

Don't Write Off Iraq

by [Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab), [Barbara A. Leaf \(/experts/barbara-leaf\)](/experts/barbara-leaf)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab)

Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Barbara A. Leaf \(/experts/barbara-leaf\)](/experts/barbara-leaf)

Ambassador Barbara A. Leaf was the Ruth and Sid Lapidus Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Geduld Program on Arab Politics from 2018-2021.



Brief Analysis

Even as Baghdad works to rein in militias that invite outside attacks, Washington needs to be patient with the country's contradictions in the near term and give space for it to exert sovereignty in the long term.

As President Trump met with Iraqi president Barham Salih today on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, they were no doubt buoyed by their governments' mutual conclusion that the recent attack on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq did not originate from Iraq. Initial concerns about that possibility were well founded—a previous attack on a major Saudi pipeline was carried out from Iraqi territory this May, and multiple Iraqi militia facilities have been struck since June, reportedly by Israel. Each of these developments was linked to Shia “special groups” with known ties to Iran.

On July 1, Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi ordered these and other militias to fold themselves under state authority, but so far he has been unable to impose order on them. The government has also failed to prevent them from threatening neighboring countries at Iran's presumed behest—an especially dangerous lapse given that Iraqi authorities cannot protect the territory these militias hold from external retaliation.

To keep other countries from turning Iraq into a proxy battleground, Baghdad needs to rein in the unruliest militias. This is a tall order because Tehran has spent fifteen years building them into a parallel force of its own. Given the willingness these “special groups” have shown when asked to attack U.S. troops, fight on the Assad regime's behalf

in Syria, or secure other Iranian interests, they risk implicating Iraq in Tehran's regional confrontations with the United States, Saudi Arabia, and/or Israel.

A PERMISSIVE BATTLEGROUND FOR ONE-SIDED PROXY WAR

Although these militia activities should have been a loud wakeup call for Baghdad long ago, the September 14 Saudi attack sharply defined the danger: namely, will the Iraqi government wake up one day to learn that its territory has been used for an act of war? Saudi Arabia's uncertainty about next steps and President Trump's sanctions-focused approach to Iran have given Iraqi leaders time and space so far, but the clock will keep ticking so long as militias have a free hand. No less urgent is the broader task of restoring deterrence against Tehran, which is crucial to fending off the threats and ambitions of pro-Iran militias.

For Washington, the question becomes how best to fulfill the Iraqi portion of that regional task at a time when Tehran seems as committed as ever to having its way next door. The United States has many gray-zone options (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operating-in-the-gray-zone-to-counter-iran>) short of war for responding to Iranian and proxy attacks, but the strong U.S. interest in bolstering Baghdad's stability and sovereignty means that those options are best played outside Iraq. Moreover, no one can constrain Iranian interference better than Iraq's own leaders and citizenry. So how can Washington help them take agency over this "long war" and rebalance relations with Tehran?

IRAQ'S CONTRADICTIONS

After sixteen years of bad news, political uncertainty, and armed conflict, Americans remain Iraq-fatigued. The country is still weak and divided, with a leadership that has frustrated observers with its creeping pace on reconstruction and reforms—including the crucial task of merging between 135,000 and 158,000 Popular Mobilization Forces personnel into the national security forces and dismantling groups that are too close to Iran or its political proxies. Iraq also seems chronically dependent on overpriced Iranian electricity and natural gas, despite its status as OPEC's second-largest oil producer. Even Najaf, the seat of Shia religious authority, is unhappy.

For these and other reasons, some in the Trump administration believe Iraq is already lost to Iran; others rightfully argue that the game is still in play. Yet even the latter camp mistakenly assumes that Iraqis will make a clear, rational decision by choosing one of two starkly different scenarios: becoming an isolated Iranian satellite, or becoming a strong, sovereign, prosperous member of the international community. This binary view ignores the fact that Iraq is a country of stark contradictions set on a long, difficult road of repair.

U.S. policy on Iraq also suffers because it has been demoted to a subset of Iran policy. Baghdad has been on the receiving end of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran, hit with demands more often than inducements. To achieve major policy shifts in an environment as fraught as Iraq's, U.S. inducements must be profuse and underwritten by constant, high-level engagement.

This punitive focus on making Iraq choose between Iran and America risks missing an important local dynamic: the increasingly vocal "Iraq First" movement, driven by nationalist sentiment among a younger, post-Saddam generation that eschews sectarian strife and yearns for a peaceful life. For example, as news spread of suspected Israeli strikes on militia arms depots this summer, predictable condemnations of "foreign aggression" were matched by public anger at the militias for provoking the attacks in the first place.

In short, more Iraqis seem to realize that their country would have the most to lose in any proxy or direct conflict. And when one reframes this realization in terms of U.S. policy, the message is clear: Iraqi sovereignty cannot be selectively respected.

ENDING THE U.S. SILENT TREATMENT

Many Iraqis draw a direct connection between Iran's deepening influence and America's declining interest. After the rise of the Islamic State abruptly compelled Washington to refocus on Iraq, U.S. attention rapidly drifted away again. Concerned by this pendulum swing, Iraq's elected leaders have repeatedly asked for greater U.S. engagement to help right their imbalanced relations with Iran. One year after the formation of a new government led by three officials regarded favorably in the United States, only the speaker of parliament has been invited to Washington (President Salih was in New York anyway for the UN meetings). By contrast, all three leaders have repeatedly been invited to Tehran, other regional capitals, Europe, and even Beijing.

A year of transactional, demands-only relations with Iraq has done little to further U.S. goals there. To change course, Washington should maintain its pressure on Baghdad regarding economic and military reforms, flexibly earmark its sanctions waivers to encourage energy independence, and consider Magnitsky Act sanctions against additional corrupt officials and human rights abusers. Yet inducements need to be part of the mix too.

On that front, there is no substitute for high-level, personal diplomacy to build out a post-Islamic State relationship with Iraq. President Trump should invite Prime Minister Abdulmahdi and President Salih to visit the White House within the next six months, no strings attached. Salih has already affirmed that "Iraq has no intention of being dragged into a regional conflict," and such sentiments should be applauded. Face time with Iraqi leaders is not a transactional gift, but a demonstration of support that can help drive further progress. Washington should also offset the strictures it has placed on U.S. diplomatic staffing in Iraq with a significant push to bring cabinet-level Iraqi officials to town. If bolstered by such visible strengthening of the bilateral relationship, the Iraqi government will gain greater confidence in taking the difficult steps needed to keep Iran's "special groups" from becoming a **parallel security structure to the national military (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-air-defense-conundrum-options-for-u.s.-policy>)**.

U.S. officials also need to take a bolder public affairs approach. As regional tensions with Tehran stimulate anti-American elements to rail against the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq, Washington should encourage rational voices to stand up for the indispensable bilateral security relationship. No false modesty is needed in this case—the administration should proudly point out that its free assistance extends beyond the battlefield, from protecting Iraq's financial assets and critical infrastructure such as Mosul Dam, to helping thousands of Iraqis come to the United States for education and training.

Above all, Washington should press Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states to deepen their tentative engagement with Iraq economically and politically. The United States is the main driver for economic reforms, which can help draw private sector investment, stymie the black militia economy, and create job opportunities so that young Iraqis are not forced to join informal security forces just to earn a paycheck. The onus remains on the Iraqi government, but success surely hinges on visible support from its American ally.

Bilal Wahab is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. Barbara Leaf is a senior fellow at the Institute and former deputy assistant secretary for Iraq at the State Department. ❖

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