

# Using American Soft Power to Counter Russian Influence in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

**Moscow is beating Washington at the reputational game in Iraq, raising the need for greater U.S. engagement on education and media outreach rather than just security issues.**

**W**hen Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov toured Iraq last month—his first visit in five years—he came armed with an entourage of energy representatives and a bevy of ideas for increasing Russian investments in Iraq. His trip is a signal that the United States will face **heightening competition for influence there from Moscow** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-geopolitical-stakes-in-iraq>).

This challenge is especially important in the context of U.S. withdrawal from Syria, which is not only damaging American credibility and raising the likelihood of an **Islamic State resurgence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/after-baghdadi-how-the-islamic-state-rebounds>), but also increasing Baghdad's susceptibility to foreign partners who do not share U.S. interests. In that sense, engaging more deeply in Iraq is crucial to countering both Iranian and Russian influence.

This engagement needs to go beyond offering counterterrorism assistance and pressuring Baghdad on economic issues and reform. To be sure, continued cooperation on those fronts is necessary to help build up the Iraqi security forces, improve U.S. relationships with them, and address the persistent corruption plaguing the public and private sector. Yet Russia is currently beating the United States at the reputational game in Iraq by faring better at soft power projection.

In January, for example, Lavrov claimed that approximately 4,000 Iraqis were studying in Russian universities, and the two countries are now looking to increase such educational initiatives. Although it is difficult to confirm the accuracy of Lavrov's numbers, what matters most is that Moscow is publicly emphasizing its connections with Iraq

beyond energy and arms sales.

Meanwhile, according to the Institute of International Education's Fall 2018 "Open Doors" report, only 1,438 Iraqi students were studying in the United States as of last year. Even that number was likely overstated, since it relied on voluntary reporting from American institutions and likely included many diaspora students who no longer call Iraq home or have no plans to return there. As one U.S. official familiar with this issue told the author, actual Iraqi student visa application numbers are "depressingly low."

Greater exposure to U.S. educational opportunities would help Iraqis move away from a system that has traditionally relied more on memorization than independent critical thought. It would also help them build personal ties to America. The United States still has strong connections to Iraqi Kurds in particular, so it should build on this experience.

Another good option is investing in a stronger U.S. presence at the American universities in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah, whether through public or private-sector efforts. One goal would be to attract more Iraqis to study there—a far easier option for many students than going to the United States, and one that would likely convince more graduates to stay in Iraq. The American brand remains stronger than Russia's on this front; indeed, Moscow is not talking about building a Russian university in Iraq.

Better U.S. media messaging is needed as well, in part to shine a light on Russia's authoritarianism, foreign interventionism, rampant corruption, and other ills rather than the false image Moscow projects. RT Arabic is the media outlet perhaps most responsible for cultivating this image across the Middle East, and most Iraqis see it as a legitimate source of information rather than a propaganda arm. For instance, it helps spread Moscow's routine lies that Russia consistently fought the Islamic State and deserves substantial credit for rolling back the terrorist group's territorial gains. The Kremlin also cultivates a positive image by repatriating children of Russian citizens who joined the group in Iraq and Syria.

In September, the Iraqi government suspended the local office of U.S.-funded Arabic media outlet Alhurra, but Iraqis can still access its programming. The United States could also engage Iraq through other services such as BBC Arabic and social media. The latter medium is especially important to younger Iraqis, and Moscow has already **[invested heavily \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-arabic-propaganda-what-it-is-why-it-matters\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-arabic-propaganda-what-it-is-why-it-matters)** in trying to reach Arabic-speaking youths through social media.

If Russia's growing presence in Iraq goes unchallenged, it will likely worsen the country's problems with corruption, repression, and weapons proliferation. Lavrov may say the right things about fighting terrorism when he visits Baghdad, but Moscow's track record of scorched-earth military tactics and arms deals without prohibitions on secondary sales will only increase instability in and around Iraq. Moreover, if pro-Iranian forces continue to win posts inside the Iraqi government, they may provide an even greater opening for Moscow given Tehran's regional partnership with Russia. Such a scenario would only increase the chances of losing Iraq to resurgent authoritarianism.

*Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its recent study "[Shifting Landscape: Russia's Military Role in the Middle East](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shifting-landscape-russias-military-role-in-the-middle-east) (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shifting-landscape-russias-military-role-in-the-middle-east)."* ❖

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