

Iraq, Iran, and U.S. Strategy: A Trip Report

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Three experts offer insights gleaned from their post-election fieldwork and high-level meetings in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

On July 25, Geneive Abdo, Nussaibah Younis, and Michael Knights addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Abdo is a resident scholar at the Arabia Foundation. Younis is an associate fellow at Chatham House and former senior advisor to the European Institute of Peace. Knights, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded with the country's security forces. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

GENEIVE ABDO

Iranian leaders are making overtures to the Sunni community in Iraq because their own country is in a precarious position. More American sanctions are coming, the Europeans are running the other way, and civil unrest is growing inside Iran. That leaves Iraq as Tehran's best hope for dealing with the sanctions.

Beyond interfering in Iraq's electoral process and economy, Iran is also becoming more involved in the Kurdistan Regional Government and using it as a political tool. The KRG may give Tehran an opportunity to control government formation in Baghdad, ensuring that the prime minister and various ministries favor Iranian interests.

Most Iraqis, even political officials, considered the May parliamentary elections to be illegitimate. Leading Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr rose in popularity because Iraqis trusted him to solve problems and deliver services, but now people are frustrated because he has failed to deliver on those promises. The United States can help fill this gap in expectations, moving beyond traditional military and political relations by bolstering the country's social services, which in turn could strengthen the central government.

Yet this does not mean Washington should neglect military and political issues. Iraqi officials are worried about America withdrawing support for the fight against the Islamic State, so U.S. officials should reassure them that it is still a priority. Washington should also tweak its sanctions against Iran to minimize their ill effects on Iraq. Even as the Iranians widen their footprint in Baghdad, sanctions will likely prevent them from providing the same level of services to Iraqis that they have in the past. In sum, while most observers believe Iraq is on the road to progress, the extent of Iranian influence and the lack of government legitimacy show that it still has a long way to go.

NUSSAIBAH YOUNIS

Despite the anger and violence seen in recent protests, senior Iraqi officials and other elites are surprisingly calm about the situation. They do not seem to sense the need to restore trust in the political system, perhaps because

most of them are far removed from the people's grievances. Inside Iraq's massive bureaucratic patronage networks, politicians do not believe they are corrupt. Rather, they see corruption as part of good governance—as being generous and taking from the state to provide for their own networks. This creates two classes of people: (1) the political elite and anyone connected to them, and (2) everyone else, meaning large swaths of the population have little access to government resources.

Regarding the KRG, Iran's involvement with Erbil is now deeper than Baghdad's. At a time of Kurdish vulnerability, Tehran has made a strong case for allying with each other, telling Kurdish officials that they can meet their goal of wresting greater autonomy and funding from the central government if they build relationships with Iranian-linked Shia politicians and parties in Baghdad, including the Badr Organization, Nouri al-Maliki, and the Fatah Alliance. According to this argument, Iran can guarantee the Kurds many of the things they failed to achieve via their alliance with the United States. Thus far, the two main Kurdish parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party—seem convinced by this pitch.

Going forward, the United States needs to start engaging with Iraqis across the political spectrum on high-priority issues, and offer to help provide basic services. Washington's apparent obsession with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is unwise because he is unlikely to maintain his hold on power for much longer.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

Although Abadi's coalition won forty-two seats in the elections, he himself controls as few as six. In contrast, Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani controls at least twenty-six seats, while the Shia factions Tayyar Hikma al-Watani and Sairoon now form the government's core. Yet these results and their effect on the balance of power in Baghdad are viewed differently inside and outside Iraq.

Interestingly, Iraqis have not been as focused on Iran during this election cycle. They know that something is wrong with their country, and choosing politicians who can fix it seems more important to them than following sectarian party lines. For instance, three of the central points in Sairoon's platform focused on reestablishing relations with regional and international states.

Even so, the imminent reapplication of heavy U.S. sanctions on Iran will no doubt become a hot issue for Iraqis. Some of them believe their country should get a pass from these sanctions because Iran provides electricity and other essential services to Iraq. Yet others believe the economy would benefit if sanctions keep certain Iranian imports out of Iraq.

Whatever the case, while Iraq's current situation is not as dangerous as that seen in 2011-2014, opportunities to improve security are being missed. The Islamic State has been dispersed, but in some ways this makes the group even more difficult to deal with. The Iraqis are not yet ready to handle the next phase of the fight on their own because they lack the necessary counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities. As a result, the country now has two distinct threat levels—during daylight hours, the Islamic State is on the defensive, but at night the group has complete freedom of movement in key areas.

More broadly, the U.S.-Iraq relationship is out of sync and needs to be reassessed. Baghdad wants Washington to be flexible on issues such as confronting Shia militias, implementing sanctions against Iran, and choosing the next prime minister, while U.S. officials want to fix the country's problems more quickly after so many years of deep involvement there. For its part, Iran wants to keep Iraq weak and dependent. To curb Tehran's negative influence and help the Iraqi government become stronger and more transparent, Washington will need to be patient and work closely with officials in Baghdad. Similarly, U.S. sanctions on Iran should be tailored in ways that help Iraq. Washington should also provide more assistance on financial intelligence, anti-corruption efforts, training and protection programs for judges, as well as counterintelligence and counterterrorism support against the Islamic State.

This summary was prepared by JoAnn Estes.