

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Iran in Iraq

DECEMBER 2017 KENNETH M. POLLACK

Since the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq in 2011, Iran has become the most influential foreign power in Iraq. This is not accidental.

Iraq is not just another Middle Eastern country to Iran. It is a critical neighbor. The two states share a border over 1,400 kilometers long. Their two societies are deeply intertwined. Their annual trade exceeds \$12 billion, and Iran sends nearly 15 percent of its non-oil exports to Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The Shia clerical establishment, the *Hawza*, of Najaf is the most important in the world, including to many of Iran's 90 percent Shia Muslims. Millions of Iranians travel to the Iraqi holy cities of Karbala and Najaf for religious pilgrimages each year.<sup>2</sup> For eight years during the 1980s, the two countries fought the longest conventional war of the twentieth century, with 400-500,000 killed on both sides.<sup>3</sup>

For all of these reasons, the stability, security, and geopolitical alignment of Iraq is of enormous concern to Tehran. These factors render Iraq a priority for Iran's foreign policy and a source of its greatest concern. In this way, Iraq should be understood as a vulnerability and fear of the Iranian leadership. These same ties, however, provide Iran with significant advantages to wield influence in Iraq, especially the broken Iraq that has been clawing toward a new political equilibrium since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. In that way, Iraq has also been an opportunity for Iran to expand its sway into the Arab world.

The extent of the ties between Iran and Iraq also means that the ways in which Iran can—and must—try to use its influence in Iraq are staggeringly complex. Moreover, they are largely exercised covertly. Iran prefers to operate in secret, where its powers are magnified, and the ability of any other party to counter them are diminished. As a result, what we know about Iranian activities in Iraq may represent only a fraction of its actual exertions. US intelligence services and those of our allies have certainly caught the Iranians plying their craft in Iraq from time to time. But too often, we can only rely on the word of Iraqis, who often believe



**Pushback: Exposing and Countering Iran** is a project of the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative. This series of reports examines the drivers, prospects, and constraints underpinning Iran's efforts to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking. Drawing on new digital forensic evidence and expert analysis, this effort offers strategic and policy recommendations to address the growing challenge Iran poses to stability in the Middle East.

- 1 Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iran Looks to Iraq and Even Syria for Trade," *Financial Times*, June 28, 2016; "Minister: Iran-Iraq trade to reach \$20bn," Islamic Republic of Iran News Agency, May 13, 2013, available at [http://www.irna.ir/en/News/2695296/Economic/Minister\\_\\_Iran-Iraq\\_trade\\_to\\_reach\\_\\$20bn](http://www.irna.ir/en/News/2695296/Economic/Minister__Iran-Iraq_trade_to_reach_$20bn), accessed on August 1, 2017.
- 2 "Iraq's Karbala Registers Record Number of Pilgrims," AFP, December 12, 2014.
- 3 For the latest scholarly work on deaths during the Iran-Iraq War, see Charles Kurzman, "Death Tolls of the Iran-Iraq War," October 31, 2013, available at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/death-tolls-of-the-iran-iraq-war/>.

things for which there is no proof, and frequently have reasons to magnify or diminish, fabricate or dismiss, Iran's role in their own behavior. As always, influence is a will o' the wisp. Often invoked, frequently seen, but never really captured.

Consequently, Americans need to recognize that the information that we have about Iranian influence in Iraq is incomplete at best. Moreover, this ignorance is magnified by the opacity of the Iranian decision-making process, which further limits our ability to understand Tehran's motives, plans, and policies.<sup>4</sup> It makes fully comprehending Iranian influence in Iraq harder still.

Yet, the ubiquity of Iraqi claims to Iranian influence is, in some ways, its own confirmation. Influence is what people believe it to be. If an Iraqi acts a certain way because he or she believes that Iran wants him or her to do so, that is Iranian influence, whether Iran has acted or not, and whether Iran wants that Iraqi to take the action or not. If Iraqis believe Iran to be a powerful actor in their internal affairs, and they take far-reaching actions in response to that belief, then Iran *is just that influential*.

### Iranian Goals in Iraq

The historical evidence indicates that Iran's aims in Iraq are best understood as a hierarchy of goals. That is because, like all states, Iran measures what it wants to see happen in Iraq against the costs and probabilities of achieving various objectives, and shifts among those objectives based on the extent to which it is willing to pay to try to achieve any desired goal. Just because Iraq is important to Iran does not mean that it is all-important to Iran. And just because Iran can manipulate the various ties between Iran and Iraq to its advantage, it does not mean that Iran can do whatever it wants—or can do anything without incurring costs. Especially in the post-2003 era, Iran's approach to Iraq has changed dramatically over time as its sense of threat and opportunity has waxed and waned, and as its willingness to invest time, energy, money, manpower, and other resources into Iraq to try to secure its goals has fluctuated.

Some of Iran's most basic aims are clear. Iran wants an Iraq that is not threatening to it, and preferably one that is friendly to it. Tehran unquestionably seeks an Iraq that is not dominated by other foreign interests, especially by foreign powers that Iran sees as threatening: its self-defined arch-nemesis, the United States; regional rivals like Saudi Arabia; or anti-Shia terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Moreover, Iran would generally like to see Iraq remain unified, if only because secession would create a dangerous precedent for some of its own unhappy ethno-sectarian groups. Indeed, Iran took a leading role in punishing the Kurds in Iraq for their September 2017 referendum on independence in large part to discourage similar sentiments among their own Kurdish populace.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it is equally important to understand that even these minimal Iranian goals can intersect in unexpected ways when Iran considers desirable end-states for Iraq. In many cases, attributes that Iran might see as positive in one light, can become negative in other circumstances. For instance, in many cases, Iran would probably prefer a weak Iraq. That would certainly be true if the Iraqi regime were hostile to Iran. But many Iranians might be glad to have a strong Iraq if it were also heavily dependent on Iran, and therefore could be expected to use that strength on Iran's behalf like Hezbollah in Lebanon. Likewise, Iran has shown a preference for stability in Iraq because instability has the potential to spread to Iran through all of the channels that link their societies. However, Iran might prefer an unstable Iraq to a strong, stable, and hostile Iraq. Likewise, Iran unquestionably seeks an Iran that is free of other foreign influences—especially those it sees as antagonistic—but at various times it has been willing to tolerate such foreign influence either when it believed it would pay too high a price and run too high a risk to try to remove it (as in 2003–2005) or when it believed that a foreign presence was beneficial to keep Iraq unified and strong enough to resist takeover by an even more dangerous threat. Thus, Iran has tolerated a US presence since 2014, because it prefers that to the alternative of ISIS control (in part or whole).

4 On Iranian decision-making, see Suzanne Maloney, *Iran's Political Economy Since the Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kenneth M. Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, The Bomb, and American Strategy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), esp. 4-18; Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

5 Michael Georgy and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iranian commander issued stark warning to Iraqi Kurds over Kirkuk," Reuters, October 20, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kirkuk-fall/iranian-commander-issued-stark-warning-to-iraqi-kurds-over-kirkuk-idUSKBN1CP2CW>.



Forces from the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) militias liberate Fallujah from ISIS rule. Some elements of the PMU form the backbone of Iran's influence in Iraq. *Photo credit: Tasnim News Agency/Wikimedia.*

All of these contradictory impulses create a wide range of possible Iranian goals for Iraq, from the most desirable to what Tehran probably regards as the minimum acceptable. At the aspirational end of the spectrum, it is likely that many Iranian policy makers would love to see Iraq reduced to an Iranian vassal—a satrapy either formally owned by Iran or diminished to a dependent satellite ready to do whatever the Islamic Republic desires. Yet few, if any, Iranian leaders seem to see that as a likely scenario, one that they could achieve at an acceptable cost and risk. The next step down for most in Tehran seems to be a strong, unified Iraq that is a staunch ally of—and somewhat dependent on—Iran. Lebanon since 2005 furnishes a model of how such an Iraqi-Iranian relationship might work in practice.

Different Iranian leaders probably have varying gradations of lesser goals in Iraq, all the way down to what they probably consider the minimum acceptable. That appears to be an Iraq that is simply not a threat to Iran.

Even at this end of Iran's threat-aspiration spectrum, however, it is critical to understand that the Iranian leadership appears to have a fairly diverse and sophisticated sense of the threats Iran faces from Iraq. Their thinking is neither as simplistic nor myopic as many Americans would posit. That is why, since 2014, Iran has prioritized eliminating the threats from ISIS and from Iraqi instability more generally over the threat from a renewed US military presence. For this reason, Tehran made no effort to prevent the United States from re-intervening in Iraq or to have its Iraqi allies harass US forces after they returned. In a similar vein, it was the Iranians who tried hardest to rein in the anti-Sunni activities of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in 2012-2013. They feared that Maliki would drive Iraq's Sunni Arabs into the arms of ISIS and usher in a new civil war, which itself would threaten Iranian stability and create the potential for a rabidly anti-Iranian group to use Iraq as a base of operations against Iran. In other words, even what Iran considers the least it can accept in Iraq is a nuanced and flexible posture, and Iran is

willing to tolerate a great deal in the short term if trying to change the situation would run too great a risk or require too great a cost.

### How Iran Exerts Influence in Iraq

When it comes to exerting its influence in Iraq, Tehran has four principal cards to play. These can also be seen as its advantages in shaping Iraqi affairs, and they are formidable.

**The Tyranny of Time and Distance.** When you speak to Iraqis about how Iran exerts influence in their country, what you hear most often from them is this: Iran is right next door and always will be. Many will tell you of conversations they claim to have had with Iranian officials or their Iraqi agents who have said something along the lines of, “the Americans will leave. Maybe in one year, maybe in ten years, but they will leave. We will always be here, right next door to you.”

It is a compelling argument for many Iraqis, and it is the starting point for understanding how Iran exerts influence in Iraq. The emphasis on Iran’s proximity and the endlessness of that proximity is both comforting and menacing to Iraqis. Tehran exploits both. In terms of time, Iraqis who throw in their lot with Iran appear confident that Iran’s backing will endure. Conceivably forever—as long as they do not turn on Tehran—although the extent of Iranian support can obviously wax and wane depending on the utility that Iran sees for the Iraqis in question. That is reassuring to many Iraqis who worry that, as bad as things are today, they could get worse tomorrow, and that the Americans, or some other ally, will abandon them when tomorrow comes.

Of course, reminding Iraqis of Iran’s permanent proximity also serves as a threat. It warns Iraqis that Iran can wait to take its revenge. For Iraqis, it conjures the fear that while the Americans—or someone else—might be there to protect them today, eventually they will leave, and when they do, Iran will punish them for taking the wrong side.

Proximity counts too, in a Janus-like fashion. Iran will always be nearby, able to respond quickly when needed. It has local knowledge because it is part of the warp and woof of the Middle East and so is often better able to help in the subtle and more culturally appropriate ways that those from outside the region inevitably miss. Moreover, Iran’s proximity means it will always have an interest in Iraq—making it more likely

to help Iraqis in need. Yet, it also means that it is much harder to escape Iranian retribution.

**Do Anything, Pay Anyone.** When Iraqis describe how Iran exerts influence, another important aspect they invariably point to is their perception of Iran’s willingness to reward or punish. It is the rare Iraqi who does not claim first-hand knowledge of another Iraqi who crossed the Iranians and regretted having done so. The Iraqi was killed. In some accounts, his whole family was killed. Or his son or his father. Or they were maimed. Or thrown in the prison of some local magistrate on Iran’s payroll. Or they just disappeared and were never heard from again. Sometimes their house, their business, their factory burned to the ground or was attacked or confiscated by a militia under Iranian control. It is impossible to verify any of these stories, but their ubiquity is striking.

In a similar vein, Iraqis frequently believe that other Iraqis (never themselves) have received thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of dollars from Iran. Whenever a tribal sheikh, a cleric, or a government official, is seen as having money, Iraq’s rumor mill typically ascribes the newfound wealth to Iran, especially (but not exclusively), if the person in question is a Shia. Iraqi politicians who seem to have money to spend on campaigning or patronage, or who are able to secure important services for their constituencies, are often believed to have Iran backing them.

True or not, these stories are omnipresent in Iraq. Moreover, the vast majority of Iraqis seem to believe that the vast majority of the stories are true. Some certainly are. US intelligence has copious evidence of Iraqi militias that receive guns, explosives, military supplies, money, and even civilian goods from Iran.<sup>6</sup> Some Iraqis brag about getting Iranian support—typically without any proof—as a way of letting others know that they have rich, powerful friends. Others will neither confirm nor deny the rumors. In some cases, this is because they may not have gotten their largesse from the Iranians but rather got it from some other, equally unsavory source, like bribes, embezzling, shakedowns, or other corruption.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Michael R. Gordon and Andrew Lehren, “Leaked Reports Detail Iran’s Aid for Iraqi Militias?” *New York Times*, October 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html?pagewanted=all>.

Ultimately, the belief is widespread among Iraqis that Iran has no moral qualms or political restrictions on rewarding its allies and punishing its foes. A great many Iraqis believe that Iran can and will shower riches on one person and torture another to death, and never bat an eye about either. Iran is widely seen as able to offer both the ultimate prizes and the ultimate sanctions. Here as well, Iraqis often contrast this with their perceptions of the United States and its Western partners, who obviously have both wealth and power far greater than Iran's, but are often shackled by political and bureaucratic restrictions that mean they deliver far less than they theoretically could—and often far less than Iran actually will.

“Tehran certainly can invest in institutions in Iraq, but it prefers to invest in people.”

**The Personal Touch.** Another Iranian practice when wielding influence in Iraq is to personalize their connections, including the positive and negative incentives they create for Iraqis. Tehran certainly can invest in institutions in Iraq, but it prefers to invest in people. While there are certainly numerous other governments that do the same, it is difficult for the United States and other Western democracies to do so, creating another important advantage for Iran in Iraq.

Iraq has very weak institutions, as do many other countries in the Middle East where Iran employs the same approach. During Saddam Hussein's era, there were some extremely strong institutions: the army, the intelligence services, the judiciary, and to a lesser extent the Baath party. But their strength derived from their role as instruments of his totalitarian state. When Saddam Hussein fell, they lost much or all of their power. Their cadres might have been preserved and used to create even stronger and more independent institutions for a new Iraqi state, but the United States fumbled this task, disbanding three of the four and leaving the judiciary without protection or the ability to enforce its judgments. The power vacuum and civil war that followed further delegitimized and hollowed out these institutions. Since the “Surge,” the United States has sought to rebuild them and to funnel its aid to Iraq through these institutions, but with decidedly mixed results. Only where the United States has provided

massive, sustained assistance—particularly in elements of the security forces since 2014—has this really had any significant impact.

Given the weakness of Iraqi institutions, there is no particular incentive for Iran to try to build them up and use them as its instruments of influence. And certainly, Iran has invested heavily in some institutions, particularly certain Shia militias like Badr, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), and Khata'ib Hezbollah (KH). However, even there, Iran's focus has been on the leadership of these groups much more than on the organizations per se. Iran invests in Badr, but it primarily invests in Hadi al-Ameri, Badr's commander. So too Tehran invests in KH, but far more so they invest in its leader, Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis, who many see as a full-blown Iranian agent. And Iran invests in AAH, but even more they invest in its vicious founder, Qais al-Ghazali.

This focus on people over institutions magnifies Iranian influence because people can be rewarded and bribed, threatened and punished in ways that institutions cannot. It goes hand in glove with Iran's willingness to employ a wide range of both rewards and retribution. When one country threatens the institutions of another—proposing to cut off aid to the ministry of agriculture, for instance—that potentially hurts every member of the ministry, but the pain is diffuse. It tends also to be minimal because the foreign aid being withheld will never be more than one source of the ministry's spending. Consequently, the loss of such aid may not affect employee salaries at all, but merely the ministry's programs. Because this approach isn't focused and probably does not hit any individual particularly hard, it will have limited impact. Only the target government as a whole, which probably wants to have an effective ministry of agriculture, will really feel the pain. But again, given all of its other competing interests and problems, the targeted government may not respond at all.

In contrast, offering ten million dollars or threatening to kill an individual is highly likely to get that individual's attention. The target is far more likely to comply if the reward or punishment affects him or her directly and personally, rather than if the effects are going to be distributed broadly and indirectly across an institution.

**Shia Solidarity.** The last card that Iran plays is religion. Although Americans and other foreigners tend to make it out to be Iran's trump, in truth it is probably the



Iraqi forces do battle with Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), a militia group led by influential cleric and political figure Muqtada as-Sadr. Iraq's campaign against Iran-backed JAM helped unify Iraqis from 2008 to 2010. *Photo credit: Pvt. Christopher McKenna/Flickr.*

weakest in Tehran's hand. Nonetheless, it has power and Iran unquestionably uses it.

The Shia have been the minority of the Muslim world from the first split after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Although the Sunni-Shia divide has never been as fraught or bloody as the Protestant-Catholic divide to which it is often compared, there are differences between the sects and there have been periods of tension and even violence. Many Sunnis consider the Shia apostates, not really Muslims at all. More than that, many Shia feel belittled and even deliberately oppressed by their governments. Whether it is Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Saudi Arabia, or Bahrain, many Shia simply do not believe that their governments respect them, protect them, or promote them in the same way as they do Sunni populations.

While there have been other major Shia powers at times like Fatimid Egypt in the tenth to twelfth centuries, in the modern era Iran has been the most powerful Shia state by far. For that reason, at various times,

downtrodden Shia have looked to Iran for help against their own oppressive governments. This connection to a foreign power is far less common than most Sunni governments believe, but it does happen, and ever more so in the past sixteen years.

That is because in 2001, a new element was added to the mix: sectarian civil war. In Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen (and likely in Bahrain had the Saudis not stepped in), state breakdown or collapse opened a security vacuum. As is typically the case, state collapse and security vacuums forced the citizenry to abandon their national identity for a subnational identity, which in these cases was religious: Sunni or Shia.<sup>7</sup> (It is important to note that in other civil wars the subnational identities can be ethnic like in the former Yugoslavia, or geographic as in Libya, or historical as in Rwanda). The vicious, no-holds barred fighting of these civil wars

<sup>7</sup> On the dynamics of civil wars in the modern Middle East, see Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer 2015), 29-46.

badly enflamed the Sunni-Shia divide and made a great many Shia (and Sunnis) fear for their lives.

These factors have combined to create more openings for Iran. A great many Shia are in fear for their lives from Sunni militias (and vice versa for many Sunnis). The Iranians can offer protection to Shia civilians fearful of Sunni militias and can offer the support to Shia militias that they cannot find anywhere else, because Sunni governments are just as naturally inclined to back the Sunni militias and protect the Sunni civilians. The Iranians can also point to times when they made good on their promise. In particular, in June 2014, Iran sent arms, money, advisers, and General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, to Iraq to organize Iraq's defenses and halt the ISIS offensive that had overrun most of northwest Iraq. The Iranians and their Iraqi allies compare this with the US reaction, which was to withhold support until Maliki stepped down as prime minister and ISIS threatened the Kurdish capital of Erbil in August. The other Arab states of the Middle East offered even less, sending only token military contingents to the US-led "Anti-ISIS" coalition. For a great many Shia Iraqis terrified of ISIS, the contrast between the Iranian and US/Arab responses reinforces Iran's message that only they can be counted on to aid fellow Shia when they need it most.

### Obstacles to Iranian Influence

Iran's inherent advantages are a reality that cannot be wished away. However, it is just as important to recognize that Iran's advantages are not insurmountable. Not at all. Tehran is not doomed to prevail over the United States in Iraq, either in the short or long term. There are also powerful factors that work to inhibit Iran's influence in Iraq.

The most important of these are Iraqi Arab nationalism and the historic enmity of Iraqis for the Persian Iranians.<sup>8</sup> Even among Iraq's Shia, their Arab identity and ethnic rivalry with the hated Persians has often prevailed over religious solidarity. It is an oft-cited but still noteworthy fact that the vast majority of Iraqi Shia fought staunchly against the Iranians during the brutal Iran-Iraq war. They did so despite Saddam Hussein's (Sunni) tyranny and Ayatollah Khomeini's (quasi-Shia)

message of liberation. They did not fight *for* Saddam Hussein so much as they fought *against* Iran.

Iranian society holds little appeal for most Iraqis. As the ever-insightful Emma Sky has pointed out, thousands, even millions, of Iraqis would gladly emigrate to the United States. Painfully few Iraqis choose to move to Iran and that is true regardless of their sect or ethnicity.<sup>9</sup>

Even in the religious realm there are important differences. Iraqi Shia fiercely defend the preeminence of the *Marja'yya* (religious leadership) of Najaf, whereas Iran looks primarily to its own *Hawza* in Qom. The struggle for religious leadership of the Shia world is very real to them and has material consequences for charitable giving, pilgrimages, and the daily lives of their followers. Moreover, many Iraqis and most of Iraq's religious establishment reject Khomeini's philosophy and the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (rule by the jurisprudent) upon which the Iranian political system is based.

Finally, strong though it is, Iran is hardly all-powerful, and clever though its officials often are, they are hardly omniscient. They make mistakes and overplay their hand. They often do not invest enough in Iraq to ensure the outcome they seek. They get outbid by others seeking a different outcome. They can be overconfident and get caught by surprise.

The key limit to Iranian influence in Iraq is therefore Iraqi strength and, at least among its Arabs, unity. Whenever Iraq is weak and divided, Iran can wield enormous influence. Its ability to target individuals and play on their fears allows Tehran to divide and conquer, co-opting various actors and then using their co-optation to ensnare still more. When Iraqis feel strong and united however, they do not need Iran because they do not fear one another. In those circumstances, Iraqis push Iran out of their lives and their politics, and they tend to do so far more effectively and easily than any outside power, including the United States.

In 2005-2006, as Iraq splintered into civil war, Iran's power expanded apace. Every Iraqi wanted Iranian assistance, although some wanted it more and got more than others. Then, the US surge strategy began to turn things around; the political fissures healed, the violence ended, and Iraqis embraced a secular, non-sectarian government. In particular, in the spring of

<sup>8</sup> For a superb piece on the manifestations of Iranian influence in Iraq—and Iraqi efforts to prevent it—see Tim Arango, "Iran Dominates in Iraq After U.S. 'Handed the Country Over,'" *New York Times*, July 15, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Emma Sky, personal correspondence with the author, August 12, 2017.

2008, Prime Minister Maliki launched Operation Charge of the Knights, a high-risk gambit to drive Muqtada as-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia from the great Shia city of Basra. JAM was heavily backed by Iran at that point, arguably the last major Iraqi client of Tehran's from the civil war. Not only did the Iraqi security forces crush JAM and drive it out of Basra altogether (with considerable American military assistance), but of even greater importance, the Shia populace of Basra embraced the largely Sunni formations that Maliki brought down from Anbar to conduct the operation. Basrawis saw these troops as Iraqis, not Sunnis: Iraqis who had come to liberate their Arab city from the Iranian proxies who had occupied it. It was a remarkable moment, and Maliki went on to launch subsequent operations that drove JAM from Amara, Qurnah, Kut, and even Sadr City itself. He then went on to win Iraq's 2009 provincial elections and come in second (to the secular Shia Ayad Allawi) in Iraq's 2010 national elections, all because he was seen at the time as a non-sectarian, secular figure and an Iraqi leader who was standing up to the Persians. At that moment, in early 2010, Iran's influence in Iraq was negligible because of the actions of the Iraqis, not the Americans.<sup>10</sup>

### The Sixty-Foot Shadow of the Six-Foot Man

Iran is not ten feet tall. Not even in Iraq. Iran is not a lightweight either. It is a skillful, determined, and experienced actor that has pursued its interests with considerable success over the years. It is a full-grown villain, one that should not be underestimated both because of its skill and its inherent advantages. But it is also not an unstoppable colossus bestriding the Mesopotamian river valleys like Godzilla over Tokyo.

Indeed, as I suggested above, Iran appears to benefit greatly from its reputation, which is widely acknowledged among Iraqis but remains a matter of conjecture since there is so little verifiable proof. Iran is a formidable foe in Iraq, but it casts a much larger shadow than is warranted by its actual deeds. It is the shadow of Iranian actions and power to which Iraqis tend to respond. For them, Iranian power is every inch

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as great as its shadow, and they treat it with monstrous deference.

This makes Iran hard to beat because it often means that its foes, starting with the United States, are shadow boxing—trying desperately to knock the Iranian shadow down to size but often swinging at something incorporeal, and therefore impervious to our blows. However, what appears to work far better is to demonstrate to Iraqis that Iran is not as powerful or as dangerous (or as helpful) as they often perceive it to be. On those occasions when the United States, or the Iraqis themselves, or conceivably another regional actor, can show Iranian power for what it really is—mostly bluffs and threats consistently backed up by far less than Tehran promised—Iraqis gladly abandon Iran. One of the other critical factors during Operation Charge of the Knights was how quickly the Iranian-backed JAM fighters turned and ran when they were suddenly confronted by determined Iraqi troops backed by American fire power. In a matter of days, they broke and fled the city, which led many Basrawis to conclude that the JAM-Iranian dominance of their city had never been as strong as they had believed.

Likewise, in 2014, it was Iran that came to Iraq's aid when ISIS drove on Baghdad, and so it was Iran that got all the credit for stopping the offensive short of the capital. Yet the truth is that ISIS had largely shot its bolt by then, having conquered far more than it had ever imagined, and being incapable of taking a (mostly Shia) city of 8 million people. Iran benefitted from the perception that it stopped ISIS until the Shia militias it backed repeatedly failed to liberate Iraqi cities like Baiji, Tikrit, and Fallujah, only to have US-backed Iraqi military formations do so instead. As a result, the insidious fog of Iranian power that suffused Baghdad in 2014 and 2015, dissipated dramatically by 2016 and 2017, when Iraqis realized that Iranian support would not enable them to take back their country from ISIS, but American support would.

<sup>10</sup> Arango, “Iran Dominates in Iraq After U.S. ‘Handed the Country Over’”; Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq,” Middle East Memo Number 29, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, July 2013, 7-14; Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 203-260.

## The Long War

Iranian influence in Iraq is formidable. It should not be underestimated. Additionally, Iraq means a great deal to Iran. It is willing to invest significant resources to achieve its goals in Iraq, and it has several potent advantages over other foreign powers, particularly distant powers like the United States. Moreover, Iranian interest in Iraq does not wax and wane, the way that it does for other countries. For Tehran, the importance of Iraq is a constant.

Yet Iran is not all-powerful in Iraq and has not been since Sassanid control over Iraq was broken by the Arab Islamic armies at the Battle of Qadisiyah in 637 AD. All things being equal, most Iraqis would choose to shut out Iran altogether, and this is just what has happened whenever Iraq was strong enough, despite all of Iran's structural advantages. That then is the key to diminishing or eliminating Iranian influence in Iraq: build a strong, cohesive Iraq that has the confidence to show Iran the door.

Of course, Iraq in 2017 is far from that secure, determined state. It remains fragmented and weak, and that creates the opportunity for Iranian influence and for Iran to resist the efforts of others to help

strengthen Iraq by sealing its fissures. If the United States were willing to exert itself again the way it did during the Surge of 2007-2008 (even without all the troops), there is every reason to believe that Iraq could be strengthened quickly, and Iran forced out with corresponding speed. Unfortunately, that seems unlikely for a United States that long ago tired of its commitment to Iraq. The alternative is to play the long game, building up Iraq piece by piece, bringing Iraqis together, empowering their government to better their lives, and finding constructive ways to resolve differences.

It is hardly impossible, but it is hard and necessary work. Because if the United States and its allies do not offer Iraqis this better alternative to Iranian influence, Iraq could become the next Lebanon. Bigger. Richer. More strategically located. It is a prospect that will terrify many US allies, who have traditionally reacted in aggressive and destabilizing ways to such increases in Iranian power and influence. It is something that an already troubled Middle East could well do without.

**Kenneth M. Pollack** is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He would like to thank Bilal Saab, Emma Sky, and Steven R. Ward for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,  
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(202) 463-7226, [www.AtlanticCouncil.org](http://www.AtlanticCouncil.org)