

During Conflict Between the United States and Iran, Iraq's Shiite Forces Will Prioritize Iraq

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Brief Analysis

“We will not allow Iraq to become a battlefield for other countries to clear their debts”—this [statement \(https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/trump-iraq-iran-pompeo-isis-terror-sunni-shia-middle-east-a8906366.html\)](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/trump-iraq-iran-pompeo-isis-terror-sunni-shia-middle-east-a8906366.html) would be unremarkable coming from many Iraqi politicians, as it is in sync with the current view of most Iraqi political parties and the three Presidencies of Iraq: the President, Prime Minister and the Speaker. Yet the fact that it was uttered by the Iraqi paramilitary Badr organisation’s leader Hadi al-Ameri, an organization often characterized in the West as an Iranian proxy force, gives the statement another flavor entirely. This sentiment was uttered a few days ago, and appears to align al-Ameri with a general political perspective at the moment. No one among Iraq’s mainstream parties wishes to see Iraq’s interests put second to those of Iran or America if matters get out of hand in the region. Iraqi officials have been clear on this point in their recent conversations with the Iranians and Americans, reflecting how an “Iraq first” policy is becoming a priority among domestic politicians as tensions between Iran and the United States continue to escalate.

As one of the latest developments in this conflict, Secretary Pompeo’s unscheduled visit to Iraq this week was a mix of business and politics. On the one hand, the Americans are wary of recent business deals struck between Iraq and the Saudis, French, and Germans after President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi’s high level visits to these countries. In the government delegation’s latest visit to Germany, Iraq signed an MoU with the German industrial giant Siemens to develop Iraq’s electricity network, a contract worth \$14.5 billion. This deal beat out the American effort to include GE in Iraq’s electricity development deal, though the U.S. government had been heavy handed in its efforts to include GE in the deal.

During his visit, the Secretary of State instead pushed for a deal for Exxon Mobil to develop southern Iraq’s oil and gas infrastructure, a contract said to be worth \$53 billion. The Prime Minister has praised the deal with Exxon, saying that it would contribute some \$400 billion to the Iraqi economy in the course of next thirty years.

Yet Secretary Pompeo’s visit was designed to deliver a clear political message as well. Pompeo presented both a sweet pill and a sour one to Iraqi leadership. On the one hand, Pompeo announced that Iraq would remain exempt from sanctions against Iran over the summer, particularly vital for continued electricity imports from Iran during

the hottest months of the year.

However, Pompeo also issued a stark warning to the Iraqi government regarding any attack carried out by forces loyal to Iran on U.S. installations or interests within Iraq. The warning reflected an increasing American concern that some of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) may carry out these types of attacks on behalf of Iran—and sent a message to Iraqi leadership that this prospect is completely unacceptable. Instead, the United States wants the Iraqi government to take its role in protecting the diplomatic missions and international companies working in Iraq and made sure that the Iraqi government heard first-hand of the consequences of such an attack if it takes place on Iraqi soil.

For their part, the Iraqi leadership is deeply concerned about the current state of affairs between the United States and Iran; the government needs both countries, as they are both partners who play different roles for Iraq. They also believe that the state of Iraq itself is fragile. The security, economic, and military situations inside the country are not stable, and any war or military conflict between Iran and the United States could consequently have a devastating result on Iraq. For that reason, Iraqi leadership would do everything in its power to prevent such conflict. It is rumored that the PM dispatched his Chief of Staff to Iran to inform them of the content of Pompeo visit and the messages Pompeo conveyed. This rumored visit was also understood as an attempt to warn Iran against any attempt to persuade domestic forces sympathetic to Iran to act in ways harmful to Iraqi interests inside of Iraq itself.

Yet it is also important to recognize that a possible attack on American interests in Iraq would be difficult, and the likelihood of such an event may be exaggerated. The dominant Shiite parties that have military capability represented inside the PMU are few, namely the Badr Brigade, Asaib Ahl Al-Haq (AAH), Hikma (Saraya Ashura) and the Sadr Movement (Saraya al-Salam).

It goes without saying that Saraya Asura and al-Salam can be ruled out in any attack against American interests. Moreover, the Badr organization has long shown its allegiance to Iraq, a reality that is only emphasized by Hadi al-Ameri's recent public statement. Thus, one of the only major groups within the PMU that might be considered likely to attack U.S. interests in Iraq at Iran's bequest is AAH. Yet they too have sided with Iraq on many occasions, such as when AAH flatly refused orders to face off against Sadrist forces when they were about to storm the Green Zone in 2015 in spite of the expectation that AAH would do so. The organization's high-ranking politicians have also made it clear in private conversations that they firmly believe Iraq comes first, while also citing the fact that AAH has not been involved in any conflict with U.S. troops for several years.

Meanwhile, there do remain some PMU groups with the arms capability to pose a threat, including Kataib Hizballa, Al-Nujabaa, Khurasani forces, and a few smaller groups. The first two organizations have the capacity to engage American troops in battle and have battlefield experience, though the remainder are capable of disturbing peace but not a great deal more. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that any of these groups would endanger Iraqi interests in the current circumstances, especially since they know that the Iraqi government and its political leadership will react against any such effort in order to protect Iraq's interest.

Much of the Iraqi leadership would even like the government to take an active role in reaching some sort of compromise as a mediator between the U.S. and the Iranian governments. Iraqi politicians would much prefer to encourage both sides to sit around a table instead of a reciprocal issuing of statements and threats of war. The Iraqi political parties and the Three Presidencies also have a shared concern for the Iranian people; no one wants to see the Iranian people suffer through the hardship of sanctions and want instead to help them.

However, some political observers believe Iraq can at best serve as a bystander to the U.S.-Iran conflict, which is bigger and more comprehensive than their respective influence inside of Iraq. These observers view U.S. pressure on Iran as an attempt to weaken the latter's capacity to move in the region in a manner that is linked to overall

regional influence and U.S. efforts to engage in a new effort to negotiate between Israelis and Palestinians. Through this lens, efforts to cut Iran's links in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine are designed to help enforce the as-yet unreleased "Deal of the Century," which the Trump administration is expected to announce in June.

A weaker and poorer Iran wouldn't be able to fund paramilitary groups in the countries surrounding Israel as they have in the past, lowering overall opposition to the deal and perhaps forcing the players in Palestine to accept it. If such a scenario is said to be true, then conflict in Iraq would serve little purpose for Iran. Iraq might be saved by the Iranians as a gateway for their goods and services, which continue to not be subject to sanctions.

Nevertheless, Iran's disinterest in prompting an attack on U.S. interests in Iraq should not be taken for granted. The Iraqi government and political leadership would be well advised to actively prioritize Iraq's interests first and foremost. Iraqi leadership wants the international community to recognize Iraqi sovereignty. For that reason, it needs to act as a sovereign state: the government must ensure that no paramilitary group carries out an attack on any foreign diplomatic missions or economic interests. Iraqi leaders must not allow the country to become an arena where other entities settle scores, even if said entities are friendly with Iraq itself. Thus, Iraqi diplomacy needs to get into high gear and fire on all cylinders in order to protect Iraq from any possible harm.

In light of this, the U.S. administration should also affirm and respect Iraqi sovereignty. Practically speaking, the United States needs all the friends it can get in the region, and Iraq has indeed been a good friend for the past sixteen years. Iraq's current administration, as represented by the Three Presidencies, is the most friendly to the Americans of all past Iraqi administrations. The United States should understand that the good will of Iraqis must come from a place of respect and mutual relations rather than coercion. In order to encourage this, the United States needs to give Iraq the breathing space and helping hand that it needs to protect its interests as a sovereign state. ❖

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