

Iran's Influence in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

On April 29, 2011, Ahmed Ali, Michael Knights, and Michael Eisenstadt addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Ali is a Marcia Robbins-Wilf research associate at the Institute, focusing on Iraqi political dynamics. Dr. Knights is a Lafer fellow at the Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, Libya, Yemen, and the Gulf Arab states. Mr. Eisenstadt is director of the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Ahmed Ali

Since 2003, Iran has pursued three political objectives in Iraq. First, it has sought to unite the country's Shiite parties so they can translate their demographic weight (an estimated 60 percent of Iraq's total population) into political influence, thereby creating a government amenable to Tehran. The March 2010 parliamentary elections illustrated this: once the voting results were released, Iran reportedly invited all of the parties except the largely secular Iraqiya bloc to government-formation consultations. Those efforts bore fruit nine months later, when the new government finally coalesced in favor of Tehran's allies despite Iraqiya's success in the elections themselves.

Second, Iran has supported shaky governing coalitions, positioning itself to be an influential external power broker when the need for mediation arises. Third, Tehran has sought to prevent non-Islamist parties from gaining power,

Iraqiyah in particular. To that end, it has also worked to marginalize secular nationalist factions and leaders, including Mithal al-Alusi, head of the Iraqi Nation Party. For example, when accusations arose that the Baath Party organized the recent antigovernment protests, the Iranian media falsely attributed the claims to al-Alusi in order to smear and isolate him.

In addition to its diplomatic presence, Iran uses its relationships with local Iraqi parties to achieve these objectives. Tehran's closest partners include the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party, and the Sadrists, though even these relationships are not without problems. In addition to Shiite parties, Iraq's two major Kurdish factions -- the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party -- also enjoy good relations with Tehran, particularly the PUK. Iran even briefly established working relations with the Iraqi Islamic Party, a predominantly Sunni faction.

Future Iraqi-Iranian relations depend to a great extent on Baghdad's foreign policy choices. If Iraq decides to maintain its current posture, which includes long-term relations with the United States, Tehran would continue to allocate vast resources to ensure continuous political influence. Yet Iran would become even more influential if Baghdad were to abandon meaningful relations with Washington and join a regional axis in which Iran is a central player. Tehran's status would be greatly threatened, however, if Iraq chose to resume its assertive regional role.

In short, Iraqi political parties will work with Iran as long as it suits their interests. Once that criterion is no longer met, they will seek support elsewhere.

Michael Knights

Iran's willingness and ability to employ violence in Iraq is often presented as a multiplier that boosts the Islamic Republic's influence. Yet Tehran's use of militant proxies within Iraq and its bullying tactics along the border may in fact have laid the foundation for a profound strategic failure.

Since 2003, Iran has been unable to transform its adversarial relationship with Iraq, unlike Turkey, which has become a constructive force in the country's politics and economy and is reaping the commercial benefits of this policy. Furthermore, Iran's paramilitary apparatus in Iraq -- run by the Qods Force, a branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) -- may be engaged in financial and political "empire-building" in Iraq that does not serve broader Iranian interests.

To date, Iranian forces have used three types of violence in Iraq: resistance against occupation, border clashes for intimidation purposes, and criminal and business "freelancing." Resistance against the U.S. military presence is motivated by Tehran's fears of Iraq reemerging as a strong, U.S.-backed military power. Currently, two-thirds of all violent incidents in southern Iraq are attacks on American personnel carried out by Iranian-supported groups. Such attacks are slowly escalating due to Tehran's concern that the United States will retain military forces in Iraq beyond this year.

Border clashes and terrorist threats are a continuation of Iran's adversarial relationship with Iraq predating 2003. In some cases they involve cross-border artillery fire into the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) zone -- once or twice a month at present. Iran also occasionally launches ground incursions up to ten kilometers inside the KRG and sends helicopter gunships and unmanned aerial vehicles even further in. The Kurds feel threatened by Iranian support for Islamist movements such as Ansar al-Islam, which they view as Tehran's way of gaining leverage over the KRG. Elsewhere, Iranian forces periodically shoot at Iraqi border guards and fishermen and threaten to annex Iraqi oil infrastructure along the border.

Other activities by Iranian forces appear to be unrelated to Tehran's strategic goals in Iraq. The provision of explosively formed penetrators to tribal groups in some Basra oil-producing areas is one example of the IRGC's murky involvement with criminal syndicates. In other cases, the IRGC and its Iraqi agents have been implicated in

corrupt practices aimed at winning small contracts in the religious tourism and construction sectors for senior Iranian generals and intelligence officials. These cases highlight how the IRGC seems to have free rein in Iraq and may be pursuing narrow objectives at the expense of Tehran's broader goals.

While Iranian agents scramble around making minor deals and playing petty power games, Turkish companies are cleaning up, reaching massive deals such as the \$10.5 billion project-management agreement for the Sadr City section of Baghdad. In time, Tehran may come to regret perpetuating its antagonistic relationship with Iraq, which has only reinforced the Iraqi people's suspicions about Iranian intentions.

Michael Eisenstadt

Iran has woven soft-power activities into its whole-of-government approach to projecting influence in Iraq. In particular, it has pursued leverage over Baghdad by implementing protectionist measures and trade policies that disadvantage Iraq, by attempting to co-opt or displace the transnational Shiite clerical network based in Najaf, and by seeking to influence Iraqi public opinion through information activities. The importance of Iranian soft power will only increase over time -- as the Iraqi security forces and state have become more proficient, projecting influence through militias and insurgent groups has become increasingly difficult for Tehran.

U.S. officials tend to discount Iran's soft-power efforts, focusing on hard power instead. Although this attitude is understandable given the threat that Iranian-sponsored militants pose to U.S. personnel in Iraq, it does not change the fact that Tehran's political, economic, religious, and social influence may pose the greater long-term threat to Iraqi sovereignty and independence.

To date, Iran's significant investments toward expanding its reach in Iraq have yielded only mixed results. Yet the formation of a new Iraqi government that incorporates many of Tehran's closest allies, along with the impending U.S. military withdrawal, will present new opportunities for expanding Iranian influence. Such efforts will in turn likely generate further Iraqi pushback. But it remains to be seen whether Iranian influence will continue to be self-limiting, or whether the emerging reality will help Tehran transform Iraq into a weak client state via a gradual process of "Lebanonization."

Over the long run, the extent of Tehran's influence will depend on Iraq's security situation, political complexion, and relationship with the United States, as well as the overall tenor of Iran-Arab and Sunni-Shiite relations in the Persian Gulf following Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council intervention in Bahrain. Moreover, Iraq's reemergence as a major oil exporter will almost certainly heighten tensions with Iran. Thus, while assessments that Iran is the big "winner" in Iraq are premature, they may yet prove prescient if the United States does not work energetically to counter Iranian influence in the years to come.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel. ❖

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