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Local Partnerships are Key to Confronting Iran in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

With its historical, cultural, and civilizational depth, combined with a deft wielding of soft and hard power, Iran currently feels that it has the upper hand in Iraq. Moreover, Iranian strategy has experienced an important development: it has moved from calling for popular revolutions against political regimes to intervening in the internal affairs of those same countries by promoting political empowerment of groups that were historically politically underrepresented inside these countries. Iraq remains a prime example of this current strategy.

Nevertheless, Iran continues to face a major problem in marketing the sectarian-theocratic political model it has relied on to exert its regional influence in Iraq. While Iran has depended on the strategy known as “Shi’a empowerment” in Iraq to achieve political gains, this tactic has sometimes resulted in political losses, as a number of Shi’a elements in Iraq refuse act in a way that serves Iranian political interests.

A continuing discomfort among many Iraqis with the idea of increased Iranian political control, along with the United States’ likely continuing military presence in Iraq, makes the country a highly likely site for more direct conflict between the United States and Iran. Both the United States and Iran have recently warned against the influence of the other power within Iraq. Similarly, the dual visits of U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo and Iranian foreign minister Mohamed Javad Zarif to Iraq last January reflect the two countries’ continuing interest in future of their influence in Iraq. Zarif in particular met with a number of different political, tribal, and militia figures in an attempt to sound out their position towards the heavy American presence in Iraq. Meanwhile, U.S. President Trump has stated that U.S. troops will remain in Iraq in part to “[watch Iran.](#)”

Thus, even as President Trump has moved to withdraw the American military presence from neighboring regions, Trump has rejected speculation that he will withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq and has reaffirmed the need for the United States to hold onto the Ayn al-Asad airbase. These recent events indicate that both countries see Iraq as a primary theater of conflict. Iran in particular has increasingly concentrated its influence and power on Iraq, especially given that Iraq lies at the heart of Iran’s overall regional strategy. Due to its geographic location, Iraq serves as a central artery through which Iran funds its military campaigns in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, whether

through financial or logistical support.

Yet in the United States, U.S. policy-makers still appear to be searching for appropriately comprehensive strategy to confront Iran's influence in Iraq. So far, there appears to be an intention to redeploy troops leaving Syria to Iraq, focusing especially on the southern and western regions. Yet the outlines of this plan remain vague, and there are many variables that can influence the current American position in Iraq. In particular, the most prominent factors on the ground right now are the growing threat posed by a resurgent Islamic State (IS), the dominant role of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the lack of reliable local partners, and recent doubts on the Kurdish side as to whether their interests will align with future American plans.

Of these concerns, the United States' position in Iraq may be most threatened by the entrenched local military support on which Iran can rely. Driven especially by the threat of IS to Iran's project of regional control, Iran has attempted to revolutionize Iraqi society by militarizing it through the production and funding of dozens of armed militias. The Iranian-backed PMF have a complicated history within Iraq, but can act as a shield to protect Iran from any threats it might encounter, in addition to shifting the nature of their affiliated political parties and distancing them from their previously civilian character. Iran has encouraged for these parties' activities to be simultaneously political and military, giving rise to the term "militia-parties."

It is under these conditions that military presence has become a crux of the battle of influence in Iraq. Just as their Iranian adversaries have done, the United States must direct their efforts to better cultivating potential partners on the ground. Those partners include the Sunni tribes and armed factions, which oppose the influence in Iraq, and include exiled political forces in Amman, London, and Washington. There is also a large Shiite population in southern Iraq that has become very critical of Iran's damaging policies in their country and is likely to resist further Iranian Influence in Iraq. There are even current members of Parliament who are already interested in curbing the Iranian influence within the Iraqi Parliament—including members of the Sairoon coalition and the National Wisdom Movement (al-Hikma).

With the current American military presence in Iraq, these forces may face a number of dangerous situations. It is possible that Iranian-backed proxies may push for a direct American military confrontation—an immensely costly prospect given Iran's extensive regional forces under its control. Iran's ability to escalate any conflict to a broader regional fight makes any potential clash in Iraq especially dangerous. General Qasem Soleimani and the Iranian Quds Force have established wide-reaching relationships with different armed Sunni and Shi'a movements alike, which have demonstrated great loyalty to Iran during the region's recent conflicts.

Moreover, though a continued policy of sanctions against Iran appears to be the preferred strategic choice for the United States, maintaining a strategy that relies exclusively on sanctions in the long term is likely to become increasingly ineffective as Iran restructures its economy to operate under sanctions. Given that Iran is a country that has historically managed to weather any number of sanctions and crises, U.S. officials should consider alternative measures that can aid in its sanctions efforts to limit Iranian expansionism.

Thus, breathing new life and potential into American cooperation with Iraqi national and patriotic groups hostile to the Iranian project in Iraq is a highly beneficial, and perhaps necessary step to challenging Iranian influence there. Given the policies of militias close to the Revolutionary Guard to pressure and blackmail elements not aligned with them, the United States has a wider margin to strategically maneuver than before. While the Iranian strategy has produced groups within Iraq loyal to Iran, these same groups have alienated many Iraqi civilians from the Iranian project. There is currently a strong Kurdish and Arab interest in preventing a loss of autonomy to Iran's allies in Iraq and becoming submerged inside the Iranian political project in Iraq.

These local elements possess the strategic and military background to counter Iran and are the most capable of

mobilizing a variety of different local groups to resist Iranian influence. They will be most effective applying political discourse that transcends narrow sectarian boundaries and ensuring that Iraq does not become subsumed into Iran's policy of expansion. Moreover, it is likely that this strategy could expect support from other regional forces—such as Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—that would all benefit from the United States wresting Iraq from Iran's grip.

Dealing with Iranian influence in Iraq requires a comprehensive strategic vision beyond sanctions or the mere maintenance of the current U.S. military presence in Iraq. This should begin with isolation and containment but also focus on building strategic partnerships within Iraq to counter Iranian influence there. And this must be seen as one step in a larger comprehensive plan; Iran has set up its regional influence so that, though inconvenient it could continue its policy of expansionism through alternative corridors were its influence in Iran blocked. United States then, if it seeks to continue its policy of preventing Iranian expansion, must see Iraq as an important step but not the final measure to a policy of containment. ❖



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