

Iran's Declining Influence in Iraq

“Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies,” was the provocative title of a pamphlet published in 1940 by Saddam Hussein’s uncle, Khairallah Talfah.¹ Saddam himself incorporated such anti-Iranian sentiment into Ba’athist state ideology after his rise to power in 1979 and into the bloody 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war. Such hostility is still visible today under the Victory Arch, popularly known as the Crossed Swords, in central Baghdad where thousands of the helmets of Iranian soldiers are held in nets, with some half buried in the ground. Before 2003, every year Saddam and his soldiers would proudly march over the helmets, as the symbol of Iraq’s triumph over Persia.

Now, however, such historical enmity appears a distant past. With the 2003 collapse of the Ba’athist regime and the ascendancy of Iraq’s Shi’a majority in the country’s economic and political life, Iran and Iraq now seem at their most amicable since the 1955 Baghdad Pact when they signed treaties for greater cooperation and aligned against separatist movements as well as the Soviet threat. With the rapid expansion of economic ties and movement of goods, products, and people, relations between the two countries have improved considerably across the border where many bloody battles were fought in the 1980s. Iraqi politicians now regularly visit Tehran while Iranian officials, in turn, travel to Baghdad to meet their counterparts.

Along with enhanced elite relations, the growth of cultural and religious interaction also speaks of a revival of historical relations between the two countries that can trace close ties to the Safavid era, when Baghdad and southern Iraq were, periodically between 1508 and 1638, governed by Shi’a Iranian kings. The *atabat*, or the shrines of the holy figures of Shi’a Islam, were

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restored and the southern Iraqi shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf expanded under Safavid rule. Today, devout Iranian pilgrims continue to travel in the thousands to visit Shi'a Islam's holiest sites in southern Iraq. Meanwhile Iraqis, on their way to visit the shrine city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran, accordingly give homage to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, by visiting his shrine on the outskirts of Tehran. Beyond the legacy of the war period, a new era of Iran–Iraq relations has clearly begun.

But such close relations have equally aroused the suspicion of the United States, which has faced considerable difficulty in Iraq after the invasion, ensuing insurgency, and sectarian conflicts which pushed the country into civil war. Since 2005, numerous public reports about Tehran's support for Shi'a militia groups have solidified the impression that Iran's presence in Iraq continues to play a destabilizing role, especially in the way Tehran actively seeks influence over Iraq's Shi'a population and clandestinely supports militia operatives against U.S. forces. As such, Iran's Iraq policy is believed to be driven by sectarian politics with the objective of building a vast patronage system of clients and collaborators across Iraq. To Washington, Iran, together with its controversial nuclear program, now presents the most troubling security problem for Iraq after the departure of U.S. troops at the end of 2011.

To ascribe Iran's Iraq policy strictly to sectarianism, however, is to ignore the complexity of both Iranian and Iraqi politics. Contrary to this prevailing view in Washington, Iran's influence over Iraq has less to do with the formation of a Shi'a alliance and support for militia activities than with intricacies regarding the management of internal divisions, competitions, and factionalism within Iraq's Shi'a political parties and the country's multi-ethnic population. Iran has so far failed to orchestrate these intricacies in its favor.

An increasingly confident Iraq defies Iran's strategic objectives more frequently.

In this contentious socio-political field, the post-election periods in both Iran since 2009 and Iraq since 2010 have been pivotal phases in the two countries' changing regional policies, as the hard-liner government in Tehran experiences dramatic changes in its elite structure and simultaneously faces an increasingly confident Iraq that more frequently defies Iran's strategic objectives. Policy toward Syria most notably demonstrates this split and has further contributed to deep divisions between the

hardliner-dominated regime of Iran, which backs Damascus for its logistical support of Hezbollah and conflict with Israel, and the Shi'a-dominated government of Iraq, which does not back Bashar al-Assad's regime largely because of Syria's brutal handling of civil unrest. Baghdad's growing discontent

with Assad's crackdown on largely Sunni protestors lies in its fear of an escalation of sectarian violence that could spill over into Iraq and arouse the anger of Iraq's Sunni population. All in all, Syrian unrest is the destabilization of the sectarian landscape rather than the future security of Hezbollah.

Taking this into account, any assessment of Iran's influence in Iraq must, first and foremost, focus on Tehran's changing factional politics and their impact on Iran's regional policy. How have Iranian politics post-2009 contributed to the decline of Iran in Iraq? How much of this decline is tied to emerging Iraqi politics? And what comes next as U.S. troops leave Iraq and create a new security dilemma in the region?

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The Rise of Iran's Neocons

At the height of its power between 2005 and 2009, the Islamic Republic, confident and assertive after the collapse of the Ba'athist regime, saw the vacuum and chaos created in post-invasion Iraq as an opportunity to enhance its interests. Yet, especially in the wake of Iraq's sectarian conflict in 2006, Iran also understood that supporting a centralized state in Baghdad would prevent ethnic and sectarian conflict from spilling across Iraq's borders. This view originally manifested in 2005 following the first popular elections in Iraq, when Iran's Iraq policy apparently moved from a hard strategy of mainly clandestine military support of various Shi'a militias to a soft strategy of influence, largely aimed at exerting control over Iraq's economic and political life.

In the post-transitional period, after 2005, Tehran's primary objective was to promote democratic processes in Iraq, especially in electoral politics, and enhance ties with various political factions. Professor Kayhan Barzegar has called this an "alliance policy"—a way to deter U.S. threats by consolidating a wide sphere of influence in both the Kurdish-dominated northern regions, where Iran has also had historical influence, and the Shi'a-dominated southern regions of Iraq.² Meanwhile, at the behest of the first administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2009), the Islamic Republic engaged in an ambitious expansion of commercial connections, media, tourism, and cross-border migration, together with major investments in power plants, schools, hotels, and the reconstruction of southern Iraqi cities such as Basra, Karbala, and Najaf. Ahmadinejad's 2008 visit to Iraq, the first for an Iranian president since 1979, was marked by the announcement of a \$1 billion credit for Iranian exports to Iraq, used mostly for infrastructural developments, with a rise

in the total monetary figure of exports to \$8 billion in 2010.³ With this new economic relationship, the balance of commercial and technological interaction mostly favored Tehran. Iran now appeared to do what it was not able to do during the war—to implant itself across the Iraqi border, especially into the country's religious centers, though now through a vast economic and political infrastructure.

But in late 2008, the Iranian soft strategy slowly began to face difficulties, many of which stemmed from Iraqi fears of a looming domination by Tehran. In economics, for instance, Iran's periodic cut off of fuel and electoral supplies in Iraq's eastern provinces caused many Iraqis to react to Iran's economic activity with irritation.⁴ Iraqis also resented Iranian construction of dams which diverted the flow of water from the Karun and Sirwan rivers, originating in Iran, into the Basra region.⁵ The influx of cheap Iranian products into Iraq has subsequently declined gradually, hurting Iran's economic fortunes, as many Arab and Kurdish Iraqis enjoy higher quality products coming from Turkey.⁶ Even in tourism, Iranian pilgrims are suspiciously viewed by many Shi'a Iraqis as either possible intelligence agents or economic opportunists who seek to purchase cheap land and colonize their homeland, as many Iranians did in the 19th century in cities such as Karbala.

Religiously, the rift between the quietist Shi'a tradition in Iraq and Khomeinism based in Iran has widened under the leadership of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and other leading ayatollahs based in Iraq. Najaf, increasingly confident and prosperous with the support of Shi'a across the world, especially wealthy merchants in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, is successfully competing with Iran's Qum as the global center of Shi'a learning. Despite Iranian attempts to buy property and open up cultural and religious centers in Iraq's shrine cities, Sistani's popularity has brought a large influx of young seminarians from Africa, the Levant, and the Indian subcontinent, expanding his sphere of influence in southern Iraq and beyond. Sistani has also been careful in accepting Iranian students to be enrolled in the *hawzah* (seminaries) in Najaf for fear of infiltration of intelligence agents from Iran. Much to the dismay of Tehran, Najaf now has wider global reach than Qum.

Militarily, Iran's security strategy has continued to focus on signing military cooperation agreements with Iraq, gathering intelligence, and forming closer ties with various militias than on transporting weapons across the border, as that is viewed by most Iranians as destabilizing and a potential risk for Iranian security. This is not to say that there have not been rogue units within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or non-state actors which have supplied arms and training to some Shi'a factions. But the Iranian paramilitary force has been fully aware that Shi'a Iraqis are not the same as Shi'a Lebanese of the 1980s, and that military operations in Iraq entail unforeseen risks with unintended consequences, some of which may not be in Iran's favor.

And yet, Iran's security strategy has faced major setbacks with the declining popularity of Shi'a militias among the Shi'a population during the sectarian conflict and uprisings by the militia of Muqtada Sadr between 2004 and 2008. Also, the abrupt Iranian attacks on the Fakka oil field in the Maysan province and Iran's border incursion against Kurdish-Iranian Free Life Party (PJAK) rebels based in northern Iraq have angered not only Arabs but Kurds as well. All in all, the persisting border disputes are a consistent source of tension for both countries.

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Politically, Iran has faced considerable problems too. Since 2003, Tehran's determination to eclipse U.S. power in the region has largely involved a two-track policy that, while advocating national unity and democracy for its neighbor, has involved limited support for militia and sectarian politics in Iraq. This ambiguous position has been part and parcel of a strategy to facilitate the growth of Iran's sphere of influence in Iraq through various channels. The main strategic objectives have been, first, to help the formation of an Iranian-friendly government in Baghdad, and second, to prevent the country from regaining the military clout of the Ba'athist era or serving as a launching pad for possible U.S. or Israeli military strikes.

With the election of Ahmadinejad and the rise of the neoconservative faction as well as their populist and ideological agenda in the 2005 presidential elections, Tehran stepped up its Iraq's strategy to seek the support of Kurdish, Sunni, and various Shi'a factions to solidify its interests across Iraq's ethnic and sectarian landscape.⁷ By 2008, the empowered neoconservative faction in Tehran was managing its newfound political and military clout with enough confidence to focus on soft measures to exert its influence over Baghdad, while the U.S. troop surge had considerably reduced violence in Iraq.

Circumstances of historic significance, however, have changed the direction of neoconservative Iranian strategy toward Iraq. The 2009 presidential elections, along with the Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2010, have forced Tehran to focus on internal security and hence lose focus of its regional ambitions and influence over its neighbor. The 2009 decline of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a political faction that has been critically viewed for its connections with Tehran, underscored the weakening Iranian grip on Iraqi politics. Likewise, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's and Sadr's public confrontations with the Iranian regime all suggest that Iran will face increasingly belligerent nationalistic politics in Iraq, with a number of former Shi'a and Kurdish allies resisting its

influence over a range of issues, even while they maintain some diplomatic relations with Tehran for their own local interests.

Fractured Tehran

The unrests that rocked the streets of Tehran and other major Iranian cities after the 2009 Iranian presidential election results, perceived by many to be rigged, have drastically changed the internal balance of the Iranian regime and its reach for regional influence. The mass protests which evolved into a social movement, known as the Green Movement, demonstrated that street politics could undermine state legitimacy, especially as the state engaged in repressive measures seen by many, including some Shi'a clerics, as unjust and un-Islamic. Anti-government activities which followed the elections also visibly revealed fierce political competition, even within authoritarian state apparatuses, changing the distribution of power and elite cohesion. In a significant way, the failure of the elections, an institutional mechanism to help manage factional politics and cement elite cohesion, ultimately led to political fissures and gave rise to a new kind of conservative politics that has changed the Islamic Republic in its theocratic form.

One of the more immediate consequences of Ahmadinejad's second presidential term was that Iran's right-wing power bloc fragmented. The first signs of internal divisions began to surface days after the elections when Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei requested that the president fire Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, a family member and a close ally of the president, from the post of vice president. Ahmadinejad's response was to move Mashaei from the vice presidency to be his chief of staff, a belligerent act overtly challenging the authority of the Supreme Leader, a major taboo within the conservative camp. By keeping Mashaei, mostly despised by the conservatives for some of his ideological stances, such as his glorification of pre-Islamic Iranian history and liberal views on culture, the newly re-elected president sent a clear signal to other conservatives that he alone controlled who should or should not remain in his administration.

Later in August 2009, Hossein Saffar Harandi, the minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance and a Khamenei loyalist, was dismissed from his post for objecting to the president's support of Mashaei. The president also fired Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, the Minister of Intelligence and a key Khamenei loyalist, for directly reporting to the Supreme Leader about the post-election unrest. In December 2010, Manouchehr Mottaki, the foreign minister and a trusted ally of Khamenei, was also dismissed from his post while on a diplomatic mission. An intra-conservative conflict was underway, now largely manifested between the office of the presidency and the Supreme Leader.

By April 2011, the Ahmadinejad–Khamenei rift had evolved into a full-blown crisis. When Ahmadinejad fired another Khamenei loyalist, Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi, the Supreme Leader furiously intervened, vetoing the decision based on an authoritarian concept of *hokm-i hokomati*, or an extra-legal authority of the *faqih*, the religious jurist, which was first applied during the reformist era of President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) as a way to curtail the authority of the Majlis (the Iranian parliament) over press reforms. Ahmadinejad's immediate reaction surprised many observers. He abruptly stopped appearing in official meetings for 11 days, protesting the decision. The president's move crossed a major red line, especially when he set conditions for his return to office with demands such as reinstalling Mashaei to the vice presidency and appointing himself as the intelligence minister. Khamenei rejected his requests, though apparently he negotiated some kind of deal with Ahmadinejad, who eventually returned to his post. While it is unclear what agreements were made between the two, it is evident that Khamenei both continues to see Ahmadinejad as a liability and views the Majlis' attempts to impeach the president as a danger to the regime and his authority, since he publicly supported Ahmadinejad after the disputed elections in 2009.

In the summer of 2011, an apparent reconciliation between the president and the Supreme Leader brought a possible end to the internal conflict within the conservative camp. Ahmadinejad's nomination in July of Rostam Ghasemi, a high-ranking commander of the IRGC, to head the influential Ministry of Oil, and his eventual approval by the Majlis, highlighted the president's attempt to alleviate friction with the Supreme Leader, who continues to have the full backing of the IRGC.

Yet, tensions within the conservative camp did not end. Khamenei's October 2011 proposal to eliminate the office of the presidency underscored the deep rift that remains within Iranian elite circles. The proposal's purpose was, in the short term, to limit the electoral ambitions of Ahmadinejad, who is still popular in mostly rural segments of Iran, and also to ensure that the Supreme Leader had control in the future over elected institutions. As the anti-Ahmadinejad conservative camp prepares for the upcoming 2012 parliamentary elections, and more importantly the 2013 presidential elections, tensions may grow in light of Khamenei's intentions to eliminate the presidency, especially since Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president and an old guard rival of the Supreme Leader, has criticized the proposal as contrary to the democratic principles of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. Here, the struggles will revolve around competing definitions of the Islamic Republic and the limits of popular sovereignty under authoritarian strictures.

While factional discord and disagreements over key policies of the state have been persistent since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the

unprecedented upsurge of splinter groups within the conservative camp, including within the IRGC, in the run-up to the elections has brought the Islamic Republic to a new historical crossroads. The contending ideologies and interests within state institutions and competing elite networks have set the stage for new developments in policymaking and, ultimately, new patterns in state-building. Two points here are crucial.

First, the unfolding infighting within the conservatives will shape which conservative faction will set and reassess policies on Iraq. The most important organization is the committee for regional affairs in the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Primarily in charge of designing defense and national security policies, the SNSC is constitutionally under the turf of the president, but the framework of general policies is determined by the Supreme Leader. If the Ahmadinejad–Khamenei rift has reached this important government body, then it is highly likely that there is competition over who should formulate Iran’s Iraq policy. Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, a special unit of the IRGC that reports directly to Khamenei, is a key figure in the committee

Iran’s Iraq policy has likely been in disarray given fierce factional politics in Tehran since 2009.

for regional affairs of the SNSC; he also reportedly supported Mir-Hossein Mousavi in the 2009 presidential election.⁸ It remains unclear if Suleimani has reformist tendencies and what implications his ostensibly anti-Ahmadinejad position would have on Iran’s Iraq policy. It is also unclear if other members of the committee have been affected by the intra-conservative rivalry, and more importantly, if Ahmadinejad, famous for reshuffling ministers, has made

changes to the advisory board of the Iraq desk. Either way, it is highly likely that Iran’s Iraq policy has been in disarray given the fierce factional politics in Tehran.

The second and more important issue is the transformation of the Islamic Republic into what Farideh Farhi has called a “securitization” state.⁹ According to Farhi, since the 2009 elections, the Iranian state has been elevated into a more security-conscious system of governance with the aim of establishing a sophisticated network of surveillance and intelligence-gathering in order to stifle internal dissent. However, contrary to Farhi’s claim, securitization should be viewed as part and parcel of a new kind of militarization dynamic within the Islamic Republic and not distinct from it. At the heart of this complex state transformation are both the increasing encroachment of the IRGC into Iran’s political sphere and its creative adoption of diverse “soft” mechanisms, especially in information and communication, to tackle both internal and

external threats including Syria and Iraq.¹⁰ Unlike, however, in what Eliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez have described as the formation of a “Praetorian” state (a military-led political system), securitization, at least in Iran, is primarily about the consolidation of clergy–military monopoly of power in the systemic prioritizing of technical security considerations in the management and performance of politics.¹¹ In terms of elite–institutional realignment, it is not that the IRGC is simply gaining power over the civilian order, but that there is a growing cross-fertilization of an organizational network, familial ties, and information–security ties between the clergy and the paramilitary forces which is shaping a very unique elite guardian class with claims on state power.¹²

A significant operational dimension of Iranian securitization is the military’s focus on the domestic dynamics of dissent, turning state security activities inward against frustrated citizens who may engage in social protests in response to increasing economic and political pressures. This inward focus of state power precisely explains why Iraq saw a sharp decline in the number of Iranian intelligence operatives in its territories following the Iranian 2009 elections.¹³ Suleimani, the Quds Force commander, is increasingly focused on intelligence activities inside Iranian borders, one example being the implementation of a tough surveillance policy over the travel of Iraq–Iran dual citizens, who are now viewed as possible U.S. operatives working clandestinely in Iran.¹⁴

However, the latest Iranian intelligence activities have not been entirely limited to within the country’s borders, nor have they been immune from Iran’s domestic politics. The case of the plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States may in fact highlight the growing effect of conservative factionalism on the IRGC and its foreign intelligence units, as Mehdi Khalaji has argued.¹⁵ There is the possibility of the anti-Ahmadinejad faction using the military–intelligence forces to gain influence against the president and his supporters, who have recently shown subtle signs of rapprochement with the United States. In fact, this latest terror plot is remarkably reminiscent of the 1991 gruesome assassination of Shahpur Bakhtiar, a dissident politician based in a Parisian suburb, just before a scheduled state visit by President Rafsanjani to France as a way to undermine his pragmatic foreign policy. What the plot against the Saudi ambassador ultimately reveals is the instability of Iran’s faction-ridden politics, the perhaps deliberate disruption in channels-of-command communication, and growing fractures within political groups vying for power in light of Ahmadinejad’s 2013 departure from the presidency.

Though it is unclear to what extent the Quds Force and other pro-Iranian groups are active in Iraq, it is highly likely that their operations have considerably declined since 2009, though some support appears to still be offered to Shi’a militias such as Kata’ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and

the Promised Day Brigades. The reduction of operational intelligence activities also explains why Iranians were so ill-prepared to deal with the 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections and the loss of their key ally, the ISCI, in those elections. What surprised Tehran the most was how drastically Iraq had changed since the 2005 elections, leaving it unsure exactly what new strategy to adopt in order to deal with the rise of post-sectarian politics in Iraq.

Post-Sectarian Baghdad

In 2005, much to their dismay, U.S. officials were surprised to learn that Suleimani, without their knowledge or approval, had entered the Green Zone and met with Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. What the Americans also did not know was that Suleimani, the most powerful Iranian figure in Iraq, had met with Jaafari to inform him how displeased he was with Jaafari's ineffective leadership and failure to secure the country as it headed toward a bloody outbreak of civil war. The 2006 departure of Jaafari and the nomination of Maliki met with Iranian approval, though with considerable reluctance due to tensions over ideological differences, as the new prime minister was known for his Iraqi nationalism and disdain for Iran. During his exile years prior to 2003, Maliki, unlike other members of his Islamic Dawa Party, choose to mostly stay in Syria, rather than Iran, and saw Khomeini's theocracy as an Iranian invention. Nevertheless, a close relationship between Maliki and Tehran developed from 2006–2008, with periodic episodes of friction over a range of issues.

The mutual enmity for the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO), an Iranian opposition group that sided with Saddam during the Iran–Iraq War, and its eviction from Iraq served as a common cause for the two governments to come together. But Maliki's nationalism and his attempts to shape a non-sectarian politics met with Tehran's opposition, as Iranian interest mostly required preserving a strong Shi'a alliance against a possible Sunni revival. There were also disagreements over the U.S.–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which Maliki viewed as a way to ensure Iraq's security against insurgency and sectarian conflict, but Tehran saw as an opportunity for a possible U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. What eventually brought them close together was the security risk of Sadr's Mahdi Army and the threat it posed to Basra and other southern provinces.

In March 2008, Maliki's Operation Knight Assault, designed to drive out the Mahdi Army militias from southern Iraq, was supported by Tehran, which feared destabilization from intra-Shi'a conflict near the Iranian border. Sadr's subsequent self-exile to Qum to become an ayatollah was partly an Iranian move, but it also involved Sistani and Maliki, who hoped to push the Sadrist away from the Iraqi political scene. By late 2009, with Sadr gone and the Mahdi

Army dismantled, Maliki had reinvented himself as a strong man with new national security credentials.

With a decline in sectarian conflict and with Iran's internal problems, a new political landscape began to emerge in Iraq. Although sectarianism continues to play a role in elections, in reality the makeup of the political factions and emerging splinter groups from the newly formed umbrella parties, such as the National Iraqi Alliance (NIA), largely favored party-oriented politics revolving around political personalities, and at times local interests, rather than identity politics. This was mostly evident in Maliki's State of Law Coalition (SLC), established prior to the 2009 provincial elections, and the Iraqi National Movement (INM) led by former prime minister Ayad Allawi. Both of these parties presented themselves as trans-sectarian as well as nationalist and sought to win over constituencies across ethnic and sectarian lines. Put together, they won most of the votes in the 2010 elections.

Three key issues characterized the 2010 Iraqi elections. First was the institutionalization of the open list system that enabled voters to pick individuals. Iran opposed the measure since it saw it as undermining a united Shi'a alliance, which played out in the case of ISCI's significant loss. Sistani, however, favored the new electoral system as he feared that sectarian politics, with the backing of Iran and Saudi Arabia, could take Iraq back to civil conflict.

The second important feature of the elections was the fragmentation of Shi'a Iraqi politics. Ironically, Iran played a key role in fracturing the Shi'a. It is now common knowledge that Tehran was behind the coalition-building between SLC, ISCI, Sadrists, and other Shi'a factions in forming a new government. But the more Iran pushed these factions to unite against Allawi's INM, seen as a U.S. stooge, the more the coalition's sense of solidarity eroded due to internal rivalries concerning resources, leadership, and control of key government ministries.

The Sadrists provide another example of the intra-Shi'a rivalry and the growing sense of defiance against Iran. While the 2008 military operations against the Mahdi Army made the Sadrists seem irrelevant to Iraqi politics, Sadr's 2010 electoral victory, which won his followers 40 seats in the 325-seat parliament, enabled him to play a key role in forming the new government and allocating some key ministries. But the empowerment of Sadrists has also brought new tension with the SLC and Maliki, who favored an extension of the U.S. troop presence in Iraq, which Sadr has fiercely opposed as part of his anti-occupation politics. The withdrawal of U.S. troops by the end of 2011, due to Baghdad's unwillingness to grant legal immunity to those troops, underscores

Iraqi politics now revolve around personalities or local interests, not identity.

the growing influence of Sadrists. To make things worse, Sadr has even challenged Tehran, his country host in Qum, for not handing over Abu Deraa, famously known as the “Shi’a Zarqawi,” a former Mahdi Army commander with a record of sectarian violence. With this move, Sadr’s aim is to prove to Sunnis and Shi’a secularists that he is keen to reform his political movement and have his sectarian record expunged.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that the third and most significant contribution of the 2010 elections in weakening Iranian influence over Iraq’s politics lies in a renewed sense of Iraqi nationalism. This critical new development has, much to the dismay of Iran, further enhanced Shi’a fragmentation and relatively empowered political parties with nationalistic rather than sectarian agendas.

It is in this new highly-contested political landscape that an emboldened Maliki has emerged to challenge Iranian pressure on Baghdad to support Damascus. Though at first the Iraqi prime minister apparently followed Iran’s policy toward Syria, he later turned against Damascus for its repressive treatment of its citizens and called for meaningful reforms in the neighboring country. What Maliki took notice of was, of course, the sea of historic change that has swept the Middle East, and that by standing near Iran, Iraq could miss out on a major historical opportunity to lead the Arab world toward a new democratic era. For the most part, Maliki has viewed Assad’s crackdown on largely Sunni protestors against Iraqi national interests, since the escalation of violence could spill over and stir sectarian tensions within Iraq. Meanwhile, contrary to U.S. media coverage, Maliki’s most recent move to abstain from the Arab League vote to suspend Syria’s membership is not due to Iranian pressures to protect Assad’s regime, but fears over destabilization of its neighboring country which could impact Iraq’s fragile security situation, especially after the departure of U.S. troops.

For Tehran, Iraq’s internal politics and regional policy have proven to be a headache, as it can no longer exercise the same power over Iraq’s once fragile political system as it did in 2006. As policy toward Syria shows, the political upheavals across North Africa and the Middle East have shaken up the region, diminishing Iran’s prestige among Arabs, many of whom—including Shi’a Iraqis—see Iran’s meddling in the region as hegemonic and counter to their national interests.

A New Region

If emerging political orders are best expressed in symbols, the following account bespeaks of a new era of doing politics in Iraq. In 2007, in the earlier period of rule under Iranian influence, Maliki ordered the infamous Victory Arch to be demolished. In light of protests by some Iraqis and the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, the demolition activities were temporarily stopped. Just three

years later, while running for reelection in 2010, Maliki reversed his approach and approved new measures to restore the monument.¹⁶ “We are civilised people and this monument is part of the memories of this country,” explained Ali Mousawi, a spokesman for Maliki.¹⁷ This statement highlights a bold attempt to bolster post-Ba’athist Iraqi nationalism and signals a renewed sense of autonomy in keeping alive the memory of the war years. Such symbolic politics of commemoration undermine the assumption that Iran has emerged from the aftermath of the Ba’athist regime with considerable power in Iraq. Though no longer enemies, Iraq and Iran will certainly remain fierce competitors for years to come.

For the most part, Iran will surely continue to assert influence in Iraq, despite growing limitations over its actual reach of power. The most intriguing aspect of the Islamic Republic’s regional policy is that it can be highly creative and shrewdly respond to a changing geopolitical environment. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq affected in a significant way the strategic alignment and military involvement of the Islamic Republic in the region, and opened a new horizon of strategic options for Iran should its relations with the United States deteriorate due to its development of nuclear technology. For an Iranian government determined to deter another U.S. military intervention, building new alliances with state (e.g., Syria) and sub-state (e.g., Hezbollah) actors demonstrated the Islamic Republic’s propensity to seek regional cooperation and expand a patronage network that would enhance its interests against potential threats.

In 2005, the ascendancy of the neoconservatives in Iran and the empowerment of Shi’a parties in Iraq initially reinforced the viability of a common sectarian front against possible foreign intervention. However, the popular revolts that began with the Green Movement in 2009 and Arab uprisings in 2011 have opened a new kind of politics with an impetus for more accountable governance, underlying the urgency for states, including Iran, to focus inward and redesign regional policies according to their changing domestic politics. The 2010 elections in Iraq represent the type of emerging competitive polity that many Arabs and Iranians demand from their governments. And yet, the experience of the Iranian Green Movement has served as a reminder to many pro-democracy Arab movements of the limits of street protests and the challenges ahead for democratization, as the Syrian opposition painfully realized after the spring of 2011.

What lies ahead for Iraq? And how will Iran’s Iraq policy be shaped according to its shifting factional politics? The Status of Forces Agreement will officially expire on December 31, 2011, and with it Iraq will enter a new historical phase

The 2009 Green Movement and 2011 Arab uprisings have opened a new kind of regional politics.

without a (large) U.S. military presence on its soil. Iraqi nationalism will likely facilitate more centralized government, as security forces seek to replace the U.S. troop presence against possible Iranian or Saudi Arabian influences. Meanwhile, Iraq's neighbors will continue to jockey to gain a foothold in Iraq.

Whichever conservative faction wins the 2012 Iranian parliamentary or 2013 presidential elections, Iran will not shy away from asserting its influence and will most likely continue to implement its soft power strategy across Iraq. Given Tehran's interest in the stability of Iraq and weariness of unprecedented waves of dissent across the region, Iran's Iraq policy will mostly be driven by cautious calculations and pragmatism. However, if perceptions of impending U.S. or Israeli attacks gain hold, Iran could resort to hard tactics, especially in the form of asymmetrical operations, to thwart possible threats across its border with Iraq and other areas such as the Persian Gulf. In the context of strained relations between Tehran and Washington, Iran will most likely use Iraq to overcome the growing regime of sanctions, probably with an increase in oil smuggling across the Kurdish–Iranian or southern Iran–Iraq borders. Much of these clandestine economic activities could destabilize Iraq's economy and promote corrupt local

Anti-Americanism in Iraq will be rivaled by Iraqi hostility toward Iran.

governance through the formation of sub-networks of smugglers and middlemen across the Iran–Iraq border.

Yet, such threats will be matched by the ascension of a stronger Iraq, a country with a better sense of its national identity and democratic practice. In post-occupation Iraq and in the wake of the Arab uprisings, the threat to U.S. interests by changing Shi'a politics in Iraq will not emanate from Iran's influence, but rather from somewhat

unpredictable shifting elite alignments influenced by the popular uprisings across the region. Likewise, with the electoral consolidation of populist movements like the Sadrists, Washington should expect a rise in the prominence of anti-American politics in the new emerging Arab political order, including in Iraq. But such anti-Americanism will be rivaled by hostility to Iran, which is seen by Arabs—including many Shi'a Iraqis—as a regional hegemonic force.

Notes

1. See Con Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), p. 19.
2. Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (January 2010): p. 173, http://www.twq.com/10january/docs/10jan_Barzegar.pdf.

3. Aseel Kami, "Iran Exports to Iraq to Pass \$8bn in 2010: Official," *Reuters*, April 25, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/04/25/us-iraq-iran-trade-interview-idUSTR E63O11U20100425>.
4. Michael Knights, "Iran's Influence in Iraq: Game, Set but not Match to Tehran," *The Guardian*, October 17, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/17/iran-influence-iraq-tehran>.
5. Yoel Guzansky, "'Made in Iran': The Iranian Involvement in Iraq," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 4 (January 2011): p. 93, <http://www.inss.org.il/upload/%28FILE%291295871240.pdf>.
6. "Decrease of Iranian supplies to Iraqi Kurdistan," BBC Persia, October 1, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/10/111001_l78_ir_krg_trade.shtml.
7. See Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
8. Christopher Dickey, "The Sandman Cometh: Tehran's master of clandestine operations, Qassem Suleimani, could hold the key to Iraq's future—if he were not so busy back in Iran," *Newsweek*, March 3, 2010, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/03/03/the-sandman-cometh.html>.
9. See Farideh Farhi, "Electoral Miscalculations in Iran," Woodrow Wilson International Center—Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series, Spring 2010, pp. 14–17, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Iranian%20Elections.pdf>.
10. For a study of the Islamic Republic and "soft war," see Nima Adelkhah, "Iran Integrates the Concept of the 'Soft War' Into its Strategic Planning," *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 23, June 12, 2010, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36482&cHash=a7a18f117e.
11. Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez, "The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2011): pp. 45–59, http://www.twq.com/11winter/docs/11winter_Hen-Tov_Gonzalez.pdf.
12. The militarization of the clerical establishment and the clericalism of the military may be traced back to 1980s when low-ranking Khomeinist clerics began to actively participate in the war against Iraq and, in turn, Guard forces would closely interact with clerics and seminary centers in Mashahd and Qum. In the war period, Ali Khamenei, the future Supreme Leader, exemplified the type of military cleric who would appear in the front lines and closely collaborate over war efforts with the Guards. In the post-war period, clerics like Hassan Taeb, the former head of the Basij and the current head of the intelligence bureau of the IRGC, would represent emerging paramilitary figures with clerical credentials who would actively participate in the expansion of the Revolutionary Guard in the political sphere. Since the end of the reformist period, and especially since the 2009 elections, the cross-fertilization of clerical and military spheres has mainly revolved around the practices of developing various types of security-minded strategies, including information gathering and surveillance tactics with the aim to bolster the military-theocratic rule.
13. Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Rebirth of a Nation: Something that looks an awful lot like democracy is beginning to take hold in Iraq. It may not be 'mission accomplished'—but it's a start," *Newsweek*, February 25, 2010, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/02/25/rebirth-of-a-nation.html>.
14. This is based on the accounts of a number of Iraq–Iran dual citizens gathered through fieldwork. These people have witnessed a spike in surveillance and security checks since summer 2011 while crossing the border and travelling through Iran.

15. Mehdi Khalaji, "The Domestic Logic of Iran's Foreign Plots," Project Syndicate, November 1, 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/khalaji8/English>.
16. Steven Lee Myers, "Iraq Restores Monument Symbolizing Hussein Era," *New York Times*, February 5, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06iraq.html>.
17. Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, "Iraq Repairs Saddam's Triumphal Sword Arch," *The Independent*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-repairs-saddams-triumphal-sword-arch-2206361.html>.