

US-Iran Competition in Iraq

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On October 10, 2021, political control in Iraq passed to Muqtada al-Sadr. This represented a shift away from the Iranian-backed forces, but it does not embody the will of the Iraqi people. Sadr attained political control in Iraq when his bloc won the majority in parliament (formally known as the Council of Representatives of Iraq).¹ Given the context of Iraq's election and government-formation processes, this is not necessarily a victory for the people of the country. Government formation in Iraq is detached from the public will. Iraqis vote for candidates at the polls, but it is ultimately the majority bloc that makes decisions on selecting a cabinet.

Moreover, voter turnout in the October 2021 election was historically low at 43 percent.² Protests continued, and there were calls for election boycotts because Iraqis believed there would be no change to the corruption that has plagued their government.³ Aside from this, Iranian-backed groups suffered the most losses and even contested the legitimacy of the election.

The US military has encountered many challenges in that country over the last nineteen years. Since 2013, however, the United States has routinely faced overt pushback from Iranian-backed Shia militia groups who have extended their reach and tested both US military and coalition presence. In 2003, the United States eliminated Iran's greatest obstacle in Iraq when it toppled Saddam Hussein. Iran's influence has since gone unfettered in Iraq, often undermining the nascent democratic government with political interference and the use of militias escalating violence in Iraqi streets. Iran's actions persist in the background as the United States attempts to combat pro-Iranian insurgents and terrorist remnants of the Islamic State group. With Sadr's rise to political prominence, Iraq is facing an existential crisis. The US-Iran competition in Iraq affects not just the political and social stability of the country, but also the effectiveness of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Can Iraq be a trusted US partner in curbing Iran's influence?

Sadr has been notoriously unreliable, as he has often vacillated between positions that are politically expedient. In the 2005 Iraqi elections, for instance, Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia supported the United Iraqi Alliance to gain parliamentary seats in the new government.⁴ Political differences regarding troop withdrawals in 2007 led to Sadr's dramatic response to move to Qom, Iran. In 2010, while still in Iran, he threw his support behind Nouri al-Maliki, a notable pro-Iran Iraqi prime minister, but not without a cost to



Maliki. With the impending US troop withdrawal, a year later in 2011, Sadr moved back to Iraq and shifted his stance on the country that had harbored him for the last several years.

Since 2017, Sadr has been more public with his political motivations. He traveled to Saudi Arabia, the first time in eleven years, to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.⁵ Sadr has been trying to build bridges for Iraq with regional powers, but it is still difficult to trust his intentions, given his track record. In 2018, Sadr shored up an Iraqi nationalist identity following battlefield successes against the Islamic State group and developed political platforms aimed at fighting corruption and supporting a more representative government for all Iraqis.

Despite his anti-Iranian rhetoric, Sadr was pictured in Iran in September 2019 sitting between Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the late Quds Force Commander General Qassim Soleimani.⁶ Then, upon his electoral victory in October 2021, Sadr called for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to purge Iranian allegiances.⁷ This inconsistency presents a challenge for the United States in protecting its interests in Iraq. Sadr's unpredictability indicates that he could direct Iranian influence in a way that best suits his interests, which further complicates the US-Iran competition.

Is the United States Competing with Iran or Shia Militias?

In December 2021, the US military withdrew most of its troops from Iraq and officially transitioned from a combat mission to an "advise, assist, and enable" role.⁸ This left the rest of the 2,500 US troops in the country with a new support role on the ground, which includes supporting ISF operations against the Islamic State group with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and intelligence integration missions. Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi previously made clear his stance on the need for the US military to shrink its footprint in Iraq, but he has not proven to the Iraqi people that his government can secure its borders and promote stability. Ultimately, the Iraqi people, despite their feelings toward both the United States and Iran, prefer a US presence that comes with security assurances.

Moreover, the targeted killing of Soleimani on January 3, 2020, has made it difficult to charge Iran with formally guiding the militia groups' activities. Soleimani's sheer presence in Iraq as their leader served as a check on each group, regardless of individual management. His death left the groups in shambles, which was a net positive. But there were unintended consequences: a rising independence from Iranian control and competition between the different factions.⁹

Where does this leave the United States in terms of competing with Iran in Iraq? With the spread of militia groups and their disparate relationships, it is becoming clearer that perhaps the United States is facing more diverse sets of insurgents and terrorists rather

than a single state-sponsored actor. The PMF is an amalgam of Iranian-backed fighters, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, as well as Iraqi Sunnis with no fidelity to Iran.¹⁰ This collective is largely to blame for the government's dysfunction since it became institutionalized within the ISF. Institutionalization means that the PMF receives funding and resources from the government of Iraq as an extension of the ISF, while continuing to reap the benefits of Iranian sponsorship.¹¹ Indeed, many Shia militias who fall under the umbrella of the PMF are pro-Iran, but an equally large number are not. This is one of Kadhim's toughest challenges in trying to curb Iranian influence without losing confidence in the ISF to carry out its mission.

Policy Impact

Iraqi politicians and Iranian-backed groups have consistently demanded the departure of US forces from the country. Militia groups intermittently launch a barrage of rockets at the US Embassy in Baghdad to break Washington's center of gravity and force the United States to leave Iraq much like it did in Afghanistan.¹² Drone strikes threaten US personnel and other interests.¹³ But the United States is no longer executing a combat mission and is conducting few air strikes. Instead, the American military is supporting the remaining security structure because the ISF is still heavily reliant on coalition support, and the United States may be becoming a defender of Iraqi independence from Iran. The most significant challenge to US efforts toward this new "train and advise" mission is the increased corruption that is the result of the PMF's institutionalization. It becomes difficult for the remaining 2,500 US troops who serve in an advisory capacity to train and advise an Iraqi military with ambiguous loyalties. Given that the PMF has morally obstructed the principles of the ISF, the United States should consider if the divisions among rank and authority have sullied the ISF's willingness to fight insurgents and terrorists.

Without question, Iraq has become an even more challenging problem for the United States. The militia groups—Iranian-backed or otherwise—are products of the atmospherics in Iraq. What has unfolded since Soleimani's death are divided loyalties that are increasingly difficult to triage. While this is the backdrop to the security situation in Iraq, it is important to note that Kadhim still has no vision for Iraq, while for Sadr, both US troops and Iranian-backed groups must leave. But is he sincere, or is this just rhetoric?

Past experiences following Iraqi elections show that it takes months before a new government is fully formed, which is indicative of the divisiveness in the political arena. But divisiveness alone is not to blame; the government-formation process in Iraq is exceedingly complicated.¹⁴ While representation of Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds is important, Iranian influence and Sadr's sway certainly play a role in leadership dynamics.

Kadhim has proven himself susceptible to Iran's sway despite Washington's hope that he would take a firm posture against Tehran's influence to stabilize Iraq. He is trying to



balance all sides, but it weakens his credibility enough for someone like Sadr to become the kingmaker. With Sadr as the majority leader in parliament, his cabinet formation could help or hurt an Iraqi prime minister, depending on which side Sadr prefers to lean. A majority bloc in parliament can influence the country's policy making based on the cabinet. Sadr vowed to promptly push through a fully formed cabinet but already faced his first challenge on February 7, 2021, when he failed to reach a quorum. Iraqi lawmakers led a boycott in response to Sadr's nomination for the Iraqi president, who is traditionally a Kurd.¹⁵

The makeup of the Iraqi cabinet is yet to be seen, but what is certain is that the dysfunction that the militia groups now present could further undermine Iraqi sovereignty. Along the way, Iranians may find a way to cooperate with one side or the other to maintain a level of influence. After all, Iran has invested billions into this hybrid war in the name of securing a stake in Iraq.

Much like its strategy in Afghanistan, US strategy in Iraq is an uncomfortable conversation for policy makers. After nearly two decades in Iraq and multiple troop drawdowns, US interests remain the same: the desire for a free and stable sovereign state with economic security. The shadow state within the state created by Iran is the greatest barrier to that goal. Iraq needs to detach itself economically from Iran in order to curb Iran's political influence. Beyond this, militia groups continue to produce a volatile environment while the presence of US forces, even in an advisory capacity, contain them. The ISF should be a stronger partner with the United States to maintain the counterterrorism mission, but militia groups hinder those efforts as well. It remains to be seen how Iran will pursue its policy interests in Iraq, but it will be equally important which side Muqtada al-Sadr decides is more to his advantage.

Just as Sadr is deemed unpredictable by the United States, he is equally unpredictable to the Iranians. Indeed, the Iraqi people have lost their patience for the incessant Iranian influence that challenges Iraqi sovereignty. Small-scale protests by Iraqis over corruption and lack of economic opportunities continue, and the political scene is punctuated with violence, typically by Iranian-backed groups, which intensifies in an environment of lessened US-backed security. It would behoove the Iraqi government to maintain a relationship with US forces; otherwise, it can expect Iranian infiltration to deepen.

NOTES

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