

Zarif versus Pompeo: Realism Wins

by [Shukur Khilkhal \(/experts/shukur-khilkhal\)](/experts/shukur-khilkhal)

Feb 8, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/zryf-dd-bwmbyw-walwaqyt-trbh\)](/ar/policy-analysis/zryf-dd-bwmbyw-walwaqyt-trbh)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Shukur Khilkhal \(/experts/shukur-khilkhal\)](/experts/shukur-khilkhal)

Shukur Khilkhal is a researcher and a journalist. He works for Middle East Broadcasting Networks–Washington D.C. Khilkhal specializes in Middle East current affairs and cultural studies, and has also worked on TV productions, writing, and producing numerous television programs and documentaries.



Brief Analysis

Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's recent visit to Baghdad has pushed the American project to counter Iranian influence in Iraq back to square one. The visit came just after U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's tour in Baghdad and several other Middle Eastern capitals, through which he sought to form a **Middle Eastern coalition** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/secretary-state-mike-pompeo-starts-middle-east-visit-jordan-190108090632341.html>) to counter Iran in the region in general and in Iraq in particular. During the tour, he discussed activating American sanctions on Iran with Iraqi officials, as well as limiting commercial activity with Iran and diminishing the role of Iranian-backed factions.

In contrast, Zarif's visit—timed just after Pompeo's own—was designed to send a direct message to the U.S. administration, signaling that nothing will change in regards to Iraqi-Iranian ties and that attempts by the United States to contain Iran in Iraq have not worked in the Iraqi arena thus far. On the contrary, Iranian influence in Iraq is in the process of expanding. Moreover, Zarif released a **strongly worded statement** (https://english.almasirah.net/details.php?es_id=4928&cat_id=2) claiming that "US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is not entitled to intervene at all in the affairs of relations between Iran and Iraq... the relations between Iraq and Iran existed before the establishment of the US State."

Although Zarif's statements exaggerated somewhat in surveying the ties between the two countries, they suggest a more realistic understanding of Iraq's position relative to Iran than the United States' expectations suggest.

The American plan to counter Iranian influence in Iraq involves working to diminish the role of Iraqi political parties close to Iran and the activity of armed factions supported by Iran. **As Pompeo has stated** (<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2019/01/288524.htm>), the United States sees Iranian influence in Iraq as "striving to reduce Iraqi freedom, sovereignty, and independence." Therefore, they must work side by side with the Iraqi government to diminish it. In this regard, the United States called on the Iraqi government to abide by the American sanctions on Iran through limiting commercial activity with it and cutting off Iranian gas and electricity.

In theory, the project would seem to be achievable and even progressing. Yet from a practical standpoint, disentangling Iraq and Iran's economic, political, and social ties is an almost impossible goal for an external actor. Zarif's extensive visit has only highlighted this reality.

The Reality of Factions Loyal to Iran

There are dozens of political and military Iranian-backed factions currently operating in Iraq, with many of them formed through the battles that Iraq fought to liberate its cities from the occupation of the Islamic State (IS). Within these factions, a doctrinal character prevails that emphasizes loyalty to Khomeini's doctrine of *vilayat-e-faqih*, and consequently to the state of Iran. It is clear that the U.S. administration understands the danger that these factions present for both Iraq and the region. Yet despite pressure from the U.S. administration and the policy of threat and intimidation it has followed throughout the past three years, these factions continue to grow and engage in military activities, both inside Iraq and in the regional proxy war in Syria.

Moreover, the United States' political blunder in Iraq brought political factions loyal to Iran into the Iraqi parliament, creating a powerful bloc dedicated to Iranian interests. The two largest military factions—the Badr faction and the Asaib Ahl al-Haq—have won more than 30 seats in the Iraqi parliament. Ironically, these two factions representing foreign interests within Iraq are **preparing draft legislation (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iraqi-lawmakers-demand-u-s-troops-withdraw-after-trump-s-n952226>)** to present in the Iraqi parliament that would expel foreign troops in Iraq—targeting U.S. military presence. Although this legislation may not pass, it is an extremely important development in the Iraqi government's relationship to American troops in the country, shifting the confrontation to the country's highest legislative power.

That these factions are in a position of increasing legislative power in Iraq requires the United States to make adjustments to its policy—threats and unilateral decisions will not succeed in producing concrete change within Iraq. On the contrary, such strong-arm tactics could further inflame the crisis and have the opposite effect of that intended. One of the clearest examples of this occurred in July of last year with the signing of the joint military cooperation agreement between Iraq and Iran in spite of American insistence on Iran's role in Iraq diminishing. Nevertheless, American strategy has not adjusted, as is seen with recent U.S. demands that the Iraqi government limit commercial exchange and stop the Iranian energy supply.

Commercial Exchange between Iraq and Iran

Aside from the increasing influence of those who support Iran in parliament, Iraq is also deeply tied to Iran from a commercial perspective. With a shared border of approximately 1,000 miles, dozens of official and unofficial border crossings are dispersed along its length, where a thriving border trade occurs. Though theoretically subordinate to the central government, the border crossings are subject to the authority of the provincial councils that control their movement and the quality of the goods exchanged through them. Even officially, Iraq is the second largest exporter of Iranian goods after China, with **bilateral trade (<https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-iraq/rouhani-sees-iran-iraq-expanding-trade-despite-u-s-sanctions-idUKKCN1NM09L>)** amounting to approximately 12 billion dollars annually centered largely in the agricultural, industrial and oil sectors.

This commercial relationship appears to be deepening. Upon receiving Iraqi president Barham Salih last October, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani announced the intention of the two countries to **increase bilateral trade (<https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-iraq/rouhani-sees-iran-iraq-expanding-trade-despite-u-s-sanctions-idUKKCN1NM09L>)** to 20 billion dollars, facilitated in part through extending **extant railway systems (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/iran-iraq-syria-railway.html>)** to link between Iran's state-owned Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (IRA) and Iraq's rail system through a connecting point at Basra.

Greater connectivity will both facilitate commercial activity and assist in transporting the large number of people who already travel between the two countries. Religious tourism between the two countries is especially active—Al Najaf International Airport in Iraq receives **dozens of flights daily (<https://www.flightradar24.com/data/airports/njf/arrivals>)** from Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad alone. Religious

tourism brings in billion dollars to Iraq annually, with approximately 85 percent originating from Iranian visitors.

Given the deep ties of the Iraqi economy to Iran, Iraq's government would simply be unable to carry out American demands to diminish commercial exchange with Iran even if it were deeply motivated to do so. The United States has presented no alternative to replace the commercial dependency it hopes to wrest Iraq from, nor is there a realistic alternative for Iraq at present.

The Energy Issue

Indeed, Iraq is even reliant on Iran for much of its most basic infrastructure; Iraq has suffered from an intractable crisis in electric power going back to the era of Saddam Hussein. The wars Iraq fought during that era contributed to the destruction of large parts of its electricity sector, an issue made even more dire by a lack of water (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/declining-levels-iraq-tigris-raise-fear-water-crisis-180607072317966.html>) in the two Iraqi rivers that weakened the capacity of the country's hydropower plants. After the security situation in the country improved, the electricity problem topped the list of the country's most complex issues. Iraq now depends on Iranian gas (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-gas/iraq-needs-two-years-to-wean-itself-off-iranian-gas-energy-official-idUSKBN1051H3>) to operate some of its gas stations, as well as directly importing electricity from Iran to cover the needs of some of its cities. Over the past fifteen years, successive Iraqi governments have failed in providing a solution to this stubborn problem.

In an attempt to end energy cooperation between Iran and Iraq, the United States has offered (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-iraq/u-s-extends-sanctions-waiver-for-iraq-to-import-iranian-gas-power-idUSKCN10K1LL>) to give Iraq a few months to cut off Iranian electricity and gas supplies in exchange for helping the Iraqi government develop this industry domestically and find the necessary alternatives to replace the current supply from Iran. Nonetheless, this proposal lacks realism and carries a number of risks, since it is in an impossible position to find a solution or alternatives within the period proposed by the U.S. administration. As an example of the importance of Iraqi dependency on Iranian energy, protests erupted in the southern city of Basra in the middle of last year due to Iran cutting off electricity from Iraq because of the accumulation of debt.

A False American Perception

The American view of the relationship between Iraq and Iran is based on the perception that Iraq as merely a victim to be saved. This view lacks a realistic perspective on the relationship itself: despite the large Iranian influence in Iraq at the political and military levels, the two countries have many shared interests expressed by the wide extent of diplomatic representation, with an embassy and five consulates for each country.

Moreover, the two countries are connected by dozens of security, military, and trade agreements. They also have a shared committee for security coordination and patrolling the border. These agreements have real power: Iran has moved to support Iraq through its war to liberate its cities from the occupation of the Islamic State, and despite any ulterior motives behind this step, many Iraqis feel grateful for the quick Iranian response to support them in this war.

America's approach to Iraqi-Iranian ties over the last three years has led to Iran's expansion in Iraq, as well as the rise of Iraqi political currents and factions close to Iran. Paradoxically, heavy-handed pressure from the United States has indirectly led to a serious threat to America's presence and interests in Iraq. Over time, maintaining a U.S. presence will become increasingly difficult unless the United States can adopt a plan towards Iraq's relationship to Iran that is based on a realistic understanding of its current nature. In particular, this understanding cannot ignore dialogue, lest the American efforts and sacrifices that have been made for fifteen years for the sake of spreading democracy in Iraq and advancing its status are scattered to the wind. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

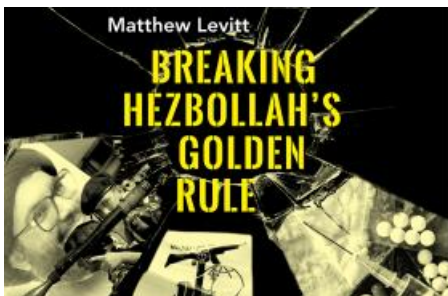
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)