



Atlantic Council

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAMS

Optimizing and Aligning the US-Iraq Relationship

C. Anthony Pfaff



MISSION STATEMENT

The Atlantic Council's Iraq Initiative provides transatlantic and regional policy makers with unique perspectives and analysis on the ongoing challenges and opportunities facing Iraq as the country tries to build an inclusive political system, attract economic investment, and encourage a vibrant civil society.



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Introduction

The relationship between the United States and Iraq remains the Schrödinger's cat of US foreign relations. Just as physicist Erwin Schrödinger posited that a cat housed in a box with something that could kill it is both dead and alive until the outcome is observed,¹ the US-Iraq relationship is both friendly and adversarial depending not only on when it is observed, but who is observing it. In a 2022 Gallup Poll, for instance, 81 percent of Americans held an unfavorable view of Iraq, while a 2019 poll of Iraqis found that 53 percent thought the purpose of the 2003 US invasion was to plunder Iraqi wealth and 84 percent saw the US-led coalition as an occupying force.² Meanwhile, as Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi seeks greater cooperation under the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) meant to govern ties between the two nations,³ Iraqi militias like Kata'ib Hizballah (KH), who receive funding from the Iraqi government as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), attack US forces with relative impunity.⁴

When US forces—whose mission was to assist the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the fight against the Islamic State group (IS)—did try to defend themselves in 2019, the result was a tit-for-tat exchange with Iran and its Iraqi proxies in 2019 that left Islamic Republic Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and Deputy PMF Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis dead and resulted in a parliamentary demand for the withdrawal of US forces.⁵ To avoid losing US security assistance while addressing parliamentary and popular concerns, the Iraqi government reclassified US forces as advisers, with minimal changes to their mission and numbers. For now, everyone seems to be

happy. The United States gets to keep its forces in the fight against IS, the Iraqi government and ISF keep their most valuable security partner, and the Iran-backed militias still have targets to shoot at.

Despite these mixed signals, the United States and Iraq have a lot of common ground. Both benefit by preventing the reemergence of Islamic terrorist organizations, promoting regional stability, and opening Iraq's economy to foreign investment to speed economic growth. In fact, as the Institute for the Study of War's Katherine Lawlor points out, the "United States cannot stabilize—or safely deprioritize—the Middle East without first stabilizing Iraq."⁶ US assistance to stabilize Iraq, however, has had little effect, limiting the kinds of mutual interests they can pursue.

The ineffectiveness of US assistance comes despite no shortage of good, well-researched policy recommendations. The Iraqi government, for example, has articulated a set of comprehensive economic reforms. These reforms, which were developed by a group led by former Minister of Finance Ali Allawi, provide a good set of measures that the United States could support.⁷ For its part, the Atlantic Council's Track II Dialogue has brought together European, Iraqi, and US experts to offer a number of policy recommendations along several lines of effort including fostering government legitimacy and economic reform, strengthening national identity, mobilizing youth, establishing a state monopoly of force, and optimizing international assistance.⁸ Many of these recommendations are also reflected in US-Iraq engagement, including the recent Strategic Dialogue,⁹

- 1 Joshua Rapp Learn, "Schrödinger's Cat Experiment and the Conundrum That Rules Modern Physics," Discover magazine (website), May 5, 2021, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/schroedingers-cat-experiment-and-the-conundrum-that-rules-modern-physics>.
- 2 Munqith Dagher, "Iraq 16 Years Later. . . Is the Country Still at War with Itself," PowerPoint, AI Mustakilla (marketing and social studies research group known as IIACSS), April 2019, accessed July 27, 2022, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/190408_Final_IIACSS-CSIS.pdf.
- 3 "Our Relationship," US Embassy & Consulates in Iraq (website), accessed September 4, 2022, <https://iq.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/#:~:text=The%20SFA%20normalizes%20the%20U.S.,relationship%20based%20on%20mutual%20goals>.
- 4 "Joint Statement Following Meeting Between President Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi in Jeddah," White House Briefing Room, July 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/16/joint-statement-following-meeting-between-president-biden-and-iraqi-prime-minister-kadhimi-in-jeddah/>; and Courtney Kube et al., "Iran-backed Militias' Attacks against U.S. Targets Are Up. The U.S. Hasn't Responded with Force Since Last Year," NBC News, June 10, 2022.
- 5 Dr. Elie Abouaoun, Sarhang Hamasaheed, "A Year After Soleimani Strike, Iraq Bears the Brunt of U.S.-Iran Tensions," United States Institute of Peace, January 6, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/01/year-after-soleimani-strike-iraq-bears-brunt-us-iran-tensions>; and Michael E. O'Hanlon and Sara Allawi, "The Relationship between Iraq and the US Is in Danger of Collapse. That Can't Happen," Brookings Institution (blog), March 20, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/20/the-relationship-between-iraq-and-the-us-is-in-danger-of-collapse-that-cant-happen/>.
- 6 Katherine Lawlor, Iraq 2021-2022: A Forecast (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2021), 8, <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20-%20A%20Forecast.pdf>.
- 7 Government of Iraq, White Paper for Economic Reform: Final Report of the Crisis Cell for Financial and Fiscal Reform, 2020, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://gds.gov.iq/iraqs-white-paper-for-economic-reforms-vision-and-key-objectives/>. Dr. Allawi resigned from the cabinet in mid-August 2022.
- 8 C. Anthony Pfaff, Ben Connable, and Masoud Mostajabi, Iraq: Implementing a Way Forward, Atlantic Council, April 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iraq-implementing-a-way-forward/>.
- 9 "U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue," US Department of State, July 23, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue/>.

as well as Iraq development planning by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).¹⁰

Moving forward, US-Iraq relations need an approach that relies less on directly confronting corrupt and malign actors and more on creating better alternatives so that individuals and groups do not choose to engage in corrupt and malign activities in the first place. Such an approach requires a sensitivity to opportunities on the part of US and Iraqi

leaders to shape those choices. Developing that sensitivity requires a deeper understanding of actors and their interests as well as how those interests interact to create both obstacles and opportunities for political stability, economic growth, and regional security. Getting that deeper understanding requires an understanding of the context in which these choices are made, the actors who make them, and a framework for identifying and taking advantage of opportunities to shape those choices as they arise.

10 "Iraq: Our Work," United States Agency for International Development, <https://www.usaid.gov/iraq/our-work>, accessed July 27, 2022.

The Challenge of US-Iraq Relations

Despite the expenditure of significant resources, stabilizing Iraq has been frustratingly difficult. For the most part, Iraq's recovery has been largely stymied by three corrosive influences: corruption, competition for the monopoly of force, and malign external influences. The result of these influences—plus the legacies of war and authoritarianism—is poor government services, a stagnant economy, weak security forces, and militias that engage in widespread terror and criminal activities. Previous US approaches have focused on anti-corruption measures; security cooperation, especially against the IS; militia integration; and encouraging the Iraqi government to diversify its economy and be more open to foreign investment. While US assistance in pushing the IS out of Iraqi cities is a bright spot, it is stating the obvious that its other efforts have achieved little.

Much of the reason for this ineffectiveness is that Iraq's corrosive conditions are not primarily a function of malign and criminal actors taking advantage of a weak or complicit government. Thus, measures that treat them as such are doomed to fail. Rather, these outcomes are a function of relatively rational actors confronted by a fractured, dislocated polity under conditions of extremely scarce resources. Under such conditions, Iraqi actors find themselves in an ongoing "prisoner's dilemma," where everyone would be better off if they cooperate; however, the only rational response is to defect.¹¹ In such cases, cooperation depends on trust; however, that trust must come from somewhere. When social bonds are as frayed as they are among Iraq's stakeholders, one obvious source of trust comes from the belief that others are acting in their own interests.

Because of this dynamic, the US approach may do as much harm as good as it treats US-Iraq relations as dependent on the cooperation of a single actor—the Iraqi government—that is often frustrated by malign actors including Iran and its proxies, but also corrupt officials and criminal organizations. The remedy, in this current view, is often to encourage,

pressure, and cajole the Iraqi government to act against those actors and influences. However, this pressure does not always have the desired effect. For example, in July 2020, Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi confronted KH by having fourteen members arrested for planning attacks on Baghdad's international zone. Armed members of the group then entered the zone demanding the detained members' release. As a result, within hours of the arrest, most were back at KH headquarters being celebrated as heroes while KH leaders condemned Kadhimi on national television.¹² Arguably, confronting the militias this way was what the United States hoped Kadhimi would do; however, the result was a diminished Kadhimi and an empowered militia.

The US policy of providing the bulk of its assistance through the United Nations and Iraqi government also means few Iraqis see the United States as a valued partner, making it more difficult for them to support US engagement, especially when it is contested by Iran and its proxies. That aid, however, has been substantial. In fiscal year 2021 alone it was more than \$390 million, with approximately \$260 million going to governance, humanitarian, and health-related assistance.¹³ While most are aware of the critical role US security assistance played in the fight against IS, they see that assistance as a double-edged sword. In the aftermath of the 2019-20 tit-for-tat exchange mentioned above, where there were large anti-American demonstrations,¹⁴ the US embassy was attacked,¹⁵ and the Iraqi Parliament passed a resolution calling for the ouster of US military forces that were providing critical support for the ongoing fight against IS.¹⁶ Even Iraqis who were not vocally anti-American joined in the protests because Iran-backed groups could portray the United States as a self-interested, destabilizing influence.¹⁷

These appearances, however, cover a more complex reality. The anti-American demonstrations, while violent, were largely organized by pro-Iran militias and never reached the

11 Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 9.

12 Mustafa Salim and Louisa Loveluck, "New Iraqi Leader Tries to Rein in Iran-backed Militias, but Task Proves Daunting," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/new-iraqi-leader-tries-to-rein-in-iran-backed-militias-but-task-proves-daunting/2020/07/02/4963bcaa-baea-11ea-97c1-6cf116ffe26c_story.html.

13 "U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country: Iraq," *ForeignAssistance.gov* (US government website), accessed March 18, 2022, <https://foreignassistance.gov/cd/iraq/2021/obligations/0>.

14 Kimberly Dozier, "Hundreds of Thousands of Protestors March in Iraq amidst Growing Anti-U.S. Sentiment," *Time*, January 24, 2020, <https://time.com/5771459/hundreds-of-thousands-of-protestors-march-in-iraq-amidst-growing-anti-u-s-sentiment/>.

15 Fali Hassan, Ben Hubbard, and Alissa J. Rubin, "Protestors Attack U.S. Embassy in Iraq, Chanting 'Death to America,'" *New York Times*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/31/world/middleeast/baghdad-protesters-us-embassy.html>.

16 Jane Arraf, "Iraqi Parliament Votes to Expel U.S. Troops, Trump Threatens Sanctions," *National Public Radio*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/06/793895401/iraqi-parliament-votes-to-expel-u-s-troops-trump-threatens-sanctions>.

17 Arwa Ibrahim, "Iraqi Parliament Calls for Expulsion of Foreign Troops," *Al Jazeera*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/5/iraqi-parliament-calls-for-expulsion-of-foreign-troops>.

scale of the enduring anti-Iran demonstrations that began in October 2019.¹⁸ While the US embassy remains at reduced staffing,¹⁹ the US military presence remains largely the same, though repurposed for advisory rather than combat missions.²⁰ Better still, in what is certainly a hopeful sign of progress, the Iraqi government hosted the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in August 2021, which brought together heads of state, foreign ministers, and other senior officials to discuss a variety of regional security issues.²¹ Perhaps most significantly, the conference brought together rivals such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, for whom Iraq had already been hosting bilateral talks.²² Iraq's role in establishing the Amman-Baghdad-Cairo agreement that seeks better economic integration is another sign that Iraq can play a stabilizing role in the region.²³ So while conditions exist for a more positive relationship, the public role the United States can play as a partner in Iraq's development and growing regional presence will remain constrained until the alternatives for relevant actors change.

Fortunately, Iraq's election-related turmoil may provide the United States an opportunity to recalibrate its approach and change the current dysfunctional dynamic. These elections elevated nationalist actors at the expense of those aligned with Iran,²⁴ and they exposed the obstacles Iraq's current constitution and government-formation process impose, which is largely a legacy of misguided US efforts to design an inclusive political process. Instead, the current system "instrumentalized sectarianism" that forces Iraqi actors to make choices that make cross-sectarian cooperation difficult.²⁵ Moreover, Iraq's government-formation process lacks transparency and allows for entrenched interests, like the Iran-backed Fateh bloc, to recover their losses.²⁶

In fact, their ability to stall the government formation process led Muqtada al-Sadr to order the resignation of parliamentarians associated with him, paving a way to restoring Fateh's lost positions.²⁷ In response, Sadr encouraged his followers to protest, which included a lengthy sit-in at the parliament to prevent his Iran-backed rivals from forming a government.²⁸

As the Atlantic Council's Abbas Kadhim pointed out, Sadr's failure was a result of how his victory changed Iraqi stakeholder calculus. While what he wanted was a cross-sectarian "national majority" parliament that could be an effective check and balance on government performance, the coalition he formed to do that quickly fell apart. First, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) nominated former Finance Minister Hoshyar Zebari, which displaced the traditional choice of a nominee from its rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In response, the PUK sided with the rest of the Shia and Sunni opposition, which effectively shut down the process after the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court issued a ruling requiring a two-thirds majority to elect a president. Without a president, there was no way to proceed. Moreover, the nationalist victory appeared to place the Shia parties at a disadvantage as Kurds and Sunnis kept their traditional positions of president and council speaker, respectively, but traditional Shia positions went to whomever could build the most support.²⁹

Thus, Sadr's nationalist victory created an opportunity for various factions to increase their advantage, which entailed the need for others to stop them. Moreover, the resulting fracturing created additional reasons, if not opportunities, for Iranian intervention. It certainly was not a good sign

- 18 Arwa Ibrahim, "Why Are Iraqi Protestors Targeting Iranian Buildings?," Al Jazeera, November 19, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/29/why-are-iraqi-protesters-targeting-iranian-buildings>.
- 19 "Iraq Travel Advisory," US Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs (website), November 21, 2021, accessed March 7, 2022, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/iraq-travel-advisory.html>.
- 20 Jane Arraf, "U.S. Announces End to Combat Mission in Iraq, but Troops Will Not Leave," New York Times, December 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/middleeast/us-iraq-combat-mission.html>.
- 21 Ali Mamouri, "Baghdad Conference to Establish Cooperation, Partnership in Region," Al-Monitor, August 30, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/baghdad-conference-establish-cooperation-partnership-region>.
- 22 "Follow-up on the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership," Middle East Political and Economic Institute (website), August 28, 2021, <https://mepei.com/follow-up-on-the-baghdad-conference-for-cooperation-and-partnership/>.
- 23 Racha Helwa, Barik Schuber, and Ibrahim Saif, "Amman-Baghdad-Cairo Agreement: A new path for economic integration," Atlantic Council, September 26, 2022, accessed October 28, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/amman-baghdad-cairo-abc-agreement-a-new-path-for-economic-integration/>.
- 24 Reuters and Associated Press, "Partial Results Show Pro-Iran Groups Losing Iraq Election, Firebrand Cleric Winning," NBC News (website), October 12, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world-iran-groups-lose-iraq-election-firebrand-cleric-al-sadr-wins-partial-rcna2885>.
- 25 Matthijs Bogaards, "Iraq's Constitution of 2005: The Case against Consociationalism 'Light,'" *Ethnopolitics* 20, no. 2, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449057.2019.1654200>.
- 26 Naufel Alhassan, "Once Again, Iraq Is at a Crossroads," Middle East Institute, May 3, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/once-again-iraq-crossroads>.
- 27 "Iraqi MPs from Muqtada al-Sadr's Bloc to Resign," Al Jazeera, June 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/12/iraqi-mps-from-firebrand-cleric-muqtada-sadr-bloc-resign>; and Trevor Filseth, "New Iraqi Parliament Sworn In, Ending Eight-Month Political Deadlock," National Interest, June 24, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/new-iraqi-parliament-sworn-ending-eight-month-political-deadlock-203215>.
- 28 Associated Press, "Protestors Camp Out in Iraq's Parliament Building as a Power Struggle Unfolds," National Public Radio (website), July 31, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/31/1114789743/iraq-parliament-protests-shiite-muqtada-al-sadr>.
- 29 Abbas Kadhim, "Muqtada al-Sadr Just Issued a Mass Resignation Decree. Where Does Iraq Go from Here?," MENAsource (blog), Atlantic Council, June 14, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/muqtada-al-sadr-just-issued-a-mass-resignation-decree-where-does-iraq-go-from-here/>.



Supporters of Iraqi populist leader Moqtada al-Sadr gather for Friday prayers outside the parliament near the Green Zone, in Baghdad, Iraq August 26, 2022. REUTERS/Alaa Al-Marjani

that, in the wake of the disputed elections, Prime Minister Kadhim's house was attacked by a drone laden with explosives.³⁰ Nor is Iranian intervention limited to intimidation by its proxies. The commander of the IRGC Quds Force, General Esmail Qaani, traveled to Iraq in mid-January to build as large a Shia coalition as possible, as the Atlantic Council's Kadhim also reports. When that failed, he convinced KDP leader Masoud Barzani to send a delegation to convince Sadr to be more inclusive toward the other Shia parties.³¹ So far, that effort has not been successful.

As should be obvious, Iraqi politics comprises a complex group of actors who cooperate and compete for access to scarce resources. This dynamic is, of course, present in any

democracy. The difficulty for Iraq is that there is such a thin basis for trust among the various stakeholders that competition generally outweighs any cooperation. As a result, Iraqi foreign relations can be equally complex, especially regarding the United States and Iran, with whom Iraqis want some kind of cooperation, while avoiding getting involved in conflict. To effectively interact with this complex system, one must identify relevant actors, their interests, and how they go about realizing them. What makes actors relevant is not just their ability to affect one's own interests, but their own interest to do so as well. How they go about realizing their interests matters to the extent they cooperate, compete, or disengage with other actors doing the same.

30 "Iraqi PM al-Kadhim Survives Drone Attack on His Home," BBC News, November 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-59195399>.

31 Abbas Kadhim, "Iraq Is Forming a New Government. But Getting There Will Be Complicated," MENASource (blog), Atlantic Council, February 3, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/iraq-is-forming-a-new-government-but-getting-there-will-be-complicated/>.

Actors and Interests

While the executive branch of the Iraqi government and its associated armed forces are not the only relevant actors, from a US perspective they are likely the most important. However, as described above, other actors affect what both the United States and the Iraqi government can do and often do so outside of established democratic and governance processes. These actors include Iran-backed militia, the parliament, and the Iraqi public. There are, of course, other actors who influence these groups such as Sadr, who has emerged as the face of Iraqi nationalism, and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has a great deal of influence over both the Iraqi public as well as government and civic leaders. However, since their influence regarding US interests is derivative of how they influence these other entities, their actions will be considered as they influence the larger groups of stakeholders. Finally, of course, Iran remains a stakeholder with profound influence on what the United States and the Iraqi government can accomplish.

The Iraqi Government

From both the US and Iraqi governments' perspectives, the ideal relationship is described in the 2008 SFA, which remains a useful blueprint for US-Iraq interactions.³² This agreement called for a "long-term relationship of cooperation and friendship" to build a democratic Iraq that can "assume full responsibility for its security, the safety of its people, and maintaining peace within Iraq and among the countries of the region."³³ To realize that vision, the agreement encourages support for Iraq's political process, national reconciliation, and economic reform that facilitates Iraq's integration into the international community. It also calls for trade, investment, and infrastructure development, especially in the areas of information and communication technologies, healthcare, defense, and law enforcement.³⁴

Unfortunately, given what are largely security-related issues associated with the Islamic State group and militia activity,

there has been little engagement on non-security matters. At the July 2021 Strategic Dialogue, the US and Iraqi delegations specified areas of mutual concern that included nonsecurity areas such as public health, climate change, energy efficiency, energy independence, humanitarian aid, human rights, economic cooperation, and cultural and educational exchanges. However, like the SFA, these goals are largely aspirational, and the political and security climate has never supported much meaningful cooperation, especially if it involved a significant US presence, even if only a civilian one.³⁵

The dialogue was also notable for how it addressed the security situation. While the Iraqi government affirmed its responsibility to protect coalition personnel advising Iraqi forces, the United States agreed to transition the role of its forces to a "training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing role" and assured that any combat forces would be withdrawn by December 31, 2021.³⁶ The reality, of course, is that the Iraqi Security Forces are no more capable of protecting coalition forces from militia attacks in 2022 than they were in 2021. In fact, in May 2022 there were as many attacks against bases housing US personnel as February, March, and April combined.³⁷ Further, US force presence in Iraq had already been largely limited to advisory roles, and numbers remain relatively close to what they were before the agreement.³⁸

But these limits do not mean Iraq is not a priority for the United States. Underscoring the importance of the US-Iraq relationship, Prime Minister Kadhimi met President Biden in July 2021 to discuss, among other things, the US-Iraq security relationship and agreed to continue to cooperate in counter-IS operations.³⁹ So, as the United States Institute for Peace's Sarhang Hamasaeed points out, despite the widespread belief the United States wishes to deprioritize the Middle East and Iraq, "there have been clear signals that Iraq remains important enough to the United States and that Kadhimi and his government are partners that the

32 "Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq," US Department of State, November 17, 2008, https://iq.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/245/se_sfa.pdf.

33 "Strategic Framework," 1.

34 "Strategic Framework," 2–6.

35 "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue," Press Release, US Department of State, July 26, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue-2/>.

36 "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue."

37 Kube et al., "Iran-backed Militias' Attacks."

38 Arraf, "U.S. Announces End to Combat Mission in Iraq."

39 "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Meeting with Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi of Iraq," White House Briefing Room (website), July 26, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/07/26/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-meeting-with-prime-minister-al-kadhimi-of-iraq/>.



Members of the Iraqi predominantly Shia Muslim Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) parade symbolic coffins at Baghdad's Tahrir Square during a rally organized to mark the second anniversary of the United States airstrikes that targeted weapons depots and command centres of the Iran-backed Hezbollah Brigades. Credit: Reuters, Ameer Al Mohammedaw/dpa.

United States can work with and should support.”⁴⁰ The challenge is increased cooperation on nonsecurity interests that entail an increased civilian or even private-sector presence without provoking Iran-backed militias or requiring a large security presence, which itself will likely provoke Iran-backed militias.

Militias

Militias, in general, have been a significant obstacle to Iraq's recovery and development. In fact, Grand Ayatollah

Sistani openly opposed the formation of any militias in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall.⁴¹ Perhaps more to the point, his 2014 fatwa, which is often seen as legitimizing militia participation in the PMF, made no mention of militias and instead encouraged Iraqis to join the existing armed forces.⁴² In retrospect, Sistani was obviously correct. Not only have some militias taken an active role in suppressing Iraq's democratic processes, but many also continue to conduct corrupt and criminal activity that undermines government legitimacy and creates a general sense of insecurity that limits the potential for economic growth and foreign investment.⁴³

40 Sarhang Hamasaeed, "Beyond Security: The Quest for a Sustained, Strategic U.S.-Iraq Partnership," United States Institute of Peace, Analysis and Commentary, July 29, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/07/beyond-security-quest-sustained-strategic-us-iraq-partnership>.

41 Caroleen Sayej, "Ayatollah Sistani: Much More than a 'Guide' for Iraqis," in Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq, POMEPS Studies (Project on Middle East Political Science series) 35 (October 2019): 24, https://www.academia.edu/40695286/Cultural_Antecedents_of_the_Leftist_Sadrist_Alliance_A_case_study_of_Sadrist_institution_building_POMEPS?email_work_card=view-paper.

42 Inna Rudolph, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," International Center for the Study of Radicalization, 2018, 12, https://www.academia.edu/38267322/From_Battlefield_to_Ballot_Box_Contextualising_the_Rise_and_Evolution_of_Iraqs_Popular_Mobilisation_Units?email_work_card=view-paper.

43 Federico Manfredi Firmian, "Curbing Militia Power in Iraq," London School of Economics (blog), January 1, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/01/01/curbing-militia-power-in-iraq/>; and Phillip Smyth, "Making Sense of Iraq's PMF Arrests," Washington Institute, April 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-sense-iraqs-pmf-arrests>.

While certainly some militias are more culpable than others, Iran-backed militias are a special problem for the United States as their willingness to conduct attacks against US forces have placed the United States in a position where its forces could remain vulnerable to future attacks. Thus, to defend itself, it may need to conduct unilateral operations to defend those forces, which could in turn draw further protests and undermine cooperation with the Iraqi government; or the situation could prompt the withdrawal of US forces. None of these options align with US interests.

However, efforts to rein in the most egregious militia activities have often proved counterproductive. For example, in addition to Kadhimī's experience (mentioned above), Counterterrorism Service (CTS) forces arrested a Kata'ib Hizballah leader on terrorism charges in May 2021; however, he was later released after Popular Mobilization Forces associated with KH surrounded the prime minister's residence.⁴⁴ As a result, the government again appeared weak, while Iran's proxies again appeared to be above the law.

Not all news is bad. In 2020, Grand Ayatollah Sistani "greenlighted" the integration of militias loyal to Iraq's Shia religious authorities, collectively known as the *marjaya*, into Iraq's security services.⁴⁵ After the elections a little over a year later, not only has Sadr at least publicly given voice to a popular anti-militia sentiment but also reportedly agreed to close some of his militia's offices.⁴⁶ The fact that these closures may be symbolic underscores the difficulty of integrating militias. For all their malign activities, they do have a constituency for whom they not only provide protection but also jobs and other services the government and nascent private sector cannot.⁴⁷ Because Iraqi security forces do not have a monopoly on the use of force, unilaterally disarming can put militias and their constituencies at risk. Under such conditions, disarming and integrating may arguably be irrational.

Parliament

The October 2021 elections were held early in response to protestors' demands for improved governance. Many of these protestors, however, doubted the elections' legitimacy and abstained from voting.⁴⁸ Even with the low turnout, reform candidates associated with the Sadrist coalition increased their seats while diminishing the power of the Iranian-backed parties and their associated militias. In addition to the nationalist victory, moderate factions with favorable views of the United States also gained in influence. As the Brookings Institution's Ranj Alaaldin observes, Kurdish parties occupy forty-nine seats in parliament, while moderates like the Taqadum party, led by the current parliament speaker, have thirty-seven. Sunni Arabs, in fact, emerged as the second-largest bloc in parliament.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Fateh secured only seventeen seats and former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law party, which also has ties to Iran, won thirty-four seats.⁵⁰

Perhaps just as encouraging, women candidates won ninety-seven seats, which is fourteen more than the quota set by the Iraqi constitution.⁵¹ Facilitating this result was the 2020 Single Nontransferable Vote Law allowing voters to choose individual candidates as opposed to party lists, which enabled candidates to build their own constituencies.⁵² Unfortunately, much of the progress represented here was undone when, as mentioned above, Sadrists candidates resigned over frustrations with the government-formation process. As will be discussed later, whether this regression remains permanent and whether Iraq will hold another election remains to be seen.

However, even though the election may not have delivered the kind of impetus for reform sought by the protestors, it did demonstrate the fallibility and vulnerability of the Iranian-backed political blocs and their seemingly unstoppable militias. For example, when the Iran-back Fateh party

44 Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Samya Kullal, "Iraqi Militia Commander, Whose Arrest Stoked Tensions, Freed," ABC News, June 9, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iraqi-militia-commander-arrest-stoked-tensions-freed-78169277>.

45 Suad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shia Leader Sistani Moves to Break Iran's Grip Over Militia Movement," Middle East Eye, May 1, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-iraqi-shia-leader-sistani-moves-break-irans-grip-over-militia-movement>.

46 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iraqi Shiite Cleric Calls on Pro-Iran Militias to Disband, Join New Government," Times of Israel, November 18, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iraqi-shiite-cleric-calls-on-pro-iran-militias-to-disband-join-new-government/>; and Dier S. Mohamed, "Iraqi Cleric Sadr to Close His Militia's Headquarters in All but 4 Provinces," Kurdistan24, October 30, 2021, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/26078-iraqi-cleric-al-sadr-to-close-his-militia-headquarters-in-all-but-4-provinces>.

47 Garret Nada and Mattison Rowan, "Profiles: Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq," United States Institute of Peace (blog), November 10, 2021, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/nov/10/profiles-pro-iran-militias-iraq>.

48 "Turnout in Iraq's Election Reached 43 Percent: Electoral Commission," Reuters, October 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turnout-iraqs-election-reached-43-electoral-commission-2021-10-16/>.

49 Sinem Cengiz, "Iraqi Elections Signal Stronger Ankara-Baghdad Ties," Arab News, October 22, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1953271>.

50 Ranj Alaaldin, "Muqtada al-Sadr's Problematic Victory and the Future of Iraq," Brookings Institution (blog), October 28, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/10/28/muqtada-al-sadrs-problematic-victory-and-the-future-of-iraq/>.

51 Ali Jawad, "For the 1st Time, Iraqi Women Secure 97 Parliament Seats," Anadolu Agency, October 12, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/for-1st-time-iraqi-women-secure-97-parliament-seats/2390095>.

52 Victoria Stewart-Jolley, "Iraq's Electoral System," Chatham House, October 6, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/iraqs-electoral-system/impact-sntv-and-other-changes>.

called for protests on its behalf, the showing was poor.⁵³ These points suggest that there is an opportunity to diminish the influence of Iran-backed parties and militias, though it will take considerable political will as well as an approach that considers the interests of all parties involved.

Of course, the Iraqi Parliament is not a singular actor; however, what matters to US interests are those moments when there is sufficient consensus to act, as it did when it recommended the removal of US combat forces following the attack that killed Soleimani and al-Muhandis. Given the new makeup of the parliament, it is not clear what will bring such consensus. As noted above, the Shia bloc has fractured, while Sunnis gained. Moreover, with the rise in nationalist sentiment evidenced by the election, it is not clear that identity determines politics as much as it did in the past. Whether those trends eventually yield a more effective parliament remains to be seen.

The Iraqi Public

Since October 2019, the Iraqi public's reputation for being fractured along sectarian lines has seemed exaggerated. As the protests clearly demonstrated, there is consensus on poor governance and public services as well as the malign role Iran has played in undermining Iraq's recovery. While there may be less of a consensus on the malign role the United States has played, a 2020 poll put favorable views of the United States at roughly 30 percent; 15 percent had favorable views of Iran, though there seems to be little interest in being dragged into a regional conflict with Iran.⁵⁴

In fact, a 2020 poll conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research reported that only 33 percent of Iraqis felt the country was heading in right direction. The economy and corruption remained the biggest concerns, followed by the impact of COVID-19. Reinforcing these concerns, a National Democracy Institute 2021 poll showed that while Iraqis continued to prioritize economic issues, the COVID-19 pandemic made issues like healthcare, government assistance, and job opportunities even more important than they had been previously. More interestingly, the government's failure to deliver on any of these issues has resulted in the public turning to

its local communities for assistance.⁵⁵ Despite these negative numbers, however, 61 percent reported that the current economic situation for their household was good or somewhat good, while 39 percent said it was somewhat bad to very bad, suggesting some reason for optimism.⁵⁶ And while few showed up for the October elections, as noted above, those who did voted against entrenched interests.

An informal, unscientific survey conducted in the summer and fall of 2021 by the Atlantic Council in support of its Track II Dialogue on Iraq reported similar concerns and provided insights on solutions Iraqis might find acceptable. Participants included more than two-dozen politicians, educators, activists, tribal sheikhs, entrepreneurs, engineers, and others from Baghdad, Diyala, Basra, Salah ad-Din, and elsewhere who shared thoughts on Iraq's potential way forward.

Unsurprisingly, a nearly universal concern was the destabilizing role of sectarian militias, which many recognized undermined efforts for political reform. Several comments suggested a broad mobilization of protests coupled with an aggressive law-enforcement campaign to pressure them while offering immunity and positive incentives to find ways to integrate constructively into Iraqi security services. In fact, many felt the situation sufficiently dire to warrant criminalizing disruptive sectarian discourse. All respondents welcomed the idea of more national unity messaging that would not only promote an Iraqi identity, but that would also counter sectarianism and promote human rights.⁵⁷ Some pointed out that senior-level visits, such as the prime minister's visit to Karbala following the assassination of its mayor, was well received.

Almost all respondents highlighted the need to diversify the economy and grow Iraq's private sector, especially in areas that lend themselves to small businesses, such as agricultural and service industries. In fact, several respondents emphasized the importance of small local projects to avoid government corruption. To promote that growth, many suggested low-interest loans, especially for young people. For such a loan program to be successful it would have to be accompanied by other programs to improve expertise and accountability to ensure funds were used effectively and for their intended purposes.⁵⁸

53 Akeel Abbas, "Iraqi Election Shakes Up Shiite Political Old Guard," Al-Monitor, October 19, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/iraqi-election-shakes-shiite-political-old-guard>.

54 Namo Abdulla and Mehdi Jedina, "New Poll: Iran Losing Support of Majority in Iraq," Voice of America, June 16, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_new-poll-iran-losing-support-majority-iraq/6191241.html.

55 National Democracy Institute, Political Distrust and Frustration Mount as Pandemic Impacts Iraq: Key Findings of Qualitative Public Opinion Research Conducted in Five Provinces in Iraq, National Democracy Institute (funded by the Canadian government), January 2021, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_percent20Iraq_percent20- percent20Political percent20Distrust percent20Research percent20Report percent20FINAL_percent20_EN.pdf.

56 Center for Insights in Survey Research, Opinion Poll of Iraqi Citizens, August 28-September 25, 2020, <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/irq-20-ns-01-pt-public.pdf>.

57 Pfaff, Connable, and Mostajabi, 7.

58 Pfaff, Connable, and Mostajabi, 7.

The takeaway from these responses is that the Iraqi public is not only ready for change, but ready to take at least some risks to make that change. What is less clear is what choices they can make to facilitate that change. The new election law has made it easier to elect representatives who are independent of sectarian party platforms, but without greater turnout and less intimidation its effects may be limited. Moreover, getting political parties and militias to forego intimidation and election manipulation will continue to be difficult, especially when outside support makes them resilient against any steps the government or public can take.

Iran

Whatever Iran's long-term goals, its immediate interest is regime survival and limiting what it sees as the malign Western influences that threaten it. To realize these ends, Iran continually seeks regional military and political advantages over the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, which it considers its primary adversaries. Knowing it cannot match the conventional military strength of any one of these adversaries, Iran pursues more asymmetric means including nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and proxy forces.⁵⁹ Generally, its nuclear and ballistic missile programs seek to deter conventional attack while its proxy forces change political realities on the ground to diminish adversary influence.⁶⁰

In the context of Iraq, Iran's goals are arguably fourfold: minimizing, if not eliminating, US presence and influence, as noted above; ensuring Iraq does not emerge as an adversary that could renew hostilities, given the experience of the destructive Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s; opening Iraq as a market for Iranian goods; and preventing internal opposition groups from using Iraq as a safe haven. To achieve these interests, Iran employs proxies—which include individuals, political parties, and militias—to constrain US force presence, impose costs should the Iraqi government or other groups

challenge its interests, and conduct direct attacks against Iranian opposition groups inside Iraq.⁶¹ For the United States, those interests and relations mean the more difficult US-Iran relations are, the more difficult US-Iraq relations.

Where Iraq's interest conflicts with Iran, there is also opportunity. Iranian goods undermine Iraq's own producers, especially in the agricultural sector;⁶² Iran's proxies have attacked Iraqis protesting Iran's influence,⁶³ and attacks against dissidents often kill Iraqis as well.⁶⁴ In response, the United States could prove a better economic partner by investing in Iraq's producers, a better political partner by helping the Iraqi government to constructively respond to protestor demands, and a better security partner by continuing to build ISF capability to secure its borders.

Future Political Environment

From the U.S. perspective, the selection of Abdul Latif Rashid as president and Mohammed al-Sudani as prime minister does not bode well for the formation of an inclusive government. The fact that the Shia Coordination Framework, which includes parties with strong affiliations with Iran, was able to exploit the government formation process to overturn the results of a popular election will undermine the Iraqi public's already fragile faith in the political system. Moreover, the Framework's close affiliation with Iran-backed militias suggests a return to 2018-2019 when militias intensified malign activities such as asset stripping, violent suppression of protests, extortion, and attacks on U.S. forces.⁶⁵ These conditions culminated in widespread protests in October 2019, where these same Iran-backed militias, as well as government forces, used violence to bring them under control.⁶⁶ It does not help that Sadr has rejected participation by him or his supporters in the new government.⁶⁷ Any successful way ahead will require shaping the alternatives the actors have, presenting more that work to the United States' favor and fewer that do not.

59 Kenneth Katzman, Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies, Congressional Research Service Report, R44017, updated January 11, 2021, 5-8, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44017>; and Alex S. Wilner, "Apocalypse Soon? Deterring Nuclear Iran and Its Terrorist Proxies," *Comparative Strategy* 31, no. 1 (2012): 19, DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2012.647539.

60 Guy Freedman, "Iranian Approach to Deterrence: Theory and Practice," *Comparative Strategy* 36, no. 5 (2017): 403, DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2017.1379831.

61 Katzman, 3-8; Helal Aljamra, "Iraq: Iran's Open Market," *Inside Arabia*, February 12, 2019, <https://insidearabia.com/iraq-iran-open-market/>; and Perry Cammack (Middle East expert and foreign policy analyst, currently program director for peacebuilding, Rockefeller Brothers Funds), in an email to the author, April 4, 2022.

62 Azhar al-Rubaie and Maher al-Hashimi, "Iraqis Complain Basra Market Filled with Iranian Produce," *Arab Weekly*, February 6, 2019, <https://the arabweekly.com/iraqis-complain-basra-market-filled-iranian-produce>.

63 Jane Arraf, "There Is Chaos: Iran-backed Militias Battle Activists in a Holy Iraqi City," *New York Times*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/18/world/middleeast/iraq-karbala-iran-militias.html>.

64 "Thirteen Reported Killed as Iran Revolutionary Guards Target Dissident Sites in Iraq," *Reuters*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-revolutionary-guards-targeted-terrorists-iraq-irna-2022-09-28/>.

65 Michael Knights, "Scoring Iraq's New Government: Metrics for Preserving U.S. Interests," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 19, 2022, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/scoring-iraqs-new-government-metrics-preserving-us-interests>.

66 "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box," *International Crisis Group*, July 26, 2021, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/223-iraq-tishreen.pdf>.

67 "Iraq's Sadrist camp refuses to join new government," *Al Jazeera*, October 15, 2022, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/15/iraqs-sadrist-camp-refuses-to-join-new-government>.

Shaping Choices

Determining these alternatives depends first on being clear not just on what US interests are, but how they interact with others. For the most part, US interests can be characterized as emphasizing counterterrorism cooperation and denying Iran a platform to destabilize the region, while opening Iraqi markets to foreign investment.⁶⁸ While the Iraqi government's cooperation on combatting the Islamic State is probably adequate to contain it, it could do more to reform the economy and open Iraq to foreign investment. Doing so could, over time, set conditions to grow and diversify the economy so that Iraqis have alternatives to government employment, corruption, and criminal activity or poverty.

Parliament, of course, could amplify government efforts through legislation that supports economic diversification, constitutional reform, as well as a more transparent elections and government-formation process. To encourage parliament to take such measures, the public not only needs to vote for candidates who have a nonsectarian, counter-corruption, economic growth agenda, they need to do so in greater numbers. They also need to continue to publicly oppose actors who continue with corrupt, sectarian practices.

While there will always be divergent interests to the extent actors are in competition, it may be possible to establish thresholds where actors are incentivized enough to act (or not act) in ways that improve the situation for everyone, even where actors could have improved their own situation more. What follows is a discussion on general rules US policymakers can follow to create, identify, and take advantage of opportunities to align stakeholder interests and advance US-Iraq relations. Of course, this approach is not intended to be comprehensive as it is impossible to identify what opportunities will arise and when.

As noted above, stakeholders in the US-Iraq relationship are better off cooperating; however, since doing so can make them vulnerable if other stakeholders do not, they have greater reason to compete. To change this dynamic, actors can employ threats and inducements that affect others' ability to realize their interests. To be effective, such measures must be both credible and capable. To the extent such measures raise the stakes, they can incentivize stakeholders to act, which may not be desirable if it exacerbates a conflict of interest. Increasing the value of the status quo can reduce the chances of such conflict, which entails calibrating demands so that concession places

stakeholders—to the extent possible—in positions where they are better off than if they do not concede. Of course, given the complexity of stakeholder relations, such calibrated demands may not always be possible. Therefore, actors should be prepared to manage escalation, in whatever form that takes.

Shaping Credibility and Capability

Shaping others' choices requires having credible and capable rewards and assurances for cooperation as well as threats for actors who choose not to cooperate. Here credibility is a function of an actor believing that it is rational for another to act on a particular measure. If an adversary believes that providing a benefit or acting on a threat makes one worse off than if one does not, then offering or threatening such measures would not be credible. Capable measures are those that actors believe will leave them better or worse off, depending on whether it is a reward or threat, if they comply.⁶⁹ Thus, shaping others' choices depends on other actors believing it is rational for one to promote or defend an interest and that it is irrational for them to challenge it.

Shortcomings in credibility and capability are most evident in the relationships the United States and Iraqi government have with the militias, especially those backed by Iran. As described above, attempts at law enforcement by the Iraqi government or military operations by the United States against militias and their members have typically placed both governments in worse positions than if they had done nothing. For the Iraqi government, failed law enforcement operations undermine its monopoly on force and make challenges more likely. For Washington, its strikes against the IRGC and its proxies, though effective, have undermined Iraqi public views of the United States and eventually resulted in limitations on the US military presence in Iraq.

Under these conditions, the United States essentially has two options: develop capable and credible threats or find ways to induce cooperation, understood here as either a reduction in attacks by militias or increased law enforcement by the ISF. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be much the United States can do regarding the former. Because of their support from Iran, as well as by local actors, militias are resilient against military strikes, sanctions, and other

68 C. Anthony Pfaff, "The Future of US-Iraq Relations," Atlantic Council, April 2020, 9, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Future-of-US-Iraq-Relations-Report-Web-v8-2.pdf>.

69 Frank C. Zagare and D. Marc Kilgour, *Perfect Deterrence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66-67.

measures the United States or the Iraqi government might take. Moreover, they are also able to communicate more directly and credibly with the Iraqi public, which allows them to mobilize public opinion against the United States. The point here is not that the Iraqi government or United States should not impose costs on the malign activities of militias. Imposing costs can limit resources as well as raise their threshold for acting. However, as deterrents, such threats will remain ineffective.

Imposing costs also can lower the threshold for cooperation. However, as the previous administration's "maximum pressure" policy toward Iran clearly showed, costs alone, no matter how high, are rarely persuasive, especially when the other actor perceives the cost of cooperation as high.⁷⁰ This point does not mean the policy was necessarily unwise, just that its utility lies in the extent it reduced Iran's capabilities, not in changing Iran's behavior.

What is not clear is what inducements put the United States in a better position: it makes no sense to incentivize an adversary's cooperation if doing so places one at a disadvantage or otherwise makes one worse off. For example, integrating militias through the PMF umbrella was intended to make them responsive to the Iraqi government by making them dependent on the funding they would receive. However, that failed to change their behavior because their connections to political parties enabled parliamentary support, regardless of government interests; external funding, including Iranian support⁷¹ or criminal activity,⁷² made threats to diminish the budget less capable; and the Iraqi government had no other effective means to hold them accountable.

Changing the Stakes to Improve Alternatives

Stakes, as described here, are determined by the value of the interest and the likelihood of conflict. The higher the stakes, the more rational it is for one to bear associated costs and any escalation. For example, to the extent Iran sees a US military presence as a threat, its threshold to act against that presence is low. To the extent actors perceive their best option to remove that presence involves violence,

the likelihood of attacks against US forces will remain high. Under such conditions, actors may feel a sense of urgency to seize the initiative and make the costs of doing so more reasonable.⁷³ As RAND's Michael Mazarr has pointed out, "when a potential aggressor sees an urgent need to act," deterrence usually fails.⁷⁴ Thus, one should avoid raising the stakes under these conditions unless escalation is not one's worst outcome.

While this dynamic can apply to any number of interactions among Iraq's stakeholders, for the United States this applies most directly to interactions with Iran and its proxies. US regional efforts to counter Iran often come at the expense of improving relations with Iraq. The more pressure Tehran feels due to US and partner actions, the less tolerant it can be of a US presence in the region. This low tolerance is especially acute in Iraq, which is not only a neighbor, but would also be a significant security concern if it were to join the United States and Gulf countries to oppose Iran's regional objectives.

Changing Competitors' Value of the Status Quo

Survival of the status quo depends on how highly valued it is. Even if actors do not prefer it relative to their own alternatives, it may still be preferable than the consequences of challenging it.⁷⁵ In many ways, the situation in Iraq reflects such an equilibrium. While few, if any actors, prefer the current situation, it seems preferable to the kind of cooperation—and possible sacrifice—necessary to effect meaningful change. This is the point that KH leader Abu Ali al-Askari made in response to Sadr's call to disband militias: it can happen only if all militias do so, including Sadr's own and the Kurdish peshmerga too, he said in a news interview.⁷⁶ Thus, it may be preferable to live in an Iraq where militias have disarmed or fully integrated into the ISF; however, militias have every reason to worry if the first one to disarm will be around to see it. Changing that status requires not just increasing costs to the current arrangement but making alternatives more attractive.

70 Elliot Abrams, "Did the 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign against Iran Fail," Council on Foreign Relations (blog), July 12, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/did-maximum-pressure-campaign-against-iran-fail>.

71 Nada and Rowan, "Profiles: Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq."

72 Sadiq Hassaan, "Iraqi Militias Are Developing Local Funding Sources for Social Activities, Fikra Forum (commentary initiative), Washington Institute, June 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-militias-are-developing-local-funding-sources-social-activities>; and Ranj Alaaldin and Vanda Felbab-Brown, "New Vulnerabilities for Iraq's Resilient Popular Mobilization Forces," Brookings Institution (blog), February 3, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/03/new-vulnerabilities-for-iraqs-resilient-popular-mobilization-forces/>.

73 Robert Powell (professor of political science, University of California at Berkeley), via email to the author, February 14, 2021.

74 Michael Mazarr is quoted by Colin Clark in "What Are the Best Ways to Shield Taiwan From a Hungry China?," *Breaking Defense*, July 29, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/07/best-ways-to-shield-taiwan-from-a-hungry-china/>.

75 Frank C. Zagare, *Games of July: Explaining the Great War* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 47-48; and Frank C. Zagare, *Game Theory, Diplomatic History, and Security Studies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 141-142.

76 Abdul-Zahra, "Iraqi Shiite Cleric Calls on Pro-Iran Militias to Disband."

The October elections and the ongoing government formation may provide opportunities to change this dynamic. Public anger over the divisive role militias play already makes militias appear less attractive. What is thus needed is a more attractive alternative. One alternative, of course, is the Iraqi Security Forces. According to 2020 polling, the army and police were trusted to some degree by 78 percent of the population, suggesting things have improved significantly since their 2014 collapse.⁷⁷ While that trust has likely declined after both participated in violence against protestors, a 2021 National Democracy Institute poll suggested that decrease is modest and that the public blamed Iran-backed militias for most of the violence.⁷⁸

Making them a better alternative will require significant improvements in capabilities and professionalism. In fact, in the aftermath of the ISF's 2014 collapse, potential recruits perceived even Iran-backed militias as more legitimate, more trustworthy, and providing better treatment than the Ministries of Defense or Interior, which fueled their growth.⁷⁹ Even though Iran-backed militias have lost much of their appeal due to their sectarian and criminal activities,⁸⁰ they likely retain sufficient leverage and influence to remain resistant to any government efforts to hold them accountable.⁸¹ Moreover, while the Iraqi Security Forces were eventually successful against IS, they remain resilient against efforts to fully professionalize. According to a recent report by the lead inspector general for Operation Inherent Resolve, the ISF has made improvements in command and control, including the ability to execute multiple operations simultaneously, and the use of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets; however, shortcomings have persisted in logistics, night operations, situational awareness, maintenance, and information security.⁸² These shortcomings have been widely analyzed and addressed, with the conclusion that any real reform will entail a long-term effort requiring effective leadership in the middle ranks as well as at the top.

Another way to raise the value of the status quo is to find areas of cooperation, no matter how small. The idea here

is that often by cooperating on some issues one is in a better position to exercise influence than if not cooperating at all. For example, in the context of US-China relations, Beijing has pursued a policy of intertwining US and Chinese interests while also establishing a set of alternatives to US-supported global institutions, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, to eventually displace US influence.⁸³ By cooperating with the United States on some interests and challenging it on others, China gains leverage it would not otherwise have. Of course, such cooperation does not prevent confrontation or even escalation; however, it does raise the threshold for actors to challenge a status quo.

This point suggests that the US government should look for more ways to cooperate with the Iraqi government as well as encourage other entities, such as US businesses and foreign partners that are generally supportive of US interests, to engage as well. Moreover, they should engage with as many Iraqi stakeholders and institutions as is reasonable. For example, respondents in the Atlantic Council survey identified the Iraqi Lawyers and Jurists Union as a nonsectarian entity that could play a role in holding government entities accountable and building trust.

Others suggested there were other civil-society organizations that could also play a trust-building role and that there are Iraqi public figures with broad “nationalist” credentials who could be effective messengers for a national unity agenda. Further, given that Iraqis are turning to more local organizations for support, increased outreach to them could pay dividends. Engaging and where reasonable supporting such civic organizations, along with government, security, and business organizations, should create a network of cooperation that will be difficult for adversaries to disentangle.

Where possible and prudent, the United States should also look for ways to engage entities in Iraq with which it has an adversarial relationship. Given security concerns, limited immediate benefit, and the likely reluctance of such entities to engage, such opportunities will be limited. However, it still makes some sense to take advantage of opportunities

77 Center for Insights in Survey Research, Opinion Poll of Iraqi Citizens.

78 National Democracy Institute, Iraq: We Want a Homeland: Key Findings of Qualitative Research Conducted in Five Provinces in Iraq, December 2019-February 2020, 24, accessed March 24, 2020, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Iraqi percent20Protests percent20Research percent20Report_EN.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Iraqi%20Protests%20Research%20Report_EN.pdf).

79 Renad Mansour, “The Popularity of the Hashd in Iraq,” Carnegie Middle East Center, February 1, 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62638>.

80 Al-Aaldin and Felbab-Brown.

81 “A Thousand Hezbollahs: Iraq’s Emerging Militia State,” Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, May 2021, 16-28, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Shia-Militia-Briefing-Newlines-Institute-1.pdf>.

82 Sean W. O’Donnell, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2021-December 31, 2021 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2022), [https://media.defense.gov/2022/Feb/08/2002934802/-1/-1/1/LEAD percent20INSPECTOR percent20GENERAL percent20FOR percent20OPERATION percent20INHERENT percent20RESOLVE percent20OCTOBER percent201, percent202021 percent20TO percent20DECEMBER percent2031, percent202021..PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2022/Feb/08/2002934802/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20OCTOBER%201,%20percent202021%20TO%20DECEMBER%2031,%20percent202021..PDF); the Department of Defense inspector general (IG) was the lead IG for Operation Inherent Resolve, the Department of State IG was the associate IG, and the USAID IG participated in oversight of the operation.

83 Manyin Li, “What China Really Wants: A New World Order,” National Review, March 7, 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/03/what-china-really-wants-a-new-world-order/>.

as they arise. The difficulty for the United States—for the government and businesses—is the security situation can limit where they can engage and operate. Still, it makes sense to engage where possible—and safe—and continually look for opportunities to do more. It also makes sense to review security policies and revise them to the extent possible to promote additional engagement.

Calibrating Demands

Even when one has what appears to be credible and capable measures, cooperation can still fail, especially when making demands. When doing so, success depends on the value of the demand, the probability that the actor making the demand would win if the interaction resulted in conflict, and the cost to either actor for engaging in conflict.⁸⁴ The reasoning here is relatively straightforward. If the value of the demand is high for the demanding actor, then conceding is likely to impose a correspondingly high cost on the target of that demand, especially in the zero-sum bargaining that characterize Iraqi politics. To the extent it does not, of course, the chances for success increase: it is generally easier to get actors to concede if they do not care much about what is being demanded from them. It is also easier to get actors to concede if they believe the actor making demands prefers conflict to concession; and their escalation or resistance will fail. Thus, if the value of the demand is equal to or less than the probability of the demanding actor winning, plus the cost to the target for conceding, the coercion should succeed.⁸⁵

There are other considerations when calculating demands. For example, counterintuitively, weaker actors are often incentivized to reject even reasonable demands because of fear that concession will lead to future demands.⁸⁶ Equally counterintuitive, more resolved actors incentivize demanding actors to better calibrate their demands to ensure success. Together, these points mean stronger actors fail more often than they succeed and resolved actors concede more often than they resist.⁸⁷ For example, even though Iran could resume exporting oil and other goods—providing it much needed revenue—by agreeing to the current JCPOA, they have so far resisted out of fear that, as happened with the 2015 agreement, more demands will follow

or the United States will withdraw should any new administration object to the deal. That could mean they set back their program for very little gain.⁸⁸

So an approach to US-Iraq relations that asks for cooperation on combatting malign Iranian influence, confronting militias, and better conditions for US businesses often ignores the actual costs the Iraqi government would incur should it try to deliver. Some of those costs have already been discussed here, especially regarding militias and Iran. Put simply, the greater the pressure placed on militias or Iraq-Iran relations, the more resistance the United States should expect, since it is reasonable for them to believe any concession is likely to yield more pressure and more demands. Given that there is such little room for cooperation, the remaining options seem to be escalation, compromise, or capitulation.

Which one the United States should choose depends on which options leave it better off. Determining that in advance can be difficult. While the escalation that killed dozens of KH fighters and culminated in the strike on Soleimani and al-Muhandis may have long-term impact on their operations, as noted above, its aftermath saw the US embassy attacked and limits placed on US-Iraq military cooperation. Moreover, it diminished Iraqi views of their relations with the United States. Of course, doing nothing would have just invited more attacks; in the end, the embassy remains operational and what constraints there are on the US military presence are relatively minor given what it had been before the attacks.

Given these limits, it makes sense for the United States to expand its engagement on other things, such as economic cooperation. Here US interests concern establishing a business environment that is supportive of US businesses. The difficulty for US businesses is not just the security situation. It is also the difficult regulatory environment. A 2019 US State Department report describes the business environment in Iraq as one of “high risk but rewards can be limited.” Among the concerns it cites corruption, custom regulations, dysfunctional visa and residency permit procedures, and lack of dispute resolution mechanisms, among others.⁸⁹ In fact, a 2020 World Bank assessment ranked Iraq 172 out of 190 surveyed countries regarding supportive business

84 Todd S. Sechser, “A Bargaining Theory of Coercion,” in *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, eds. Kelly M. Greenhill and Peter Krause (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 63.

85 Sechser, *Bargaining Theory*, 63.

86 Robert J. Art and Kelly M. Greenhill, “Coercion: An Analytical Overview,” in *Coercion: The Power to Hurt*, 18-19; and Sechser, *Bargaining Theory*, 69-70.

87 Sechser, *Bargaining Theory*, 73.

88 Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, “Iran Stands to Lose the Most if the Nuclear Deal Isn’t Revived,” *Foreign Policy*, July 25, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/25/iran-nuclear-deal-economy-diplomacy-sanctions-fail-lose-most/>.

89 “2019 Investment Climate Statements: Iraq,” US Department of State, 2019, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-investment-climate-statements/iraq/>.

regulations. Iraq scored especially low on starting a business, enforcing contracts, and getting credit.⁹⁰ The Iraqi government does have a plan to address some of these

concerns, as captured in the government's White Paper for Economic Reform, and it could serve as a basis for future US engagement.⁹¹

90 World Bank Group, Doing Business in Iraq: 2020, Annual Study, 2020, <https://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/i/iraq/IRQ.pdf>.

91 Allawi, White Paper for Economic Reform.

The Way Ahead

With the rules above in mind, there are specific choices actors can make collectively to increase the likelihood of realizing these outcomes, including those discussed below.

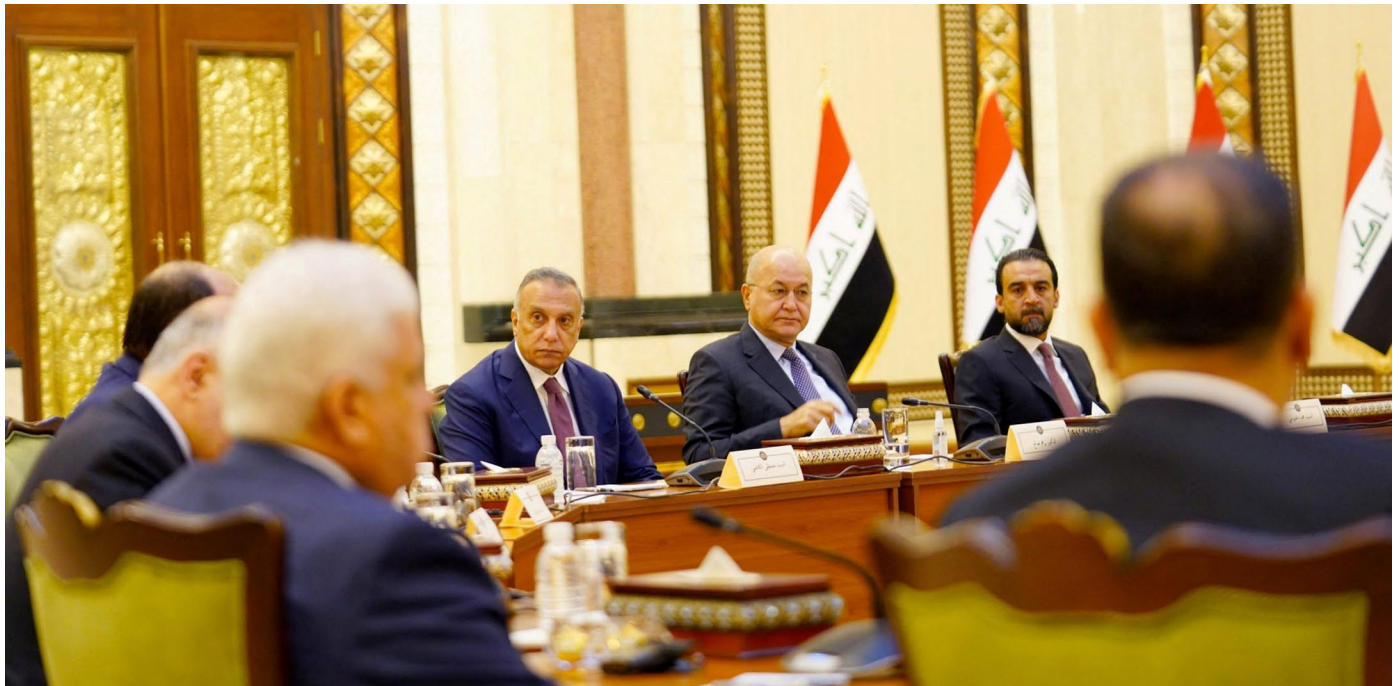
Forming an Inclusive Government

Despite the setback current government formation appears to Iraqi democracy, all hope may not yet be lost. Sudani resigned from Dawa in 2020 after protests underway reportedly to advance his political career because he believed voters were more interested in independent candidates.⁹² This point suggests he may be open to incorporate more of a nationalist reform agenda in future policy. Moreover, despite dominance by Iran-backed parties, the Framework also includes more moderate factions such as Ammar al-Hakim's National Wisdom Movement and former prime minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance who are united primarily by their opposition to Sadr, and little else.⁹³ Even if these more moderate elements do not get adequate

representation in the new government, it is also likely that Kurdish parties will hold key cabinet positions, with the three ministries, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly going to the KDP, and one, the Ministry of Justice, to the PUK.⁹⁴

One other reason for hope is, presumably, no one wants a return to the conditions that sparked protests in October 2019. That means Sudani will have to pay attention to the appearance, if not the fact, of Iranian influence as well as signal openness to reform. Such measures should include curbing militia violence against protestors, attacks against U.S. interests, and a commitment to early elections. Doing so should increase the value of cooperation for all sides. Given the Iraqi public's justified cynicism regarding its government, turning that increased value into an actual incentive to cooperate will depend on broad engagement with a variety of civil-society and religious organizations to increase their stake in the status quo the new government creates.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and Iraqi President Barham Salih and Iraqi speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-Halbousi meet with the leaders of the Iraqi national political parties, in Baghdad, Iraq, September 5, 2022. Iraqi Prime Minister Media Office/Handout via REUTERS



92 Shawn Yuan, "Iraq's new prime minister-designate: Who is Mohammed al-Sudani?," Al Jazeera, October 13, 2022, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/13/iraqs-new-prime-minister-designate-who-is-mohammed-al-sudani>.

93 Mustafa Sadoon, "Understanding Iraq's Coordination Framework," Al-Monitor, August 13, 2022, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/understanding-iraqs-coordination-framework>.

94 "Kurdish parties to get four ministries in Iraq's new cabinet: KDP official, Kurdistan 24, October 21, 2022, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/29770-Kurdish-parties-to-get-four-ministries-in-Iraq's-new-cabinet-KDP-official>.

Reforming the Constitution

Critical to the application of the suggested approach is the creation of new alternatives that put Iraq on a more stable and prosperous trajectory. The single nontransferable vote law was a good step in the right direction because it allowed Iraqis to select a parliament that better reflected their interests. However, as the current government-formation impasse illustrates, that reform was not enough. What needs to happen is comprehensive constitutional reform to improve central government effectiveness while at the same time giving local governments adequate authorities and protection to solve local problems.⁹⁵

Continuing to Build Military and Law Enforcement Capacity

As noted above, the Iraqi government can reduce the need for PMF by prioritizing military and police capacity building. Building that capacity depends in no small part on increased professionalization, which can be facilitated by completing the law on military service and retirement to establish standards for rank and position. Doing so would allow for more competent leadership by making it harder for unqualified persons to purchase positions or be appointed to them as acts of patronage. Specifying standards for each rank and role would help ensure individuals with the right skills and abilities serve in them. It should also encourage merit-based promotions for those who excel.⁹⁶

Resolving Oil Export Issues with the Kurdish Regional Government

As the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Michael Knights has argued, one of the most helpful things the United States can do for Iraq is help resolve the disputes between Baghdad and Erbil, which are largely over oil revenues. He points out that the February 2022 ruling by Iraq's Federal Supreme Court that the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) contracts with international oil companies were illegal not only threatened to raise the price of oil, but set Baghdad and Erbil on a path toward more conflict. In response, he argues for a two-step solution whereby both parties agree to implant the Supreme Court decision for two years while working on legislative revisions that are in their mutual interest. If after two years there is no agreement, either side would have a right to terminate the

agreement or extend it for another year. As he also argues, the United States or the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq could play an important role in encouraging and mediating such a dialogue.⁹⁷

Such a role makes sense. The United States, for example, can offer both incentives and disincentives for participation that make it objectively in both sides' interests to participate and come to an agreement. To the extent that Baghdad and Erbil believe that both discussion and the terms of any agreement are in the others' interest, such mediation can create enough trust to reach it.

Managing Militias

As noted above, there is little in the near term that either the United States or the Iraqi government can do to prevent destabilizing activities by Iran-backed militias. Fortunately for the United States, its interests can be served independent of militia integration into the ISF. For the most part, all the United States requires from the militias is that they do not conduct violent attacks against facilities where US personnel and equipment are stationed. Improving the security situation will give US forces greater freedom of movement, which will allow for better counterterrorism cooperation. To induce such a concession, the United States must lower the sense of urgency militias and their Iranian backers assign to the US military presence, which is largely defined by broader regional trends such as US-Iran relations and regional stability in general. Over time, as Iraqi institutions improve, opportunities will likely arise to better control militia activity or undermine their appeal and reduce their access to funding and resources. To lower the urgency, the United States must lower the stakes associated with its military presence and related activities. What that would look like is the subject of the next section.

Containing Iran

The United States has sometimes been criticized for conflating its approach to Iraq with its approach to Iran. As Anthony Cordesman points out, the United States needs a strong and independent Iraq more than it needs a strategic partner to contain Iranian influence. For Cordesman, the reason for the preference is that the latter is probably out of reach, while the former will still have utility. A strong and independent Iraq would have both the interest and ability to push back on Iran's more malign activities such

95 Pfaff, Connable, and Mostajabi, 5.

96 Pfaff, Connable, and Mostajabi, 13.

97 Michael Knights, "The Necessary U.S. Role in Fixing the Baghdad-Kurdistan Energy Dispute," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/necessary-us-role-fixing-baghdad-kurdistan-energy-dispute>.

as transiting support to its proxies in the Levant and elsewhere.⁹⁸ This analysis suggests, however, that given the current state of US-Iran relations, a strong and independent Iraq may be preferable to a formal strategic partner against Iran. Seeking Iraq as a partner against Iran raises the stakes while decreasing the value of any status quo to the point it has to resist. On the other hand, an Iraq that can contain Iranian influence enough, control its borders adequately, and combat Islamist extremism sufficiently so it does not become a platform for Tehran's destabilizing activities not only contains Iran, but can give the United States more options to shape Iranian behavior.

Moreover, a strong and independent Iraq whose relationship with the United States is not a direct threat to Iran gives Tehran more alternatives for its own relations with Iraq. An Iraq that is aligned with the United States against Iran, as discussed, provides Tehran only one rational response: keep Iraq weak and the United States out. A strong and independent Iraq that can resist Iranian influence that is against its interests, but also does not pose a threat, forces Iran to consider more constructive options. Taking away Iran's ability to dominate Iraq would force it to consider how relations could be mutually beneficial, which would impact its trade relations; as stated above, those relations work against Iraq's economic development and how it engages the Iraqi public. Rather than the current intimidation campaign, Iran would be forced to find ways to be more attractive. There are numerous ways to do that.

There also are numerous ways the United States could help to bring about this outcome. First, obviously, the United States can continue to support Iraq's political and economic development as opportunities arise, including encouraging international investment in Iraq's private sector. Second, Washington can continue supporting the development of Iraqi military and police forces, as previously discussed. Third, the United States can lower the stakes with its relations with Iran to decrease the sense of urgency Tehran attaches to US interests in Iraq.

There are several ways to lower the stakes. The current administration's willingness to reengage on the Joint

Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) may be one step, though the current state of negotiations suggests there is little hope of reaching an agreement. Reducing some sanctions, especially those that have hindered Iran's COVID-19 response, could also relieve a little pressure without enabling much additional bad behavior.⁹⁹ Moreover, supporting Iraq's efforts to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran into dialogue could also help. Whatever steps the United States takes, the purpose should be to establish a new status quo where Iran and its proxies are satisfied enough that the costs of challenging US presence and support outweigh the potential benefit.

The point here is not to appease Iran. Rather, it arises out of a recognition that pressure on Iran equates to more interference in Iraq, where Iran has an upper hand relative to the United States. In fact, critical to this approach's success is developing credible and capable threats should Iran continue to resist. In this context, credibility entails ensuring that Tehran understands the high value the United States places on its relationship with Iraq and a belief on their part that the United States will bear a high cost to maintain it. Capability depends on finding measures that the United States can employ that make Tehran worse off than if it had not acted. So far, as the results of the "maximum pressure" campaign have shown, such measures have been elusive.

Having said that, while the strike that killed Soleimani may have incurred costs to the US relationship with Iraq, it did force Iran to find a way to deescalate tensions with the United States, which it did with its ineffective missile strike against bases housing US troops in Iraq.¹⁰⁰ These points suggest the United States should at least consider direct measures against Iranian assets outside Iraq that would not antagonize the Iraqi public while limiting the chances of escalation. What those are will largely depend on the context in which the next crisis occurs. However, the United States could take a page out of the Iranian playbook and, in addition to potentially engaging IRGC forces directly, consider less violent cyber operations that impose costs that the regime in Tehran will feel.

98 Anthony Cordesman, "America's Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf," Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), January 20, 2020, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-failed-strategy-middle-east-losing-iraq-and-gulf>.

99 Abbas Karimi and Hojjat Salimi Turkamani, "U.S.-Imposed Economic Sanctions on Iran in the COVID-19 Crisis from the Human Rights Perspective," International Journal of Health Services 51, no. 4 (October 2021), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8442125/>.

100 Paul D. Shinkman, "U.S., Iran Poised to De-Escalate Following Retaliatory Strikes," U.S. News and World Report, January 8, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2020-01-08/us-iran-poised-to-de-escalate-following-retaliatory-strikes>.

Conclusion

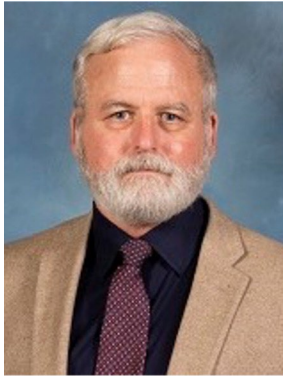
Nothing discussed here will likely fully resolve the dual nature of US-Iraq relations. Rather, the argument is that optimizing US-Iraq relations requires aligning to some degree the interests of multiple actors, all of whom are in competition. Moreover, this analysis avoids specific recommendations regarding Iraq's well-known concerns regarding militia integration, malign influences, corruption, constitutional reform, and so on. While advocating for such aspirational goals has utility, it makes no sense to base a relationship on things one cannot have. Until the underlying and competing interests described above are better aligned, there is little the Iraqi government can do to deliver on any of these issues.

Therefore, what is recommended is an opportunistic approach that seeks to create alternatives to corrosive influences. Creating these alternatives would certainly benefit from greater emphasis on economic cooperation, as more economic opportunities would lower the stakes overall, creating conditions for cooperation on other critical issues. However, economic opportunity also depends on political and security improvements. Whether those improvements come depends on the character of the new government

currently under formation. While the Sadrist victory may yield a prime minister who may be less friendly to US interests, there are other Iraqi stakeholders who may be more open to them.

Taking advantage of that openness does not entail undermining any new Iraqi government. Rather, it involves credible and capable inducements and, where necessary, threats that either raise the stakes to impose costs on an actor or lower them to create more room for cooperation. In changing the stakes, one frequently changes the value others ascribe to the status quo. To discourage subsequent challenges, one should seek ways to raise the value of the status quo, at least up to the point where one is worse off. Where that is not possible, one should prepare for confrontation. Decreasing the chances, or at least the severity of any confrontation requires carefully calibrating demands to encourage cooperation. Big demands, even when accompanied by high costs for failure to concede, generally result in failure. Thus, an approach that looks for cooperation on a broad change of smaller, less costly concerns will have a higher chance of success than one that seeks to directly confront Iraq's corrosive influences.

About The Author



C. Anthony Pfaff is currently a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Iraq Initiative and the research professor for the Military Profession and Ethic at the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), US Army War College in Carlisle, PA.

A retired Army colonel and Foreign Area Officer (FAO) for the Middle East and North Africa, Dr. Pfaff recently served as Director for Iraq on the National Security Council Staff. His last active duty posting was Senior Army and Military Advisor to the State Department from 2013-2016, where he served on the Policy Planning Staff advising on cyber, regional military affairs, the Arab Gulf Region, Iran, and security sector assistance reform. Prior to taking the State Department position, he served as the Defense Attaché in Baghdad, the Chief of International Military Affairs for US Army Central Command, and as the Defense Attaché in Kuwait.

He served twice in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, once as the Deputy J2 for a Joint Special Operations Task Force and as the Senior Military Advisor for the Civilian Police Assistance Training Team. He also served as the Senior Intelligence Officer on the Iraq Intelligence Working Group and as a UN observer along the Iraq-Kuwait border. Prior to becoming a FAO, Dr. Pfaff served on the faculty at West Point as an assistant professor of Philosophy. As a company grade Army officer, he deployed to Operation DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM with 82nd Airborne Division and participated in Operation ABLE SENTRY with the 1st Armored Division.

Dr. Pfaff has a bachelor's degree in philosophy and economics from Washington and Lee University, where he graduated cum laude with honors in philosophy; a master's degree in philosophy from Stanford University, with a concentration in the history and philosophy of science and where received a graduate fellowship at the Center for Conflict and Negotiation; a master's in national resource management from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, where he was a distinguished graduate; and a doctorate in philosophy from Georgetown University.

Dr. Pfaff has authored more than twenty articles in professional and scholarly publications including, Proxy War Ethics, in the Journal of National Security Law and Policy; "A Crisis of Norms: Fighting Irregular Wars Well," in Transformations of Warfare in the Contemporary World (Temple, 2016); "The Ethics of Complex Contingencies," and "Officership and Character," in The Future of the Army Profession, 2nd Ed (McGraw Hill, 2005), "Toward an Ethics of Detention and Interrogation: Consent and Limits," in Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly (2005); and "Aligning Means and Ends: Towards a New Way of War" (2011) and "Officership: Character, Leadership, and Ethical Decision Making" (2005) in Military Review; and "The Ethics of Espionage," in the Journal of Military Ethics (2003). He has also published a number of monographs with SSI including "Resolving Ethical Challenges in an Era of Persistent Conflict," (2011), "Development and Reform of the Iraqi Police Forces" (2008), and "Peacekeeping and the Just War Tradition" (2000).

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