 43–45, 50–52, 68, 81.
20. For more on the tensions and deep-seated resentments that continue to divide Tehran and many of its Iraqi clients, see Larry Kaplow, "Iraq Steps Out of Iran's Shadow," *Newsweek*, June 15, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/2009/06/05/iraq-steps-out-of-iran-s-shadow.html>.
21. Sadr is unlikely to become an ayatollah in the traditional sense; he can earn that title only through decades of study under various mujtahids, and reports from sources in Qom indicate that during his time there, he was nowhere to be seen at any of the numerous religious seminaries. Rather, he is likely to be awarded the title as an honorific by his supporters in much the same way that political clerics in Iran, such as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Expediency Council head Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, are referred to as ayatollahs by their political supporters. Neither has the required ecclesiastical training to claim the title. See Elizabeth Dickinson, "Interview: Mehdi Khalaji," *ForeignPolicy.com*, July 27, 2009, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/27/interview\\_mehdi\\_khalaji](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/27/interview_mehdi_khalaji).

22. Maad Fayad and Saad Jarous, "Iran Pressuring al-Sadr to Support al-Maliki for a Second Term," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), August 23, 2010, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&cid=22065>. Sadr has sometimes been cast as an Iraqi nationalist, but his complex relationship with Iran (e.g., his threat to retaliate on behalf of Iran if it were attacked by the United States or Israel), as well as his strife-ridden relationships with other Iraqi Shiite and Sunni politicians and groups, indicates that his identity and his politics cannot be reduced to such simple labels.
23. Sadr mentor Kadhim al-Haeri and ISCI cofounder Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi were both students of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and rivals for leadership of the Islamic Dawa Party, which Sadr founded in 1957. The origins of the rivalry between the Sadrist and ISCI can thus be traced, in part, to the rivalry between these two men.
24. "Shia Leader Cuts Ties with Sadr," BBC News, October 20, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3758872.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3758872.stm); Michael Knights and Ed Williams, *The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq*, Policy Focus no. 66 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 2007), pp. 3, 18, 28, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus66.pdf>.
25. The sophisticated Sadrist electoral strategy is described in Charles Levinson, "Iraq Campaign Closes with a Sadr Twist," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704869304575103851437150096.html>.
26. For detailed coverage of how the Accountability and Justice Commission operated, see Reidar Visser, "More Post-Election De-Baathification: Another Blow to the Idea of Democracy in Iraq," Iraq and Gulf Analysis (website), April 26, 2010, <http://gulfanalysis.wordpress.com/2010/04/26/more-post-election-de-baathification-another-blow-to-the-idea-of-democracy-in-iraq/>.
27. Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective on the Iran-Iraq War*, McNair Paper no. 70 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2009), p. 62, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/saddams-war.pdf?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270645759&csr=1-1>.
28. The Qods Force is the arm of the Revolutionary Guards devoted to the export of the Islamic Revolution through support for terrorism and subversion abroad. See "Iran's New Ambassador to Iraq," *Iran Focus*, July 26, 2010, [http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=21162:exclusive-irans-new-ambassador-to-iraq&catid=29:exclusive-reports&Itemid=42](http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21162:exclusive-irans-new-ambassador-to-iraq&catid=29:exclusive-reports&Itemid=42); Paul Von Zielbauer, "U.S. Calls Iranian Official Part of Elite Force," *New York Times*, October 8, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/08/world/middleeast/08iraq.html?ref=world>.
29. For a somewhat breathless account of Soleimani's role, see David Ignatius, "At the Tip of Iran's Spear," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/06/AR2008060603152.html>. See also Hannah Allam, Jonathan S. Landay, and Warren P. Strobel, "Iranian Outmaneuvers U.S. in Iraq," *McClatchy Newspapers*, April 28, 2008, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2008/04/28/35146/iranian-outmaneuvers-us-in-iraq.html>.
30. MEMRI Blog, "Tehran Takes IRGC Official Suleimani Off Iraq Dossier," citing *al-Rafidayn* (Baghdad), July 13, 2010, [http://www.thememriblog.org/blog\\_personal/en/28523.htm](http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/28523.htm). Interestingly, Ali Larjani is one of a number of prominent Iraqi-born Iranians who hold or have recently held key positions in the Islamic Republic. Others include his brother Hojjatoleslam Sadeq Larjani (head of the Iranian judiciary), Ali Akbar Salehi (foreign minister, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, and former deputy head of the Organization of the Islamic Conference), Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi (the cofounder and first head of SCIRI, a senior member of the Office of the Supreme Leader, a former head of the judiciary, and a member of the Guardian Council), Ayatollah Ali al-Taskhiri (senior member of the Office of the Supreme Leader and head of the international relations department of the Islamic Propagation Organization), Alaeddin Boroujerdi (head of the national security and foreign policy committee of the Iranian parliament), and Muhammad Naghdi (commander of the Basij militia and a former senior Badr Corps commander).
31. U.S. Forces—Iraq analyst, interview by authors (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali), Washington, D.C., August 2010.
32. Knights, "Iraq's Security Forces," p. 11.
33. James Glanz and Sabrina Tavernise, "U.S. Is Holding Iranians Seized in Raid in Iraq," *New York Times*, December 25, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/25/world/middleeast/25iraq.html?pagewanted=print>.
34. James Glanz, "Iraq Signals Changes in Protocols with Iran," *New York Times*, January 19, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/19/world/middleeast/19zebari.html?fta=y>; Michael Hirsch, "Iranian Diplomat: We're Ready to Help Iraq," *Newsweek*, July 23, 2007, <http://www.newsweek.com/2007/07/22/tehran-plays-a-double-game.html>.
35. Von Zielbauer, "U.S. Calls Iranian."
36. See Baghdadec blog, December 12, 2010, <http://baghdadec.ipbhost.com/lofversion/index.php/t2122.html>.
37. Christian Berthelsen, "Arrest Sparks Iraq Protests," *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/feb/25/world/fg-iraq25>.
38. Abbas Sarhan, "Challenges Block Karbala's Tourism Sector," Niqash (website), September 21, 2009, <http://www.niqash.org/content.php?contentTypeID=28&cid=2530&lang=0>. See also Abbas Sarhan, "Holy Money," Niqash, August 10, 2009, <http://www.niqash.org/content.php?contentTypeID=28&cid=2504&lang=0>.
39. Michael Christie, "Quarter of U.S. Iraq Deaths Due to Iran Groups—Envoy," Reuters, August 26, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLDE67P22D>.
40. Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy*; Mounir Elkhamri, "Iran's Contribution to the Civil War in Iraq," Occasional Paper (Jamestown Foundation, January 2007), <http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Jamestown-IranContributionIraq.pdf>; Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, "Iran's Hard Power Influence in Iraq," AEI Iran Tracker (website) (American Enterprise Institute, April 10, 2009), <http://www.irantracker.org/military-activities/irans-hard-power-influence-iraq>; and Michael Harari, "Status Update: Shi'a Militias in Iraq," Background (Institute for the Study of War, August 16, 2010), [http://www.understandingwar.org/files/Background\\_ShiaMilitias.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/files/Background_ShiaMilitias.pdf).
41. Muqtada al-Sadr has promised to fight at Iran's side if the latter is attacked, though Tehran probably already has its own agents in place in Iraq for this purpose. Ellen Knickmeyer and Omar Fekeiki, "Iraqi Shiite Cleric Pledges to Defend Iran," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/23/AR2006012301701.html>. There is an additional nuclear angle to Tehran's support for militant proxies: Iranian officials had apparently offered to halt attacks on British troops in Iraq if European Union negotiators dropped their objections to Iran's nuclear enrichment program. See Sir John Sawers, Great Britain's United Nations envoy, as quoted in Bridget Kendall, "Iran in 'Backroom Offers' to West," BBC News, February 20, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7901101.stm>.
42. Michael Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 3, nos. 11–12 (November 2010), p. 12, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss11-12.pdf>.

43. See Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy*, Appendix B, which contains translations of captured Saddam-era intelligence documents describing Iranian support for Iraqi proxies during the 1980s, 1990s, and prior to the 2003 invasion, [http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix\\_B\\_Harmony\\_Docs.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix_B_Harmony_Docs.pdf).
44. Republic of Iraq, General Security Office, "Study about the Disloyal Badr Corps 9," (HARMONY document reference number ISGQ-2005-00038283), January 2002, p. 71, in Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy*, Appendix B, pp. 323–326, [http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix\\_B\\_Harmony\\_Docs.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix_B_Harmony_Docs.pdf).
45. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq," press release, July 2, 2009, <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/tg195.htm>.
46. After Saddam's fall, rumors were widespread that Badr personnel were involved in the assassination of former Iraqi air force pilots and other officers who had participated in the Iran-Iraq War, using lists provided to them by Iranian intelligence, as well as the assassination of members of the new Iraqi National Intelligence Service (many of whom had served in the former regime) on orders from Tehran. See Elkhamri, "Iran's Contribution," pp. 5–6; Edward T. Pount, "Special Report: The Iran Connection," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 14, 2004, <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/041122/22iran.htm>.
47. Lami was a notorious Sadr City special group leader who split from the Mahdi Army and was believed responsible for the torture and death of thousands of civilians in 2006–2007; see Jon Swain, "Is This Iraq's Most Prolific Mass Killer?" *Times* (London), January 21, 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article1294957.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1>. He reportedly returned to Iraq in mid-2010 after spending nearly two years hiding out and training in Iran. Some see his return as a sign that, with the U.S. military role winding down, Iran is now supporting the return of sectarian militia leaders who had fled to the Islamic Republic. Ma'ad Fayad, "Iraq: Notorious Shiite Warlord Returns to Baghdad," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), August 18, 2010, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&cid=22008>.
48. Azadeh Moaveni, "Hard-Liners in Iran Worry about U.S. Influence in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/apr/11/news/war-splits11>; Ned Parker, Raheem Salman, and Saad Fakhrideen, "Dread Descends on Iraqi Holy City," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/20/world/fg-najaf20>.
49. Shimon Shapira, "The Origins of Hizballah," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 46 (Spring 1988), pp. 115–130.
50. Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups," p. 13.
51. James Risen, "A Region Inflamed—The Hand of Tehran: Hezbollah, in Iraq, Refrains from Attacks on Americans," *New York Times*, November 24, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/24/world/region-inflamed-hand-tehran-hezbollah-iraq-refrains-attacks-americans.html>; Michael Gordon and Dexter Filkins, "Hezbollah Said to Help Shiite Army in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 28, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/28/world/middleeast/28military.html>; Michael Gordon, "Hezbollah Trains Iraqis in Iran, Officials Say," *New York Times*, May 5, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/05/world/middleeast/05iran.htm>. See also Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy*, Appendix A, which contains redacted interrogation debriefings of Iranian-trained special groups members: [http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix\\_A\\_Intelligence\\_Summaries.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix_A_Intelligence_Summaries.pdf). Credible reports also indicate that Iranian personnel participated directly in combat during the early phases of the insurgency in Iraq. Edward Wong, "Iran Is in Strong Position to Steer Iraq's Political Future," *New York Times*, July 3, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/03/international/middleeast/03IRAN.html>; Stack, "Iran's Internal Divisions."
52. Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups," p. 14; James Glanz, "U.S. Says Arms Link Iranians to Iraqi Shiites," *New York Times*, February 12, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/12/world/middleeast/12weapons.html>. See also Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy*, Appendix C, which provides a representative sampling of the contents of arms caches discovered in Iraq during a five-month period in 2008: [http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix\\_C\\_Cache\\_Data.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Iraq/Appendix_C_Cache_Data.pdf).
53. Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups," p. 14.
54. Gordon and Filkins, "Hezbollah Said to Help"; Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy*.
55. At current expenditure rates, one fairly typical cache found in Zubayr (near Basra) would have supported four to five months of rocket and improvised explosive device (IED) operations. This single cache alone included 76 rockets marked with Iranian production stamps; mortars (including 518 mortar bombs); 95 antiarmor and 200 antipersonnel rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) rounds, plus 155 extended-range RPG booster charges; 41 magnets for under-vehicle IEDs; 200 command initiation kits; 76 assembled IEDs; and 15 tons of TNT. See Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups," p. 14.
56. Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. Suspects That Iran Aids Both Sunni and Shiite Militias," *New York Times*, April 12, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/12/world/middleeast/12iraq.html>; Mark Hosenball, "Tehran's Secret 'Department 9000,'" *Newsweek*, June 4, 2007, <http://www.newsweek.com/content/newsweek/2007/06/03/tehran-s-secret-department-9000.html>.
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