

The U.S. Role in the Future of Iraq

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Brief Analysis

The United States of America has invested significant time and effort in Iraq over the last fifteen years, yet the Iraqi political process continues to falter. The damage of the country's limited adoption of democratic values is continually demonstrated in each election cycle. This is especially complicated by the outsized role of Iraq's Islamist political parties connected to Iran.

Since these parties believe in the primacy of the Quran in governance and Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of Velayat-e Faiqh, their goals are driven by regional concerns for the primacy of Iran rather than domestic stability and democracy—even treating democratic principles with a large degree of suspicion. Values of democratic equality such as those connected to women, child protection, human rights, and citizenship are often viewed with suspicion. These connections are complicated; Quds Force head Major General Qassem Soleimani has control over sizable Iraqi militias, and his dictates further contribute to the submission of these political parties to Iranian dictates.

In contrast with Iran's clear and continued engagement in Iraqi politics, U.S. interests in the future of Iraq remain opaque for many domestic observers. Though the United States has stated that the regional influence of Iran is one of its primary foreign policy concerns, these efforts are complicated by the history of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq. With the Obama administration's nuclear agreement with Iran and the withdrawal of American military forces from Iraq, many anti-Iranian groups inside Iraq have interpreted the United States as acquiescing for Iraq to be subject to Iran's expansionist whims. The inclusion of the Fatah Alliance in the dominant political coalition demonstrates the result of the Obama administration's previous silence on Soleimani's actions in the country, and the continued mixed messaging from the current administration.

It is not unreasonable to trace many of Iraq's ills to a failed American policy in Iraq: political and economic crises in the face of disappearing Iraqi sovereignty and a real absence of the principle of the separation of powers, with rampant financial and administrative corruption. Iran has exploited the indecision of U.S. foreign policy to expand its influence in Iraq as a means of developing stronger influence across the whole region, and Iranian-backed parties have shown little interest in stemming Iraq's major crises. Rather, Iranian actions actively threaten Iraqi democracy; political parties affiliated with Iran have worked in a concerted manner to forge election results in both Shi'a and Sunni provinces—the latter of which contain Sunnis suffering from corruption who are linked through mutual connections with Soleimani and his followers.

The currently forming Iraqi government seems to be particularly vulnerable to Iranian machinations. Soleimani himself met with Iraqi politicians—including a number of politicians notorious for corruption—in order to form a bloc of over a hundred members that stands as a clear challenge to politicians looking to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq.

In the past months since the Iraqi elections, Soleimani has also sent a clear message to Iraqi and U.S. officials alike through the development of an oppositionist bloc of 145 members of parliament under Badr's Hadi al-Ameri and former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki that Iran will have significant control of minister positions and voting blocs.

Soleimani's clear success in controlling a sizable source of power in the new Iraqi government demonstrates the impact of a persistent and clear stance in Iraqi politics, both to the Iranian government and Iraqis themselves. Moreover, Soleimani's activist stances continue to contrast with State Department officials' mixed messaging throughout the lengthy process of Iraqi government formation, including its apparent acceptance of Iraqi elections results despite evidence of corruption.

Without a clear vision from U.S. officials in Iraq, the country lacks serious prospects of a moderate Iraqi government liberated from Iranian influence ever forming. Many Iraqis who relied on the U.S. vision of moderation and democracy as a model for their country have lost trust in American policy. Soleimani's efficacy in promoting his goals is appealing in comparison, and his allure may serve as a fatal blow to independents, moderates, democrats, and to future American interests in Iraq.

The solution is clear: the United States and its representatives in Iraq must have clear stances on Iraqi politics and demonstrate that working with the United States has clear benefits for Iraq. The American administration should not allow its staff to recycle the same policies adopted by Obama's administration in Iraq, especially since they no longer reflect the United States' overall renewed focus on Iran.

Perhaps the most effective and quickest way to restore benign American influence is the implementation of existing Iraqi-American agreements. America could also contribute to bringing about reconciliation between Iraq's different sects in order to re-engage Sunni Iraqis in the political process by giving them the sense of playing a part in Iraq's future. Perhaps the United States can allocate further resources to support the country's process of decentralisation in the country and supporting efforts to bring Sunni Arabs into the country's armed forces. Finally, the United States should work to support Iraqi media that can counter sectarian Iranian propaganda that seeks to spread division among the people of Iraq.

However, this does not mean that the United States is unilaterally responsible for the U.S.-Iraqi relationship. Iraq, for its part, must retain its ability to act independently in oil markets, whatever the situation with market indicators and regional struggles may be. Strengthening the Iraqi-American partnership will not come about only through American investment in Iraq, but rather through cooperation, which will ultimately bring about economic and strategic benefits to both countries. ❖

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