

# U.S. Interests and the Unsustainable Status Quo in Iraq

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Nov 12, 2019

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

The unprecedented protests in Iraq underline the reality that Iraq is slowly failing as a state. Though life inside the country has improved in some ways, there are still nearly a million new job-seekers each year left unemployed, militias continue to openly humiliate the government, and little is being done to prepare for the day when oil rents can no longer cover the huge bill for the bloated government payroll and social benefits. Meanwhile, the political parties and bloc leaders that rule Iraq are content to let the country collapse as long as it serves their near-term parochial interests. Fundamental change is needed: to the nature of party politics, endemic corruption, undue influence by foreign-backed militias, and elections that are at best rigged but are increasingly outright stolen. In private, almost none of my senior Iraqi political contacts bothers to refute any of the above facts.

These issues are also crystal clear to U.S. policy-makers on Iraq, but they are less sure about the U.S. role in what comes next. Does U.S. involvement hurt or help those seeking positive change? Could strident U.S. involvement discredit a genuinely indigenous protest movement and prompt an even harsher backlash by Iran-backed militias? And beyond the tactics of the day, what is expected of the United States by the next generation of Iraqis? What will they remember about our activity or inactivity during this period?

The U.S. government needs to quickly make up its mind on these issues and then act accordingly. And there is a relatively clear, if potentially risky, way forward; we should side with the new generation of Iraqis and with centrist Shiites within the religious establishment. We should support orderly, non-violent change that culminates in a new electoral law, a new political parties law, and effective international observation of the next elections. We should quickly impose Global Magnitsky Act sanction packages against key Iraqis responsible for murdering Iraqi civilians.

This is a high-stakes call, but Iraq's ongoing protests also represent a unique opportunity. This is the first time mass protests have been launched by individual young Iraqis, not by Islamist demagogues who are themselves part of the problem.

**SEEING U.S. INTERESTS CLEARLY IN IRAQ**

As hard as it may be for our critics to believe, the United States wants Iraq to be sovereign, stable, and democratic. Perhaps we are serious about these aims because we have learned not to expect more: for instance, it has been clear for a decade or more that Iraq was never going to view the Iranian regime in the same suspicious manner as America does. But whatever our motivation, we do want an Iraq that can resist outside pressure, which does not need regular infusions of U.S. blood and treasure, and which validates our vision that Iraqis want and value democratic choice.

In my experience, however, the United States lost sight of these objectives during the war to fight the Islamic State (IS). I have been warning of IS resurgence since 2011; I opposed the U.S. withdrawal and have always advocated a U.S. military training mission in Iraq; I successfully pushed for the first use of U.S. offensive airstrikes to save civilians in late August 2014; and I was part of the planning process in Operation Inherent Resolve, the campaign that aided Iraq in liberating all its cities previously captured by IS. I am not soft on IS, but I do believe that we now need to prioritize other strategic risks in Iraq.

It is time to decide what poses the greatest risk to a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq. U.S. government officials still view Iraq primarily as a launch-pad for the war against IS, and indeed Iraq is an even more important basing location now that the U.S. presence in Syria has been repeatedly shown to rest on shaky foundations. But does IS merit its top billing as our primary interest in Iraq? No, not by any measure.

Contrary to the astronomical U.S. government estimates of 14,000 IS fighters in Iraq and Syria, a more likely estimate is well under half that number. IS currently struggles to mount even a weak insurgency. One day that may change, but this is not likely to occur for many years. In contrast, Iran today controls a proxy force of well over 60,000 militiamen inside Iraq, which is hollowing out the Iraqi security forces and feeding off the federal budget to the tune of \$2.2 billion in 2019.

### **THE GREATEST THREAT IS IRAN, NOT ISIS**

This Iranian-built shadow state cannot exist in parallel with a successful counter-IS strategy. As Iraqi politicians and soldiers freely admit, this Iranian-built machine is inexorably chipping away at the U.S.-led coalition's ability to help Iraq to fight IS by banning U.S. advisors and drones from operating.

In August and September, the website Iraq Body Count registered 93 and 151 fatalities, largely due to IS. However, in October—when Iraq's protests began—the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR) reported the deaths of 301 persons in the protests and the wounding of over 15,000 others. Numerous human rights organizations, journalists, and Iraqi protesters have shown that Iran is orchestrating this violent crackdown. Put simply, Iran and its allies are now killing twice as many Iraqis as IS kills each month.

Both Iraqi protesters and the Shiite religious establishment (led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani) have become increasingly open and candid that the greatest threat to Iraq is now Iran and its allies within Iraq's corrupt political elite. The U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense should also accept this assessment and build our policy around it.

### **IRAN IS NOW A STATUS QUO PLAYER IN IRAQ**

Iran controls the Iraqi government at its highest levels. This has been the case throughout much of 2019, but particularly since the late summer. As someone who watched this dynamic unfold through close contact with Iraqi leaders, there were two watershed moments evident at the time: first, the appointment of Abu Jihad—an Iran-backed politico—as the overbearing chief of staff for Prime Minister Adel Abdalmahdi; second, Iran's successful fostering of the PM's paranoia that the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel, former Saddamists and U.S.-trained military officers were plotting to remove Abdalmahdi.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) no longer just influences: it now controls the Iraqi government.

Tehran can send Iranian generals to direct Iraqi repression of the Iraqi people. Iran can inform Iraqi air traffic control when to close airspace to U.S. aircraft. Iran can order and oversee the killing of hundreds of Iraqi civilians with impunity, safe in the knowledge that not a single guilty party will be mentioned in Iraqi government investigations. The only reason that Iran doesn't remove U.S. forces from Iraq because those forces are exposed hostages within easy reach, and because they pose no actual threat to Iran's hold on Baghdad.

Having achieved its pinnacle of influence, Iran's main job is now to protect the old corrupt political and economic elite by preventing change. The IRGC mission in Iraq is "foreign internal defense" of a corrupt class of rulers. Being a status quo player has many advantages—foremost among them is the fact that almost the whole system is now reliant on Iran to protect their illicit privileges. If you know Iraqi leaders personally, you know that party politicians, parliamentarians, and ministers do not want to lose their cushy sinecures if the government collapses or faces early elections. Iraq's Kurdish politicians rely on the current premier for their budget share and view any alternative as a risk.

However, being the power that sustains a corrupt political class has disadvantages. As the United States and the Soviet Union learned during the Cold War, being "on the hook" for the crimes of odious regimes can cause severe reputational damage and popular backlash. If Iran is openly defending the corrupt elite, this opens up significant opportunities for the United States to align with the new generation of Iraqis and with centrist Shiites within the religious establishment. The United States should be clear that it is not a status quo player in Iraq, and that it instead strongly supports the necessary changes sought by the Iraqi people.

#### **WHAT KIND OF CHANGE SHOULD THE U.S. SUPPORT IN IRAQ?**

The United States must be clear about what we do and do not want to see. We cannot be a status quo power in Iraq, as we were in the half decade prior to our withdrawal in 2011. From a political, generational, and economic standpoint, the current status quo is not sustainable: it is a losing bet, even though the old corrupt Iran-backed elite will hang on to their positions tenaciously.

Rejecting the status quo then begs the question: what kind of change should the United States get behind? First, the United States should support orderly change. This means incremental, steady change that involves constitutional and legal processes. The Iraqi political and religious establishment abhor chaos, and they fear it more than anything. If any scenario is likely to result in a system-wide circling of the wagons in Iran's favor, it is the risk of anarchy and unclear path of political succession. If the protests remain leaderless, they will likely swing towards continuous and escalating civil disobedience and the full loss of legitimacy for all state and religious institutions. This suggests that the international community—including the United States—should encourage and protect the emergence of a wise "face" and a voice for the protesters, perhaps drawn from university faculty or civil society. This can lead to a Track II-type negotiation process whereby protester demands can be met steadily, in realistic time frames, but without losing focus.

Second, the change must be as non-violent and bloodless as possible. Iran-backed militias have strong advantages if the protests keep getting more violent. If protesters tip fully over into sabotage and vandalism, some of the moral high ground of the protests will be eroded and support from the Shiite religious mainstream and the international community will wane. Though to U.S. eyes it might have been sweet revenge to see Iran's embassy in Baghdad overrun by protesters on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution's similar invasion of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, the reality is that such a development would likely have pitched central Iraq into intense factional warfare and the U.S. embassy would likely have been partially destroyed and evacuated.

Third, the United States should strongly back fair elections, whenever they happen, whether in 2020 or 2022. Though protesters and even the Shiite religious establishment seem to expect early elections in 2020, this is Iraq,

where delay tactics are often effective and almost the entire political class would lose out from early elections under a fair law and with international supervision. If Iraqi electoral code changes are slow and no early elections happen in 2020, there will be an inclination by Iraqi forces to see little value in expediting elections that are in any case due in early 2022. An interim government—with a new premier and cabinet—also seems rather unlikely to be formed between now and any early elections that were organized. As a result, a good degree of political continuity is likely in Iraq's near future despite popular calls for a new government. Yet while the United States should not pursue arbitrary deadlines, it should strongly back the basic premise of a new electoral law, a new political parties law, and effective international observation of the next elections. We should aim high on all these issues.

Finally, the United States should put considerable effort into supporting a broader international effort to deter and punish crackdowns on the protests, and to seek justice for murdered, disappeared, and tortured Iraqis. It will be hard for the United States to draw any definitive “red lines” on ongoing repression because the mechanism of an Iran-advised crackdown on protest leaders will be deliberately incremental and opaque. Yet on specific issues—such as the ordering of sniper fire, overrun of television stations, abduction of protest leaders, and use of deadly gases and riot control projectiles—the United States can follow the lead of groups like the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch to be highly active in seeking justice in individual cases.

### **WHAT TOOLS ARE AVAILABLE TO THE UNITED STATES AND ITS PARTNERS?**

While the United States enjoyed an unnatural level of influence in Iraq following the 2003 invasion, this progressively gave way to a more normal bilateral relationship. Now the pendulum has arguably swung to the opposite extreme, with Iran now enjoying unparalleled control and the United States increasingly “locked out.”

This is an uncomfortable position for U.S. policymakers, but this could also be invigorating given the current situation. The United States no longer has to defend all the missteps of a broken Iraqi political elite while enjoying no real countervailing benefits, as has been the case for most of the period since the United States began to withdraw from Iraq in 2009. Now the United States needs to learn how to play a different game in Iraq, one that could build a more sustainable long-term U.S.-Iraq relationship and impose significant costs on Iran.

However, there is no sugar-coating the reality of diminished U.S. power in Iraq. The many limitations of the United States include a negative presidential view of Iraq, erratic senior leadership attention, turnover in mid-level officials, reduced freedom of movement and security on the ground, plus a general resistance to trying new approaches, using intelligence, or taking risks. What does that leave in terms of innovative strategies for the U.S. government?

If the United States maintains a presence in Iraq—if we do not choose to leave or get disinvited—this presence should be more visible. One way to raise this visibility may be to expand its daily communications, particularly in Arabic and Kurdish, to include daily press briefings and an even greater use of social media. While cultural and people-to-people engagements may seem like low-impact activities in normal times, they may be particularly well-suited to this moment, when the United States wants to signal solidarity with the legitimate demands of the Iraqi people.]

The United States must also work more closely with the other outside friends of Iraq so that the global community speaks with one, amplified voice. As is partially the case already, the United States administration must synchronize its approach with UNAMI, the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq), the Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), the NATO Training Mission-Iraq (NTM-I), embassies in Baghdad, and human rights organizations.

The United States should also focus its still-considerable intelligence capabilities on the worst members of the corrupt political and militia elite. The U.S. government still has the capability to intercept a vast range of communications, to dissect financial holdings, and to securely receive leaks of very sensitive and personal information regarding the Iraqi elite. This capability needs to be demonstrated in a sustained campaign of

intimidation against human rights abusers and their enabling politicians in Iraq.

Related to the above, the United States should quickly levy meaningful and repeated Global Magnitsky Act sanctions packages against key Iraqis responsible for murdering Iraqi civilians. Though the United States can rightfully be accused of being a “one-trick pony” in its overreliance on sanctions, the July 2019 Global Magnitsky sanctions against four prominent Iraqi leaders sent a definite chill—verging on panic—through the corrupt elite in Baghdad. Figures like Abu Jihad, Falah al-Fayyadh, Abu Muntadher al-Husseini, or the raft of militia and security officials listed [here \(/policy-analysis/view/exposing-and-sanctioning-human-rights-violations-by-iraqi-militias\)](#), should see their overseas assets and travel put at risk.

### **MANAGING THE RISKS OF U.S. INVOLVEMENT OR NON-INVOLVEMENT**

A remaining issue is the fear in U.S. government circles that saying anything on the current situation in Iraq could draw attention away from Iraqi protesters or set them up for failure and repression. The converse concern is that we do and say too little, act too late, and appear to be just as callous as Iran in backing the corrupt elite.

I would argue this moment is the United States’ opportunity to get back on the right side of history in Iraq, which will ultimately also be the country’s winning side. Iran broke the new Iraq that emerged since U.S. withdrawal in 2011, and this time they are the ones that should be held accountable.

Conversely, the United States can now be the state playing the long game. We should not be afraid to strongly support a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq. The events in October have made two things clear: Iraqi protesters and the Shite religious establishment seem to have a very clear understanding that Iran is the country meddling in Iraq, not the United States. We do not need to be afraid of our own shadow.

It is equally clear that the Iran-backed militias are already (laughably) 100 percent certain that the United States, Mohammed bin Salman, the Mossad, and Saddamists are responsible for the protests—a litany of boogymen. They will believe any conspiracy to avoid the reality of what is dawning in Iraq. Given these already cemented beliefs, clearer U.S. statements are not about to worsen the situation in this regard.

The United States must clearly not encourage unlawful protests, sabotage or revenge, even against Iranian provocateurs. Washington should closely mirror Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s own wise statements on protest-related issues. Mindful of the U.S. encouragement of the intifada in 1991—a brutally suppressed Iraqi uprising against Saddam Hussein, which we vocally supported but did not subsequently back—we cannot encourage anyone to go further than we will actively back.

The danger of doing nothing is equally clear. Even if Iraqis don’t currently seem overly concerned by what the United States does or doesn’t think, this can quickly change. If the protesters face a serious crackdown, they may become highly sensitive to their apparent isolation. This was the case with the collapse of the Green Movement in Iran in 2009, which may have deterred potential successor protests for the subsequent almost-decade. Even with polling of Iraqi public opinion today, the United States should not assume this can measure how Iraqis will remember the current moment in the future.

### **BE WILLING TO LEAVE, SO WE DON’T HAVE TO**

While a U.S. official presence in Iraq remains, Iran could remove U.S. forces and diplomats with a few well-placed rockets or a parliamentary debate. They choose not to because we are increasingly irrelevant to their plans for Iraq and because they are successfully neutering our ability to fight IS, build institutions, or protect Iraq from Iranian subversion.

Therefore, U.S. presence in Iraq should not be a deterrent for taking action. We are not risking much if we risk being removed from Iraq. The Iraqi elite has benefited from having us kill their enemies and give them a counterweight to

Iran, but the relationship has become one-sided and no longer offers us much tangible benefit. Iraqi leaders need to understand that they are not doing us a favor by allowing U.S. troops to stay in Iraq: quite the opposite. America is still well-protected from IS without removing this scourge entirely from Iraq or Syria.

Therefore, the United States must be ready, if Iranian control continues at current levels, to temporarily suspend our military efforts in federal Iraq and to explain to the Iraqi people why Iran made this step necessary. We must be ready to temporarily deny sanctions waivers, which would defund the Iraqi government by denying its ability to import or export due to the withdrawal of US banknotes provided by the Federal Reserve and the cessation of correspondent banking relationships. In the same way that preparing for war is the best way to deter adversaries and secure peace, the United States must be truly ready to take a break in our relations with Iraq's elite if we wish to avoid such an outcome. The U.S. has nothing to gain, and much to lose, by paying to prop up an Iranian-controlled government in Baghdad. If the government refuses to protect protesters or deliver justice and fair elections, then the United States should not be afraid to cut it loose and bet on the next generation of Iraqis.

Iraq's ongoing protests are an opportunity and a test of the U.S.-Iraq friendship. As hard as it may be for our critics to believe, the United States wants Iraq to be sovereign, stable, and democratic. This could be the beginning of a turnaround: it is better to be with the next generation of Iraqis and the religious establishment than the corrupt elite. In this instance, Iran has backed the wrong horse. ❖

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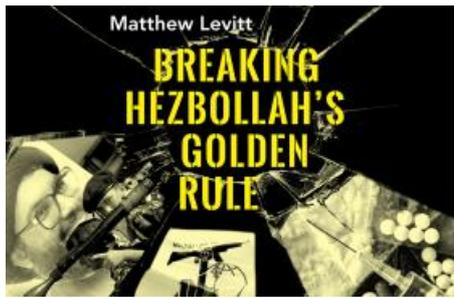
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