

Iran's Influence in Iraq: Game, Set, but Not Match to Tehran

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Articles & Testimony

"Today, Iraq is to Iran as Lebanon was to Syria," intoned an Iraqi politician during a recent off-the-record briefing in Washington. The sentiment is commonly expressed by Iraqis, the US's Arab allies and by many American diplomats and soldiers: that the United States removed Iran's most inveterate opponent -- Saddam Hussein's regime -- and then allowed Tehran to become the most influential outside power in Iraq.

But is it really "game, set, match to Iran"? Any assessment of Iran's influence in Iraq must centre on a review of Tehran's interests and objectives vis-a-vis its neighbour and historic rival. Above all other considerations, Tehran seeks to prevent Iraq from recovering as a military threat or as a launchpad for an American attack.

Some of these objectives have been achieved, for at least the current decade, by the removal of Saddam's regime, the de-Ba'athification of the security services and the ascent of former armed oppositionists into the leadership of post-Saddam Iraq.

Undertaking or supporting an attack upon Iran would simply be much harder for Iraqi politicians who relied upon Iran for protection during the last three decades of Ba'athist rule and who often made common cause with Tehran against the Iraqi military. This is one reason why Iran has supported its Iraqi allies in their ongoing de-Ba'athification efforts and why it would prefer not to see a new, cross-sectarian nationalist bloc emerge in Iraq.

Looking forward, Iran's supporters in the Iraqi government will seek to complicate the task of negotiating a post-2011 US-Iraqi security agreement and to restrict the scale and effectiveness of American security assistance to Iraq's external security forces. Though Iranian-backed militancy in Iraq is an irritant in the two countries' relations, the al-Quds Brigades of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), responsible for operations outside Iran, will maintain its ability to target US military personnel, diplomats and private citizens in Iraq, which could act as one source of deterrence against a US or Israeli military strike on Iran -- a nightmare scenario for US generals and diplomats in Iraq.

In Iraq's economy, Iran has established a balance of trade and economic co-dependencies that favour Tehran and protect it, to some extent, from the potential impact of future armed attacks or sanctions. Tehran has arguably benefited from a "whole-of-government" approach in which government-owned industries and IRGC-influenced religious foundations (bonyads) are used as tools of statecraft. Since 2003, the Iranian government has encouraged Iraq's eastern provinces to rely on Iranian provision of vital civilian fuel products, such as cooking gas, heating oil, and vehicle fuels, as well as Iranian support to the Iraqi electricity grid. In the future, Iraq may import gas from Iran, while Iran may offer to increase Iraqi oil export capacity through use of its ports, offsetting the possible bottleneck of Iraq's underdeveloped southern export infrastructure.

Yet Iran periodically signals its position of strength in such relationships, cutting off fuel and electrical supplies in winter and summer, just when Iraqis need them the most. This has led to concerns that Iran could threaten Iraq's oil export capacity in the future, particularly if Tehran wanted to protest about its treatment by the international

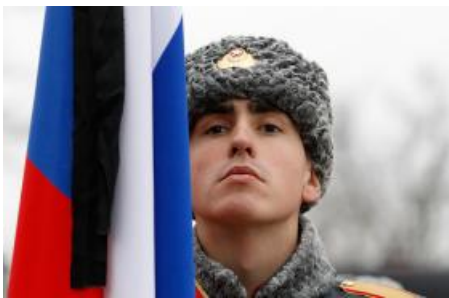
community or if it wanted to curtail Iraq's ability to replace Iranian production on the global market.

The fragmented and unregulated nature of Iraqi politics has allowed Iran to provide campaign financing, media support and mediation to Iraqi political lists, and also paramilitary support to armed groups. Yet Iran's support has frequently proven counterproductive, particularly for Iran's longest-serving Iraqi ally, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a movement that was shunned by Iraqi voters for its Iranian connections and now appears to have broken with Tehran over Iran's backing of Maliki. Iranian border incursions, support to militias and its diversion of the headwaters of Iraqi rivers regularly draw criticism from Iraqis of all sectarian and ethnic groups. Iran probably faces a future in which Iraqi nationalism grows as a force, whilst the current crop of Iranian-favoured politicians will fade away. This all suggests that Iran, like the United States, will have to continue to vie for influence in Iraq, year after year, decade after decade.

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