

A Decade of U.S. and Iranian Policy Towards Iraq Will Shape 2020

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Brief Analysis

The former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Harold Wilson, once opined: “A week is a long time in politics.” For politics in Iraq, a week is a very long time indeed. And if the past few weeks are anything to go by, we should brace ourselves for many more charged weeks and months ahead. The drivers of crisis are still in action, with little sign of cooling down.

The latest Iran-U.S. crisis in Iraq, while certainly an escalation, is not an isolated incident. It represents a transformational milestone in the overall conflict between the two states and reflects the evolution of the region's political and security dynamics. It also marks a significant change in the political mind-set of Washington, Tehran, and Baghdad, while demonstrating a collective policy failure.

American and Iranian Policies in Iraq

Since 2003, the George W. Bush administration was the only administration, which has adopted and implemented a clear Iraq-focused policy. A trillion dollars and thousands of U.S. lives later, the Obama Administration abandoned these policies, withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011, and thereafter ignored Iraq altogether. When the United States did return to Iraq in 2014, its presence was based on a policy highly focused on the war on ISIS, rather than on Iraq itself. Meanwhile, U.S. policy on Iran did develop; the Obama Administration struck an historical nuclear deal with Iran (the JCPOA) with the full endorsement of other major global powers. The agreement was based on the hope that Iran would, in good faith, also change its behavior. This, of course did not occur.

With a new administration led by Trump, the United States continued the ISIS-focused policies established by the prior administration until they came to a more or less natural end. Meanwhile, the administration's Iraq policy, while extant, was one almost entirely focused on Iran. Simultaneously, President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and pressed for fresh negotiations with Iran designed to permanently damper Iran's nuclear ambitions, alter Iran's expansionist behavior in the Middle East, and open its gates to U.S. business. The Trump Administration has increasingly proven prepared to use the U.S. military and the global power's financial might to drag Iran to the table

and strengthen their own negotiating position. However, the U.S. policy inside of Iraq has, outside of its larger regional goals, failed to develop a path of its own.

By contrast, Iran has maintained a clear Iraq policy throughout this period of U.S. fluctuation. The Islamic Republic knows exactly what it wants in Iraq, and they have been successful in obtaining it. Part of this clarity is driven by necessity; Iranian leaders consider Iraq of paramount importance for their national security and the survival of the regime, managing bilateral relations as if Iraq is a natural and inextricable extension of their own country. Iran also has a penchant for tapping into Iraq's human and economic resources in pursuit of domestic goals.

This targeted behavior, combined with a lack of U.S. direction in Iraq, has allowed Iran to advance their course undeterred for the past decade. Iran has taken advantage of each crisis in Iraq, from the war against ISIS to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's referendum for independence, to expedite this progress. The decisions of both sides has led to the current moment, with Iran demonstrating remarkable confidence over its strong bargaining position in regards to future negotiations or wars. Were its current efforts to secure the eviction of the U.S. presence in Iraq successful, Iran would feel even more secure and confident.

Soft Power in Iraqi Politics

Since Iraq's regime change in 2003, Iran has developed far more effective political, security, and economic relationships in Iraq than the United States. The Iranians used their allies in the political and security sectors of Iraq (including those who act as direct proxies) to advance their policies in Iraq with the aim of not only overwhelming the decision-making process (which they have) but also to minimize and eventually remove altogether U.S. influence in Iraq.

To this end, Iran has established excellent personal and bilateral relations with most of the Iraqi political and security actors, while encouraging the internal divisions within Iraqi politics. Iran tends not to formally engage Iraq's state institutions or political organisations. Instead, Iranian strategy breaks down organizations into their individual components and engages their respective leaders individually and separately. General Soleimani excelled in this approach, which has helped contribute to Iraq's political instability and politicians' reliance on Iranian direction.

In contrast, the U.S. approach has involved none of these tactics. In consequence, and combined with its lack of a clear guiding policy in Iraq, the United States has lost much of its influence in Iraq over time. While the attack against Soleimani was decisive, the United States at present has minimal leverage inside of Iraq, largely relegated to military or financial threats.

Thus, a crystal clear Iranian policy in Iraq combined with a murky U.S. one has allowed the Iranians and their proxies to drag the United States into the sequence of retaliatory actions that culminated in last week's crisis. While the loss of Soleimani was perhaps unexpected, Iran likely saw a direct attack from the United States as in the interest of Iran—rallying against the enemy allowed for a shift away from the narrative of anti-Iranian protests that have defined the Iraqi and Lebanese streets over the past few months. An attack on Iran is a chance to unify, distract internal opposition, and rally Iran's diverse allies across the Middle East.

However, here Iran also miscalculated. In the process of forcing a response, Iran also prompted a major change in the political mind-sets of both the Trump Administration and the entire U.S. establishment, including U.S. diplomats in Iraq. While the chain of events that led to the strike itself is unclear, it appears that the United States is now emboldened, confident, and trigger-ready. The past few weeks have demonstrated that the current administration has become much less tolerant of Iran's ongoing behavior in Iraq and more prepared to take defensive and offensive military action against them or their proxies.

Scenarios for 2020

Last week, both Iran and the United States had a taste of what an all-out-war could mean. Iran has almost certainly come out worse: it lost an almost indispensable General (Qasim Soleimani) and his Iraqi counterpart (Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis), along with control over its anti-air missiles and the sentimental unity Iran had hoped to achieve with its attack. The new dynamic is likely to have changed Iranian leaders' calculations and made them reflect on their vulnerabilities.

Given the current escalation, 2020 is likely to be a decisive year for both U.S. and Iranian interests in Iraq and attitudes towards one another. The most likely scenario is maintaining the current 'status quo,' no peace yet no war; neither escalation or de-escalation. However, the status-quo increasingly resembles a risky war of attrition. The United States shows little interest in slowing down its policy of maximum pressure, while keeping troops on alert. Moreover, ongoing protests inside Iran—an indirect result of the escalation—suggest that the status-quo is increasingly unsustainable for Iran. Moreover, the current cycle of escalation has pushed the boundary of the residual international sympathy that Iran has maintained.

In 2020, Iran will continue its efforts to evict U.S. troops, applying mounting political pressure via the Iraqi government and parliament or a low grade military provocations via its proxies. This might work and trigger a response from the United States, either in the form of tweet from President Trump who could easily announce a decision to leave Iraq—a decision with grave consequences to Iraq, potentially including state-failure—or trigger further escalation, likely to stop just short of an all-out war.

If Iran does not see the status-quo as sustainable, many have argued that Iran might be tempted into a new strategy of escalation driven by desperation, seeking war as a way of ensuring an ultimate regime survival. However, it is notable that Qassem Soleimani's killing while providing ample momentum and opportunity to escalate last week's crisis to a war, did not push Iran to choose this route. While the reasoning behind this decision is a matter of speculation, several factors—both short-term and historical—suggest that Iran is unlikely to pursue such a path.

Iranian leaders have historically proven to be extremely shrewd and pragmatic. Iran has never directly confronted any credible global or regional power, instead choosing the safer and remarkably effective method of frustrating the balance via proxy wars outside of Iran itself. While the Islamic Republic has engaged Turkey in a bloody rivalry in Syria, the last time they confronted Istanbul—despite the longstanding enmity between Ottoman and Persian empires—was around two centuries years ago. Similarly, instead of engaging the United States in a direct and existential all-out-war, Iran has sought to keep the conflict confined within Iraq.

Moreover, the next few months are a particularly perilous time for Iran to engage in any major destabilizing action. General elections in February, the current backlash after the Iranian downing of the Ukrainian Airliner and the current European debate about Iran's breach of JCPOA are likely to occupy Iran for the near future. In contrast, late summer to early autumn would be ideal—Trump will be the most vulnerable through the United States' own elections. Conversely, the best available window for the United States is from now until the end of March at the latest, before the U.S. presidential campaign is seriously underway.

Indeed, this mutual electoral season may actually lead to patience on the Iranian side in hopes of a different U.S. policy altogether towards Iran. Iranians may hope for an elected Democrat who might build on the previous JCPOA with some complementary multi-lateral negotiation for a new Middle East security order. The Iranians' current assumption must be that a second term for Trump is likely to be more reckless, as the president will have much less to lose without the potential for re-election.

Yet it is not inconceivable for Trump to adopt a different outlook and offer a new opportunity for a mutually agreeable deal after re-election. After all, the real Trump—ever the businessman—knows that wars are double-edge swords. But given the pressures surrounding both sides, such a scenario is unlikely to have the ability to unfold without

public pressures getting in the way.

This is unfortunate, as a genuine multi-lateral dialogue is both the ideal and possibly most desired scenario by the international community for 2020. As part of a mutual lack of trust, the two pending elections are unlikely to create the right environment for such a dialogue. The international community, especially the EU member states and other global powers, who could play critical roles had previously been unwilling to get too closely involved.

However, on 14 January, the three leading powers in Europe (U.K., France, and Germany) expressed concern over Iran's failure to meet its JCPOA commitments and triggered a dispute-resolution mechanism (built into the agreement). This may complicate issues further and keep tensions rising. We must wait for the next few weeks to unfold, which may provide a clearer picture of which direction these tensions are head. ❖

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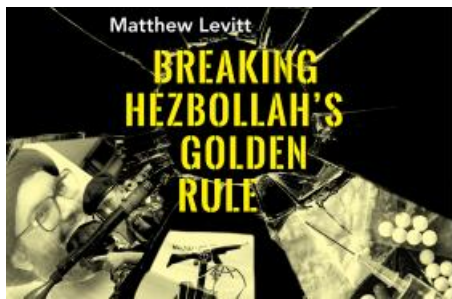
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