

Iranian Tortoise and American Hare in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Everyone remembers the beloved story about the tortoise and the hare. There is a similar race taking place between Iran and America in Iraq. As Iran moves in a slow and cunning way, ever increasing its influence in Iraq, America has lost most of its own sway there. The race between the U.S. and Iran began in 2003 after Iraq turned into a Shia regime shared with the Islamists on the Arab Sunni side, along with Kurdish nationalists, Marxists, and Islamists. At the same time, Iraq also became a rear base for Iran to support its fronts in Syria, Lebanon, and other areas.

Notwithstanding all the different analyses conducted in Washington, Americans do not have a deep understanding of these political realities. Some in the media, the general public, and Congress believe that the U.S. administration has already achieved a three-fold foreign policy victory in this arena: first, they made Iraq a democratic country; second, they brought American forces back home; and third, they brokered the successful Iranian nuclear deal. In reality, these events were not successes, but rather the waste of time that allowed the tortoise to cross the finish line, and kept the hare far from victory. The victories for Iran were America's gradual withdrawal from the Middle East, increased extremism, and the open invitation to create a more powerful enemy than before.

The Iranian threat manifests itself through its armed groups, which were allowed to participate in elections to take control of the parliament and already possess both legislative and military power on the ground. As a result, they have become an essential part of the Iraqi government, through which they have imposed their repressive ideology. The contours of America's receding role versus Iran's rising role in Iraq include increased overt hostility towards the U.S. by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the collapse of the Kurdish and Sunni roles in Iraq, and the tactical Turkish-Iranian rapprochement.

In regard to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its hostility toward the American presence in the region, General Muhammed Iskandri, leader of the Guard Corps from the Hamadan Province in central Iran, confirmed that the war in Syria is actually Iran's war against the U.S. – enabled by Iran's dominant position in neighboring Iraq. He also noted that the Revolutionary Guard's leadership has equipped their front lines with generals and 138 brigades to confront their "enemies." As for Iraq itself, in retrospect, Sunni Iraqi researcher Dr. Omar Abdussattar has suggested in an interview that the resistance waged by the Sunnis against the American army after 2003 was in practice a decoy for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's front lines against the U.S. project in Iraq.

In reality, these claims are proven correct day after day. By last month, the Revolutionary Guard's second-in-

command, Hossein Salami, boasted that “Both the Iraqi and Syrian armies constitute a strategic pillar for the Islamic Republic of Iran.” He declared that Iran is the real military player in the region, whether their enemies admit it or not. Salami added that Iran has improved the precision of their ballistic missiles to target U.S. aircraft carriers in any possible confrontation.

Meanwhile, the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement and its impact on American influence in the region has taken place over two phases: the first in light of American and European pressure and sanctions on Iran in the past; and the second after the Kurds attempted to bolster their position in Iraq by holding an independence referendum. This referendum pushed Turkey to build relations with Tehran based on common interests, and then to impose new realities on the Middle East. All of this came in the context of America’s dwindling involvement, as well as the lack of an Arab plan for a bloc that could compete with the Iranian-Turkish regional forces, protect its interests, and promote its goals. The Turkish-Iranian rapprochement resulted in the siege on Kurdistan and the end of Kurdish control over Kirkuk.

The Kurds had been strategic allies for the Americans in Iraq. During the war, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah transformed into safe locations for managing American interests there. Although the Kurds only possessed around forty seats in the Iraqi Parliament, they represented a game-changing trump card. Such was their influence that they even cast the deciding votes to select the Prime Minister.

Then came Iran’s Qasem Soleimani to impose his will after the defeat. Soleimani acted like Saddam Hussein in the way he managed internal Iraqi opposition to his desires, fragmented the Kurds, and destroyed their alliance after the referendum. Erbil came under indirect siege by Turkey and Iran, the Iraqi government closed the Erbil International airport, and Kurdish wages were slashed. All of these factors ignited Kurdish public opinion against the regional government and forced Kurdistan’s President Massoud Barzani to step down. Now the Kurds are drawing down and attempting a rapprochement with Iran to salvage what remains of their position – a move that signals that America has lost its Kurdish trump card, their key ally in shaping Iraq’s future.

Yet, it is not too late to respond effectively to all of the above. Preventing Iran not only from achieving nuclear capabilities, but also from establishing military bases in Iraq, which holds the world’s second-largest oil reserves, is paramount. Iran’s success in neutralizing Iraq would surely make it an Iranian military base, from which it can operate in Syria and Lebanon to create other fronts and extend Iranian influence in the region.

Thus, a new position on the Iranian nuclear deal should be just the first step. The next step should be to place armed groups that have made threatening statements against America on the terrorist list and to demand that the “friendly” Iraqi government surrender them, or at least expel them, out of respect for diplomatic relations and signed U.S.-Iraqi agreements. The U.S. must also adopt a new strategy to deal with the Kurds, Sunnis, and Shia groups that reject Iranian influence, by building a single, U.S.-friendly alliance with financial and political power and establishing a new strategic relationship with it. Ultimately, in order to check Iran, the U.S. has a clear national interest in offering assurances for Iraqi power-sharing, greater local autonomy, paramilitary forces under the command of the National Guard, and limited amnesty linked to peaceful reintegration into the new Iraq. ❖

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