The Outcome of Invasion: US and Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq

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Note: This draft is being circulated for comments and suggestions. Please provide them to acordesman@gmail.com
Iraq has become a key focus of the strategic competition between the United States and Iran. The history of this competition has been shaped by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the 1991 Gulf War, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since the 2003 war, both the US and Iran have competed to shape the structure of Post-Saddam Iraq’s politics, governance, economics, and security.

The US has gone to great lengths to counter Iranian influence in Iraq, including using its status as an occupying power and Iraq’s main source of aid, as well as through information operations and more traditional press statements highlighting Iranian meddling. However, containing Iranian influence, while important, is not America’s main goal in Iraq. It is rather to create a stable democratic Iraq that can defeat the remaining extremist and insurgent elements, defend against foreign threats, sustain an able civil society, and emerge as a stable power friendly to the US and its Gulf allies.

Iran has very different goals. It seeks to ensure that Iraq does not serve as a base for the US, serve US interests, or reemerge as a threat to Iran. Iran shares a long and porous border with Iraq, and seeks to create a stable and malleable ally, not a peer competitor. It seeks to rid the country of American influence – particularly of American military personnel – to the greatest extent possible. Iran has aggressively used its networks, patronage, economic ties, religious ties, aid money, and military support to various factions in Iraq to achieve these goals.

Iran, however, has overplayed its hand at times and created anti-Iranian popular backlash. Resentment over Iran’s political and economic influence, as well as Iranian incursions into Iraqi territory, fuels a deeply seeded Iraqi mistrust of Iran with roots in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. Politically, Iraq’s Shi’ites are far from united and in the most recent elections lost ground to Iraqiya, which loudly attacked Iranian influence. The ISCI, Iran’s closest ally, badly lost ground, though the Sadrist continue to be critical to the Maliki coalition.

This competition between the US and Iran has reached a critical stage as the US prepares to withdraw its military forces and drastically scale down its aid program. The advancement of Iranian ambitions following the US withdrawal depends on how successful US efforts are in building an enduring strategic partnership with Iraq. Much will depend on the level of continued US diplomatic, advisory, military, and police training presence in Iraq, and on Iran’s ability to exploit the diminished US presence.

So far, the US has had limited success. It was not able to keep troops or bases after 2011, and it is has steadily cut back its goals for security and civil aid, and a military and police advisory presence. Responsibility for US competition with Iran in Iraq has also shifted from the Department of Defense to the State Department without any clear agreement on either the US or Iraqi side as to how the Strategic Framework Agreement will gain real meaning after all US combat troops leave in December 2011.
The US and Iraqi forces scored impressive tactical victories against the insurgents in Iraq during 2005-2009, but the US invasion now seems to a de facto grand strategic failure in terms of its costs in dollars and blood, its post-conflict strategic outcome, and the value the US could have obtained from different uses of its political, military, and economic resources. The US went to war for the wrong reasons – focusing on threats from weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi-government sponsored terrorism that did not exist. It had no meaningful plan for either stability operations or nation building. It let Iraq slide into a half decade of civil war, and failed to build an effective democracy and base for Iraq’s economic development. Its tactical victories – if they last – did little more than put an end to a conflict it help create, and the US failed to establish anything like the strategic partnership it sought.

The US invasion did bring down a remarkably unpleasant dictatorship, but at cost of some eight years of turmoil and conflict, some 5,000 US and allied lives and 35,000 wounded, and over 100,000 Iraqi lives. The Congressional Research Service estimates that the dollar cost of the war to the US alone is over $823 billion through FY2012, and SIGIR estimates that the US and its allies will have spent some $75 billion on aid – much of it with little lasting benefit to Iraq.

The State Department must now take the lead at a time when the Iraqi government is too fractured to agree on a strategic relationship, and when US congressional and public support for funding such a relationship is both uncertain and declining. The State Department assumed full responsibility of the US mission in Iraq in October 2011, and broadened diplomatic, advisory, training, and other development goals characterized under the Strategic Framework Agreement. Its original request for $6.83 billion for FY2012 was of unprecedented scope for State and its program is being steadily down-sized by budgetary restraints, security concerns, the withdrawal of US troops, and inconsistent political will in both Iraq and the US.

Now that there is no prospect of a continued US troop presence past the December 2011 deadline, State will find it difficult to support a major military, police, and civil advisory effort or play an active role in helping Iraq heal its ethnic and sectarian divisions and end what is still a high level of internal violence. While plans remain in flux, the State Department will also have to depend on private security contractors to make up a majority of the 9,600-16,000 personnel that are planned to be part of the post-2011 State mission for security, road movement, helicopter support, police training and other functions. The presence of contract security forces is particularly sensitive to Iraqis. Security contractors remain targets and certain groups will continue to fuel sectarian tensions, and it is unclear that Iraqi forces can take up the burden of either internal security or protecting the kind of US presence that is currently planned after 2011.

Threats from both Sunni and Shi’ite hardline extremists make it clear that US troop withdrawal will not put an end to violent retaliations against the US and GOL. Yet, the US must depend on State Department-led political, economic, and security training efforts to bolster Iraq’s capacities and to counter Iranian influence. The US ability to help Iraq create the broader economic and political reforms, legal incentives necessary for economic development, and Iraqi government’s capacity in these areas, remains as important as military and police assistance and training.

Measures that reduce ethnic and sectarian tensions, stem corruption and enforce rule-of-law are necessary to give the Iraqi government legitimacy while building the foundation for security.

In contrast, Iran still has a long history of tension and conflict. Most of the Shi’ite Iraqi clergy is quietist and does not support Iran’s concepts of an Islamic revolution or a Religious Supreme Leader. Sunnis and Kurds do not support Iranian influence in Iraq, and polls show that both
Sunni and Shi’ite Iraqi Arabs see themselves as having a very different cultural and national identity from Iranian Persians. Many of Iran’s actions and economic activities since 2003 have led to tensions with various factions in Iraq.

At the same time, Iraq has lost virtually all of its military capabilities to defend against Iran as a result of the 2003 invasion. It now enjoys deep ties to the ruling Shi’ite parties and factions in a country with which it once fought a fierce and bloody eight-year war. It plays an active role in mediating between Iraqi political leaders, it has ties to the Sadrists that are now the largest party in Iraq’s ruling collation, and the IRGC has significant influence over elements within the Iraqi security forces. During the past seven years, Iran has also deployed a large mix of cultural, military, and economic resources available to influence Iraq. Iran will leverage its resources to ensure Iraq prevails as an ally. Yet Iran’s role in Iraq is complex, and it will be no simple task to mold Iraq into the ally Iran wishes it to be.

The end result is that the US and Iran will continue to compete for influence in Iraq, especially in aid, political development, military sales, and security training. This competition will not only have a major impact on Iraq, but the far broader range of US and Iranian competition in the Arab world – especially the Southern Gulf, in Turkey, and in dealing with Iran’s efforts to create an area of influence that includes Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and which poses a major challenge to Israel.
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Historical Background

The competition between the United States and Iran for influence in Iraq became a key US foreign policy issue in 1979, when the revolution in Iran toppled the US-installed Shah. That same year, Saddam Hussein formally assumed power. These events brought to power two regimes that were hostile to the United States. That same year the new Iranian leadership took Americans hostage at the US embassy, and President Jimmy Carter placed Iraq on a list of states sponsoring terrorism.2

Iran and Iraq remained rivals as long as the Shah remained in power, but avoided large-scale conflict. The Shah’s support for revolts by Iraqi Kurds in the early to mid-1970s helped force Iraq to accept a border settlement favorable to Iran in return for the Shah ending aid to the Kurds. The Iranian revolution, however, exploited tensions and provided the perceived instability that would lead to war between the two countries.

The new Iranian regime was actively hostile to Iraq both on religious grounds and because of the Iraqi government’s treatment of Khomeini after he had fled to Iraq due to his opposition to the Shah. Although Saddam Hussein initially supported the Iranian revolution, it soon became clear that Iran’s new leader sought to export his religious revolution to Iraq, and sent “guides” to Iraq in an effort to persuade Iraq’s Shi’ites to overthrow the Ba’ath regime. At the same time, Iran seemed divided and vulnerable, with uncertain loyalties among its military forces.

The Iran-Iraq War

The end result was that Saddam Hussein prepared an invasion of Iran that he launched in 1980, initially claiming that this was to liberate the Arab population of southwestern Iran – the area that has most of Iran’s energy resources. This began the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted until the summer of 1988, and became one of the bloodiest wars in modern history.

The US opposed Iraq’s invasion of Iran and did not support its ambitions to acquire territory and influence in Iran in spite of its growing tension with Iran and the Iranian hostage crisis. This policy changed in 1982, after Iran was able to throw back Iraqi forces and went on the offensive in Iraq. Iraq had to turn to the West and the Southern Gulf states for aid, while the US feared an Iranian conquest of Iraq that could destabilize the Gulf.

President Reagan began tilting towards Saddam in an effort to check Iran’s efforts to invade Iraq.3 The Reagan Administration removed Iraq from its list of sponsors of terrorism and began providing money, weaponry, and intelligence to help Iraq in its war. This included “dual-use” technology,4 and industrial goods for missile, chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs and weapons.5 6 A National Security Directive states that the U.S would do "whatever was necessary and legal" to prevent Iraq from losing its war with Iran.

The US also became embroiled in the Iran-Contra scandal, which involved transferring arms to Iran in an effort to buy the freedom of hostages being held in Lebanon by Iranian-backed Hezbollah, even as it steadily became more active in supporting Iraq. In 1987 the US began reflagging Kuwaiti tankers to prevent Iranian attacks on tankers and other targets in the Gulf that supported Iraq. The US role in the “Tanker War” was an important factor in Iraq’s ability to keep fighting and eventually force Iran into a ceasefire.
The 1991 Gulf War

The Iran-Iraq War ended in a 1988 ceasefire, leaving Iraq the largest military power in the region, but crippled economically and with massive debt to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Saddam first sought payment from the Southern Gulf states for Iraq’s “defense” against Iran, and then invaded Kuwait in August 1990, seeking to annex Kuwait, seize its assets, and pressure the other Arab Gulf states into debt forgiveness and aid. He acted to avoid the repayment of Iraq’s war debt, end disputes over Kuwaiti oil production and gain control of its oil resources, and at least demonstrate to Saudi Arabia that Iraq had the potential to invade it as well.

Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait presented a major threat to US strategic interests. The US responded with Operation Desert Shield, an American mission to deter attacks against Saudi Arabia. It then launched Operation Desert Storm, a US and Saudi-led and UN-approved military campaign to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. 7

In spite of a massive Coalition military victory that liberated Kuwait, Saddam Hussein’s regime survived – largely due to the US calculation to avoid the chaotic aftermath of Saddam’s removal and to maintain his utility as a counterweight to Iran. Saddam moved from a defensive posture to one that threatened Kuwait and succeeded in repressing internal uprisings and dissent. The US subsequently worked with its Gulf, British, and French allies to maintain “no-fly zones” to protect Iraq’s northern Kurds and southern Shi’ites, while UN Security Council sanctions on Iraq virtually halted its military modernization, though had a devastating effect on Iraqi society. This situation lasted until the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

The sanctions and no-fly zones also helped secure Iran from Iraq. There was little Iran could do in Iraq except sponsor weak exile movements until another US-led coalition destroyed Saddam’s regime and Iraq’s remaining military power in the spring of 2003.

The 2003 Invasion of Iraq

As Figure 6.1 shows, the 2003 invasion weakened Iraq’s forces to the point where they ceased to be a key check on Iran’s influence in the region. Yet, the swift destruction of Saddam’s forces gave rise to Iranian fears that Iran would be next, and coupled with the invasion of Afghanistan, created a situation in which the US effectively occupied two of Iran’s neighbors. This led Iran to reshape its forces and military exercises out of fear that the US would invade Iran or otherwise intervene militarily. These fears were fueled by both official US warnings about military options to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and a long series of speculative and inaccurate media reports about US invasion plans and preparations for such actions. 8

After the US-led invasion, Iran initially took a wait-and-see approach to Iraq and made sure that it avoided confrontations with the Coalition. 9 At the same time, the Coalition Provisional Authority sought to persuade Iran to play a constructive role vis-à-vis Iraqi Shi’ites, who make up between 60-65% of Iraqis. 10 11 Whether it was sincere or not, Iran initially offered to cooperate with the United States in Iraq, as it had in the invasion of Afghanistan.

When the US rebuffed the offer, Iran began to call for the withdrawal of US troops, challenge the legitimacy of the Coalition Provisional Authority, push actively for Iraqi self-governance, and call for elections that it knew would bring Iraqi Shi’ites into power. 12 Iran pursued a strategy of backing pro-Iranian or sympathetic Iraqi Shi’ites, and to a lesser extent Iraqi Kurds, in order to
promote a weak federal state susceptible to Iranian influence. This strategy had significant success, although the risk of a popular nationalist backlash against Iran was and is ever-present.

Figure 6.1: Iran and Iraq Military Balance in 2003 and 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Manpower</td>
<td>424,000</td>
<td>513,000</td>
<td>8:10</td>
<td>191,957</td>
<td>523,000</td>
<td>2:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserve Manpower</td>
<td>650,000</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>19:10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Battle Tanks</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>1,565</td>
<td>7:5</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>1,613</td>
<td>1:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OAFVs</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>815</td>
<td>8:5</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>7:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APCs</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>4:1</td>
<td>1,479</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>23:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towed Artillery</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>2,085</td>
<td>9:10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2,010</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP Artillery</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>1:2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRLs</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>1:5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Aircraft</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>11:10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Helicopters</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>6:5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major SAM Launchers</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>11:10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Aftermath of the Invasion

The US invasion of Iraq has proved to be a grand strategic failure. The US went to war for the wrong reasons – focusing on threats from weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi-government sponsored terrorism that did not exist. It had no meaningful plan for either stability operations or nation building. It let Iraq slide into a half decade of civil war, and failed to build an effective democracy and base for Iraq’s economic development. Its tactical victories – if they last – did little more than put an end to a conflict it help create, and the US failed to establish anything like the strategic partnership it sought.

The US invasion did bring down a remarkably unpleasant dictatorship, but at cost of some eight years of turmoil and conflict, some 5,000 US and allied lives, 35,000 wounded, and over 100,000 Iraqi lives. The Congressional Research Service estimates that the dollar cost of the war to the US alone is over $823 billion through FY2012, and SIGIR estimates that the US and its allies will have spent some $75 billion on aid – much of it with little lasting benefit to Iraq.

Iraqi politics have become so complex and unstable that neither the US nor Iran has been able to exert dominant or consistent influence. Since 2003, the US position in Iraq has been undermined by US failures to plan for or execute effective stability operations following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The US rushed a poorly planned and underdeveloped nation-building effort that many Sunnis felt favored Shi’ites, while it also faced opposition from Shi’ite leaders like Moqtada al Sadr. The resulting rise of Iraqi Shi’ites and drift towards civil war opened the door to increased Iranian influence in Iraq.

The US made other significant missteps. For example, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, L. Paul Bremer, issued Order Number 2 on May 23, 2003 that formally dissolved the Iraqi army, leaving a Sunni-dominated officer corps and 400,000 soldiers unemployed. More broadly, however, the US was unprepared to carry out armed nation building in the critical period immediately after the fall of Saddam’s regime, which contributed to the release of deep divisions between Shi’ites and Sunnis as well as between Arabs and Kurds.

By late 2004, lack of progress led to a Sunni-dominated insurgency and a civil conflict where Sunni Islamists gradually replaced the supporters of Saddam Hussein, and the leading insurgent movements became tied to al-Qaida. Iran, in turn, supported the Shi’ites and saw the developing conflict as an opportunity to limit US influence and power. Iran took advantage of the porous border, newfound freedom of communication and transportation between the two countries, and post-war chaos to develop unprecedented and broad-based influence in Iraq.

Iran also sought to extend its influence across a wider spectrum of liberal secularists, the Kurds, and Shi’ite Islamists. Reports by coalition forces show that Iran used money, weapons, training, and other forms of support to bolster both Shi’ite and non-Shi’ite allies inside Iraq, in order to disrupt US forces and ensure Iraq was too weak to pose a challenge to Iranian security and interests.

According to a State Department memo obtained by Wikileaks, Iran provided $100-200 million a year to its clients in Iraq. It also sought to prevent and discourage an American attack on Iran, create a buffer zone against invasions from its west, cultivate an Arab partner, and counteract Sunni religious extremism. According to some analysts, Iran also exploited the crisis in Iraq to help counter against criticisms of its nuclear program, offset international sanctions in response
to its nuclear programs, weaken the American military by keeping it preoccupied in Iraq, and help suppress Iraqi-based Iranian dissidents like the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization.\textsuperscript{19}

**US Withdrawal and Competition for Post-Withdrawal Influence**

The US gradually corrected many of the mistakes it made between 2003 and 2007. It changed its approach toward Iraq from one of trying to quickly transform the politics, governance, rule of law, and economy of Iraq to one of helping Iraqis build as unified a state as possible and security forces capable of defeating extremists and insurgents, as well ones that can eventually become capable of deterring and defending against external threats.

Since 2008, the US has sought to create an Iraq that is not reliant on Iranian aid or vulnerable to Iranian influence, and which is tied to a strategic partnership with the US. It has also set more practical goals for Iraq. On November 13, 2009, the US embassy in Baghdad laid out a much more modest approach in a memo that was among the US diplomatic cables made public by Wikileaks:

> Our objective in Iraq should be less about countering all-things Iranian, and more about developing viable alternatives and approaches that gradually alter the GOI's political, economic, and social worldview. Development of viable international alternatives in Iraq is one of the most effective measures of countering Iranian ambitions and, ultimately, integrating Iraq as a constructive member of the international community. Specifically, our ongoing efforts to bolster the GOI through capacity building and assistance within the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) and to remove Iraq from Chapter VII remain our most valuable tools in this regard. Given the value placed on the SFA by the GOI and the Iraqi public, our ability to recognize, enhance, and exploit the value of the partnership will constitute an essential element of any effort to counter "malign" Iranian influence.\textsuperscript{20}

The US, however, has had uncertain success. American efforts to create stable and inclusive governance have clashed with Iranian efforts to support Iraq’s Shi’ites, and have not succeeded in uniting Iraq’s Sunnis, Shi’ite, and Kurds. The US and Iran have also competed for influence within the Iraqi Security Forces and for domination in the post-invasion security environment. The failure to renegotiate a US troop presence to continue after 2011 has significantly altered the pattern of US-Iranian competition. Other shifts occurred in 2008 with the end of the most serious fighting, the conclusion of most US military operations in June 2010, and the creation of a new Iraqi government in late 2010.

The US side of this competition has been shaped by two major agreements signed in November of 2008: The Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) and the “Security Agreement” (SA) often referred to as the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). These agreements provide the US avenues to influence and cooperate with Iraq, and ultimately, compete with Iran.

The SOFA established rules and procedures for US personnel operating in Iraq and the US military’s role in countering threats. It included a timeline for the withdrawal of US troops, beginning in 2009 from Iraqi cities and ending with the complete withdrawal from Iraq no later than December 31, 2011. All the other provisions under the SOFA expired three years after its signing, or November of 2011. Among these provisions was an agreement to strengthen Iraqi Security Forces, which included training, equipping, supporting, supplying, and addressing logistical systems, to include transportation, housing, and supplies.\textsuperscript{21} The rights to conduct military operations and assist Iraqi forces against terrorists, outlaw groups, and remnants of the former regime, were unique to the SOFA, and expired at the end of 2011.\textsuperscript{22}
Any presence of US troops beyond 2011 – and many aspects of the transfer of responsibility for the future role of the US to the State Department – required the renegotiation of the Security Framework Agreement, or in some cases through a memorandum of understanding. The SFA outlines broader bilateral relations between the two countries, including political, cultural, economic, and security interests. This includes programs that support cultural exchanges, democratic institutions, social welfare and human rights, rule of law, and aspects of bilateral trade. It does not stipulate specific US assistance levels. The SFA remains in force until either party gives one-year notice of its intent to terminate the agreement. Section III of the SFA briefly addresses “Defense and Security Cooperation”, but states “cooperation shall be undertaken pursuant to the (SOFA).”

The US failed during 2011 to reach an agreement to keep deploying some US troops in Iraq. The US commander in Iraq initially sought to maintain some 30,000 troops. This goal was not approved in Washington and was cut to 9,000-11,000 during the spring and summer of 2011. In September 2011, the US acknowledged it was in negotiations with Iraqi officials to maintain a troop presence after the December 2011 withdrawal deadline. The Obama administration expressed a desire to keep a force of 3,000 to 5,000 troops to continue “training missions” for Iraqi forces. This was a much lower number than previously advocated for by US military and political leaders. In October 2011, Iraq’s political leaders agreed to keep US military trainers in Iraq, but failed to grant US troops immunity from Iraqi law. The US has said any such restriction would prevent a deal from moving forward and a deal on an extension was aborted.

At the same time, the State Department assumed responsibility in Iraq as planned October 2011 and continued its ongoing mission of building Iraqi institutional capacity under the SFA. Although the work conducted under Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) ended, remaining reconstruction projects continued under the supervision of the Iraq Strategic Partnership Office (ISPO), with Embassy Baghdad’s Political Section responsible for provincial outreach. State is also to have consulates in Basra and Irbil, though plans for Embassy branch offices in Mosul and Kirkuk have been abandoned.

The military function is now under State in the form of an Office of Security Cooperation – Iraq. There are now some 10 (OSC-I) sites that will host a limited number of military personnel who report to the US Ambassador. The OSC will be responsible for coordinating weapons sale, providing long-term assistance to the Iraqi Security Forces, and other military and security-related tasks. As of November 2011, ten OSC sites were operational. State will also oversee the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) in its downsized police-assistance program.

Iran has met these changes with mixed success. Shi’ite political fragmentation and anti-Iranian popular backlash have complicated its ability to gain influence and create a pro-Iranian coalition. Iran worked with Iraqi Shi’ite political leaders to form a new government in 2010, while continuing to bolster the political importance of Sadrists and support various Shi’ite militias. Iran has been a major cause of continued instability through its support for attacks on American forces and the Iraqi government via a powerful military branch, the Qods Force, of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.
An Increasingly Uncertain Future Base for Competition

The US is currently committed to defending Iraq in the event of an attack, but the balance of influence is changing. America’s aid packages to Iraq are rapidly decreasing as the US economic crisis and debt issues combine with weariness over the Iraq and Afghan Wars and result in Congress being less willing to appropriate Iraqi aid. Additionally, Iraq’s instability has made it difficult to convince American financiers to invest in Iraq. On the other hand, Iran’s significant aid and greatly expanded commercial ties make them one of Iraq’s most important trade partners. Iraqi imports of Iranian goods may reach $10 billion by 2012, and Iraq is increasingly dependent on Iranian energy imports.\(^{29}\) Much will depend on how the US reacts to the growing Iranian role in Iraq.

Iraq’s response to the US-Iranian competition has been equally complex. Iraq is both diplomatically and militarily weak, the Maliki-led government is deeply unpopular with most Southern Gulf and many other Arab states, and Iraq must now constantly try to find a balance between conflicting pressures from the US and Iran. Iraq has tried to walk the line between the two competitors, preventing a major rift with either nation. Iraq needs trade and cross-border support from Iran, just as it needs aid, diplomatic, and military support from the US.

Historically, Iran and Iraq have been adversaries, and despite cultural and religious ties many Iraqi Shi’ites proudly fought and died in the war with Iran. Iraq has a strong current of nationalism, and many in the Iraqi military see Iran as a major future competitor. Yet many Iraqis also deeply resent the American presence in their country and blame much of the violence since 2003 on US and US-led Coalition forces. Most Iraqis do not want either the US or Iran to meddle in Iraq. According to a February, 2009 ABC news poll, only 18% of Iraqis feel that the US is playing a positive role in Iraq, with 64% believing that it plays a negative role. However, Iran does even worse: only 12% believe it plays a positive role in Iraq, with 68% of Iraqis believing it plays a negative role.\(^{30}\)

The Regional Response to Developments in Iraq

Iran continues to seek ties that will lead Iraq to support Iran rather than assist in US attempts to contain Iranian ambitions. Iraq’s much-reduced military capabilities make it dependent on aid, military sales, and training from the United States, yet Iraq still lacks the resources and cohesion to resist against Iraqi coercion and an defend against Iranian aggression.

Iran’s influence in Iraq, and the growing uncertainty over the future nature of the US role in Iraq, has also had a broader impact. Regional actors, especially Saudi Arabia and Jordan have expressed reservations and criticisms of Iran’s role. They worry about the development of “a Shi’ite crescent” of influence – from Hezbollah (the only active militia in Lebanon) and Syria (ruled by Shi’ite Alawites) to Iraq and Iran.\(^{31}\) Prior to the January 2005 elections, leaders in Iraq and in the region accused Iran of coaching candidates, pouring money into campaigns, and even rigging the election.\(^{32}\) Jordan’s King Abdullah II claimed that over a million Iranians went to Iraq to vote in the election and Iran was giving money to the unemployed in order to influence their vote.\(^{33}\)

The Saudis have expressed concern over Iran’s role in Iraq and are worried about the spread of the Iranian model of Shi’ite governance, terrorists flowing from Iraq to Saudi Arabia, and the long-term oil issues in Iraq.\(^{34}\) In September 2005, Saudi Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister, said, “The Iranians now go in this pacified area that the American forces have
pacified, and they go into every government of Iraq, pay money, install their own people, put their own – even establish police forces for them, arms and militias that are there and reinforce their presence in these areas.”

That same year, a leaked State Department memo shows, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah privately expressed anger over the fact that, “whereas in the past the US, Saudi Arabia and Saddam Hussein had agreed on the need to contain Iran, US policy had now given Iraq to Iran as a ‘gift on a golden platter.’”

Experts like Ellen Laipson, President and CEO of the Stimson Center, counter with the argument that Saudi Arabia and Iraq’s other Arab neighbors made few investments of political capital to counter Iranian influence despite their rhetoric and complaints to US diplomats. Whether this is their fault a lack of credible opportunities, or clearly defined US efforts to show Arab states that it supported such intervention, is a matter of debate.

**Political Competition**

Iran has heavily influenced Iraqi politics since the run up to Iraq’s first post-invasion election. It has backed all of the major Shi’ite parties to varying degrees, assuring that whichever party wins elections will be beholden to Tehran. Iran has also been heavily involved in most post-election coalition-building talks. However, Iranian influence is limited, and constantly risking a popular backlash. Iran’s backing of multiple Shi’ite parties has undermined Shi’ite unity, as has its support for various militias. Despite its influence, Iran has been unable to block the major US-Iraqi accords that cement their relationship, such as the Status of Forces and Strategic Framework Agreement.

**The First Round of Iraqi Governments and Elections**

Iran has played a critical role in backing candidates and parties, as well as brokering post-election political agreements to form the majority government in every one of Iraq’s elections since 2003. Ironically, American efforts to produce a representative government in Iraq did much to serve the Iranian goal of creating a Shi’ite-dominated government. This first became clear in June 2004, when the US Coalition Provisional Authority transitioned control to a sovereign Iraqi Interim Government with Iyad Allawi as its prime minister.

The creation of Allawi’s government was intended to provide another half year for the US to continue to shape Iraq’s governance before elections created a new and more lasting body. In practice, however, the lack of Iraqi Sunni participation in the elections on January 30, 2005, was a boon to Iran and a blow to the American goal of creating an inclusive political process that would bring stability to Iraq.

The elections were supposed to form a broadly based 275-member National Assembly that would write Iraq’s new constitution. However, the Sunni boycott was apparent in the results, as 240 of the 275 seats were won by three parties: the Shi’ite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) won 140 seats, the Kurdistan Alliance won 75 seats, and the Iraqiya List, led by Iyad Allawi, won 40 seats. Iran played an important role in bringing together the UIA coalition, which included most of Iraq’s Shi’ite political groups, most prominent of which were the Abdul Aziz al-Hakim-led Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (SCIRI) and Nouri al-Maliki’s Dawa Party. The two major parties in the Kurdistan Alliance were the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The PUK’s leader Jalal Talabani became President of Iraq and
Massoud Barzani became President of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Ibrahim al-Jaafari of the Dawa Party became Prime Minister.

A second round of elections on December 15, 2005, created a new 275-member Council of Representatives with a five-year term. The Shi’ite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance was again the largest bloc, winning 128 seats. This time, Moqtada al-Sadr’s followers joined the bloc, and the end result put Islamic parties, with many leaders who had been exiled in Iran, in leading positions. The Kurds won 53 seats. The Sunni-Arab Tawafuq party, also known as the Iraq Accord Front, won the third most seats with 44. Allawi’s former coalition Iraqiya List joined others to form the Iraqiya National List, which won only 25 seats.

Iran was instrumental in assembling the United Iraqi Alliance, whose formation of the government that followed saw Nouri al-Maliki of the Shi’ite Dawa Party replace Jaafari as Prime Minister, SCIRI gain several important ministerial posts, and five Sadrists take ministerial posts.  

### The January 2009 Governorate Elections and March 2010 Parliamentary Elections

More recent Iraqi elections have not clearly favored either the US or Iran, but their net effect has made it impossible for both Iraq and the US to move forward in reaching viable plans to implement their Strategic Framework Agreement. The January 2009 provincial elections saw the fragmentation of the Iranian-backed coalition that had formed the United Iraqi Alliance. Maliki’s Dawa Party separated from ISCI (formerly SCIRI) and formed a new list called State of Law. The three major Iraqi Shi’ite parties were competing with each other, further reducing Iran’s influence. State of Law came in first in most Shi’ite governorates, while ISCI’s best performance in the South was in Najaf, where it tied with State of Law for seven seats each out of 28 in the governorate council. Sadr’s list performed even worse, failing to win any governorate outright. Although Iran’s attempt to revive the United Iraqi Alliance failed, post-election complications gave Iran a major role in forming the next Iraqi government.

The March 7, 2010 parliamentary elections resulted in a very different outcome than previous elections, and one that has virtually paralyzed many aspects of Iraq’s political, economic, and security development ever since. Iyad Allawi’s Iraqiya list won the most seats with 91, while Maliki and his allies – who split from the United Iraqi Alliance to form the State of Law list – won 89. The successor to the UIA, the Iraqi National Alliance, won 70 seats and the Kurds 57.

These results initially seemed encouraging to the US, as the two candidates seen largely as more secular and less connected to militias fared the best, and the possibility for an inclusive government was promising. Iran had pushed for a unity Shi’ite alliance, though according to Reidar Visser, it wanted to allow Sunnis token power. Meanwhile, Allawi spoke often in Iraq and foreign cities of the danger of Iranian influence.

It soon became clear, however, that the election had produced near paralysis as two conflicting coalitions struggled for power without showing the ability to compromise. This gradually gave more power to the Sadrists – the largest victor on the Shi’ite side. The subsequent stalemate to form a majority coalition that could appoint a new prime minister lasted eight months, setting an international record for the longest period of time between elections and the seating of a government.

With Iranian encouragement, Shi’ites -- including Sadr -- came together and supported Maliki in remaining as prime minister. Allawi’s Iraqiya and the Kurds eventually agreed to participate. In
November 2010, the outlines of a new government took shape. Maliki remained as Prime Minister, Jalal Talabani remained as President, and the speakership of the Council of Representatives went to Osama al-Nujeifi – a member of Iraqiya with a tense relationship with the Kurds, especially regarding Kirkuk’s future.  

The US did play a major role in forming the new government, and US officials applauded its apparent inclusiveness when it was finally formed. American officials pointed to the influence it had in pushing for the outcome, including the adoption of an American suggestion that Allawi head a new, “National Council for Security Policy”. However, that council’s powers were poorly defined and some critics argued that the power-sharing arrangement would sharply reduce the quality of governance.

These new arrangements remain fragile, and effectively paralyze the government’s ability to move forward effectively in many areas. Allawi had broad-based appeal, but was left without significant power. In one poll, 56% of Iraqis said they would not see the government as fully legitimate if Allawi was not part of it, while 31% said they would see it as “legitimate” or “somewhat legitimate.”

It has never been clear how the National Council for Security Policy could fit into the legal framework of Iraq, since it is not mentioned in the constitution, and Maliki and Allawi have never agreed on a functional role for the Council. Moreover, serious Sunni and Shi’ite differences remain, and key sources of tension between Arabs and Kurds have not been resolved. For example, the Kurds won Maliki’s tentative acceptance of the international oil deals it was making outside of the federal government’s authority, but it is still far from clear the extent of what this means in practice.

The eventual creation of a new government resulted in a Shi’ite majority leadership in Iraq that Iran, partially due to the pressure exerted by Iranian Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, worked hard to establish. Iran played a role in the Independent High Electoral Commission’s decision to ban Sunni and secular candidates from the vote. Iran’s efforts to include the supporters of both Maliki and Sadr in the new government is part of a long-standing strategy in which Iran supports diverse Shi’ite factions in order to serve their interests regardless of the outcome. Iran was able to overcome the tensions between Maliki and Sadr to create an Iraqi government beholden to Iranian influence. Iran may also have provided $8 million a month to Moqtada al-Sadr’s party for the 2010 election. Without Iranian backing, Sadr is left with a far less durable foundation, while Iran is far less influential in Iraq without Sadr.

This leaves a power structure that can do little to eliminate the remaining sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi’ite, or the ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds. It has done nothing to halt the tensions that affect smaller minority groups. Figure 6.2 shows US estimates that nearly half of Iraq’s minorities have been driven out of Iraq since 2003.

Moreover, as the October 30, 2011 reporting by the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction has made clear, it has left a high level of violence inside Iraq, and a number of extremist groups that will continue to threaten Iraq in the future. This violence is show in Figure 6.3, and the October 30, 2011 SIGIR report to the US Congress makes it clear that there is a growing pattern of violence and assassination directed at Iraqi security forces and officials. The report uses declassified US intelligence sources to describe the key sources shown in Figure 6.4.
The 2010 political impasse, however, may have had at least some positive outcomes that help the US see a stable system emerge. The training of the bureaucratic machinery in the Iraqi government has been forced to mature as it ran the country while Iraq’s politicians struggled to form a new government. The judiciary was also empowered, first in declaring it unconstitutional for the Council of Representatives to not meet, therefore pushing the parties to come to a deal, and second, in declaring the powers of the presidency set out in bylaws to be unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{52} If Iraqiya and the Sunnis can attain real power within the government, this is likely to favor the United States, which pushed for an inclusive government. The Obama administration pushed successfully for the creation of a new Political Council for National Security to give an important role to the Sunnis.\textsuperscript{53} However, the amount of influence within the government that Iraqiya will actually wield is still uncertain, especially as the Political Council for National Security’s powers remain undefined. The American plan would have given the head of the council power over security policy, military appointments, and the budget.\textsuperscript{54}

Moreover, Iraqi Sunnis recognize the need to find some modus vivendi with Iran despite their distrust. After the March 2010 parliamentary elections, Iraqiya made concessions to Iran and supported friendly ties, which Iran reciprocated. Following the elections, the spokeswoman for Allawi’s bloc said that Iraqiya would not allow the use of Iraq for an attack on Iran.\textsuperscript{55} Iran, in turn, said that all major coalitions should play a part in Iraq’s new government, including Iraqiya; perhaps out of concern that Sunni alienation would lead to continued US presence and too much instability within its neighbor.\textsuperscript{56}
### Figure 6.2: The Impact of Internal Conflict on Smaller Minority Groups 2003-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minority Community</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>Predominantly Assyrian, Chaldean, Armenian, and Syriac; most live in or around the Kurdistan Region; a small number of Armenians live in Basrah.</td>
<td>1.4 million</td>
<td>600,000 to 400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmen</td>
<td>Descendants of Ottoman Empire-era soldiers and traders, about 60% of Turkmen are Sunni Muslim and the rest are Shia.</td>
<td>800,000</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabaeans</td>
<td>Gnostics who follow John the Baptist, Sabaeans do not accept converts and must live near a river to observe religious rites; concentrated in southern Iraq.</td>
<td>60,000 to 70,000</td>
<td>5,000 to 10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yazidis</td>
<td>Ancient group with religious traditions drawn from Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism; Yazidis do not accept converts or marry outside the faith; concentrated around Sinjar Mountain west of Mosul.</td>
<td>600,000 to 700,000</td>
<td>Less than 500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabaks</td>
<td>Most identify as Shia and the rest as Sunni, but do not observe all pillars of Islam and draw religious traditions from Yazidis and Sufism. Shabaks have lived along the Ninewa Plains since 1502.</td>
<td>400,000 to 500,000</td>
<td>200,000 to 500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feyli Kurds</td>
<td>Ethnically Kurdish Shia, the Feyli live mainly in Diyala province along the Iranian border, in Baghdad, and in Iran. Under Saddam Hussein’s regime, they were stripped of Iraqi citizenship.</td>
<td>1 million to 1.5 million</td>
<td>100,000 to 120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaka’is</td>
<td>Kurds who speak their own dialect, Kaka’is draw religious traditions from Yazidis, Zoroastrianism, and Shia Islam. They live primarily in Kirkuk and Mosul.</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>60,000 to 70,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Some population estimates were obtained from community leaders who met with the Minority Rights Group International; others were taken from SIGIR interviews with community leaders and U.S. government reports.

Figure 6.3: The Continuing Pattern of Violence in Iraq

MONTHLY SECURITY INCIDENTS AND CIVILIAN FATALITIES, 1/2004–9/2011

- Uprisings in Baghdad, Fallujah, and Najaf
- Parliamentary Elections
- Constitutional Referendum
- Samara Mosque Bombing
- Iraqi Elections
- Security Incidents
- Provincial Elections
- U.S. Surge
- National Elections

Note: Data not audited. Totals for September 2011 include data through September 23. “U.S. Surge” denotes period when at least 150,000 U.S. troops were in Iraq.


PEOPLE KILLED, INJURED, OR KIDNAPPED IN ACTS OF TERRORISM, 2006–2010

% of Worldwide Total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worldwide</td>
<td>74,695</td>
<td>71,795</td>
<td>54,263</td>
<td>58,711</td>
<td>49,901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>38,817 (52.0%)</td>
<td>44,014 (61.3%)</td>
<td>19,077 (35.2%)</td>
<td>16,869 (28.7%)</td>
<td>15,109 (30.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>3,534 (4.7%)</td>
<td>4,467 (6.2%)</td>
<td>5,479 (10.1%)</td>
<td>7,582 (12.9%)</td>
<td>9,016 (18.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since 2010, terrorist attacks have primarily targeted Iraqi security forces and government officials, but they have also been aimed at stirring ethnic tensions. AQI has been operating primarily in regions with majority Sunni Arab populations, particularly focusing its efforts in and around Baghdad and Nineawa, but appears unable to command territory or population centers. The degradation of AQI’s capacities is expected to continue under the pressure of an ISF now more capable of targeting, capturing, and detaining terrorists and disrupting their networks. However, according to DoS, AQI has adapted to the changing security conditions and remains capable of coordinated mass-casualty attacks and assassinations.

Other Sunni terrorist groups remain active as well. Ansar al-Islam, with both Kurd and Arab membership, operates in northern Iraq. The group has claimed responsibility for the second-largest number of Sunni terrorist attacks in Iraq (behind only AQI). Another group operating in northern and central Iraq, the Jayish Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi, emphasizes what it claims to be the religious justifications for its attacks. Shi’a extremist groups – backed by Iranian funding, training, and weapons – also present a threat to Iraqi and US military forces. DoS reported that attacks by these groups have decreased this year, but their Iranian-supported networks continued to operate throughout Iraq’s southern provinces.

Shi’a militias in Iraq Jayish al-Mahdi (JAM) and its successor, the Promised Day Brigade, are the militant arm of the Sadrist movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Since the militia’s inception in 2003, JAM has engaged in countless attacks on US forces, Iraqi forces, and Sunni civilians. The group was responsible for some of the most gruesome sectarian violence in Iraq. Early in 2007, at the beginning of the US military surge, al-Sadr ordered his followers to stand down, and shortly thereafter, he left for Iran. Following the military campaign in Basra, Sadr City, and al-Amarah in the spring of 2008, al-Sadr disbanded his militia. Several months later, he announced the transition of his movement into a non-violent organization called the Munahidoon, but he maintained a small group of Iranian-supported militants called the Promised Day Brigade.

Assaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, or League of the Righteous): Having emerged in 2006, AAH is led by Qais Khazali, who broke with al-Sadr and was officially named the leader of the Iranian backed AAH. Khazali’s fighters traveled to Iran for special training by the Revolutionary Guards and members of the Lebanese Hezbollah. They received four to six weeks of training in the camps in the use of mortars, rockets, sniper tactics, intelligence gathering, kidnapping operations, and explosively formed penetrators. AAH conducted attacks on Coalition forces from as early as the summer of 2006 and continues intermittently, also engaging in kidnappings and sectarian violence.

Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH, or the Hezbollah Brigades) Active in Iraq since 2007, KH operates mainly in Shi’a areas of Baghdad, such as Sadr City, and throughout southern Iraq. Like AAH and the Promise Day Brigade, it is supported by Iran. KH is independent from Moqtada al-Sadr and has operated separately since its inception, albeit with some cooperation and operational overlap. Since 2007, KH members have conducted multiple attacks against US forces using rocket-propelled grenades and improvised rocket-assisted mortars. Since the beginning of 2011, the majority of Iranian-backed attacks have occurred in southern Iraq, with sporadic incidents taking place in northern provinces and in Baghdad. Toward the end of the quarter, Iran-sponsored attacks in northern provinces appeared to be subsiding, although USF-I officials reported that these networks still possess the capacity to conduct operations.

Sources: SIGIR, Quarterly Report, October 30, 2011, p41, 56-57.

**Competition for the Shi’ites**

Iran continues to provide both overt and covert support to various Shi’ite groups in Iraq, while many Iraqi Shi’ites have openly express their gratitude. In the initial period after the US invasion, Shi’ites in the Governing Council praised Iran’s role in Iraq, particularly for harboring the opposition prior to 2003. Sayyid Abd el-Aziz al-Hakim of SCIRI even suggested Iraq pay reparations to Iran for the Iran-Iraq War. As sectarian violence, political infighting, and
economic hardship have ebbed and flowed, Iran has maintained its influence through close ties to Iraqi Shi’ites.

The US, in turn, has sought to limit Iranian influence by focusing on security and governance, while persuading Iraq’s Shi’ites to move toward reconciliation with its Sunnis and Kurds through a national and independent government. The US has had some success in meeting these goals, but the 2003 invasion reopened linkages between Iran and Iraq that Iraqi Shi’ites rely on at critical junctures. Previously, Ba’athist rule suppressed open cultural connections to Persian culture and Iran. Iraqi Shi’ites lost contact with relatives in Iran, and some Iraqis even received financial incentives to divorce their spouses if they were suspected of having Persian ancestry. Some urban Iraqi Arab Shi’ites stopped celebrating Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, though Kurds continued to celebrate it.

This situation changed quickly in Iraq’s Shi’ite-dominated areas following the invasion, and movement across the Iran-Iraq border became easier. Iranian religious books in Arabic began to replace those from Lebanon and Egypt, and the Iranian government sponsored popular book fairs at Baghdad universities. At the same time, even independent Iraqi clerics like Grand Ayatollah Sistani benefited from Iranian knowledge of media and the Internet, which expanded the distribution of their work. Moreover, Iranian and Iraqi ties built upon the fact that some senior commanders in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, members of the Iranian judiciary, and other Iranian leaders were born in Iraq, in addition to some Iraqi expatriate businessmen being based in Iran.

Iran has been able to extend broad support to Shi’ite Islamic groups. In 2005, the London Times identified eight significant Islamic groups with Iranian ties: the Badr Brigades, the Dawa Party, the Mahdi Army, the Mujahedin for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Thar Allah (Vengeance of God), the Jamaat al-Fudalah (Group of the Virtuous), al-Fadilah (Morality), and al-Quawaid al-Islamiya (Islamic Bases). One estimate placed the amount of Iranian aid per month to Shi’ite militias like the Mahdi Army at $3 million in 2009. In 2006, Iranian and Iraqi Shi’ite interests aligned to an even greater degree against Sunni resumption of power in Iraq. Clerics were mainly silent about Iran’s role in Iraq, while Iranians continued to visit Shi’ite holy sites in Najaf and Karbala, and trade boomed between the two countries.

**Competition for Religious Influence**

Iran’s ability to compete with the US in Iraq is limited, however, by the fact that tensions between Iranians and Iraqi Shi’ites continue to exist. Iraqis – including Iraqi Shi’ites – have not forgotten that the two countries fought an eight-year war that involved trench warfare, human wave attacks, mustard gas, over a million deaths, and millions more wounded and displaced. Relations between Iraqi exile groups in Iran and the Iranian regime before the US invasion were fraught with tensions and resentments.

Iran also had to contend with the power of Iraq’s Shi’ite leader Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, in spite of the fact he was born in Iran and is said to speak Arabic with a Persian accent. Like many other Iraqi clerics, Sistani belongs to the “quietest” trend of Shi’ite Islam, tending to separate the religious from the political. However, he faces competition from other Shi’ite religious leaders who want to see closer integration between religion and politics, including Kazim al-Haeri of Qom, who would be a leading replacement for Iraq’s Shi’ite community if anything were to happen to al-Sistani.
Sistani and most Iraqi Shi’ites do not accept the Iranian Ayatollah as a Supreme Leader of the world’s Shi’ites. Sistani rejects the religious legitimacy of a velayat-e faqih, or supreme religious leader, much less the religious authority of Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. One Shi’ite cleric, Sayyid Ayad Jamaluddin, who later joined Allawi’s list in the December 2005 elections, argued “The leadership of the jurist as in Iran is unique in the history of the Shi’a sect…Ayatollah Khomeini did not rely on specific religious texts to implement the doctrine of the rule of the jurist.” Most Shi’ite parties no longer even support the idea of a theocratic state, though there was some support from Shi’ite quarters for an Islamic state when Iraq’s leaders initially drafted its constitution. In 2004, Sistani criticized Iran’s strategy of what some call “managed chaos”:

“Iran’s policy in Iraq is 100 percent wrong. In trying to keep the Americans busy they have furthered the suffering or ordinary Iraqis…We are not asking them to help the Americans, but what they are doing is not in the interests of the Iraqi people; it is making things worse. We [Iranians] have lost the trust of the Iraqi people [Mardom-e Aragh az dast dadeem].”

Sistani has also often used his moral authority to reduce violence in Iraq and bridge Sunni-Shi’ite and Arab-Kurd tensions that Iran has at times sought to exploit against the US. In 2004, for example, he struck a deal to end a bloody three-week siege of Najaf’s Imam Ali shrine between Moqtada al-Sadr and the Iyad Allawi’s government.

Iraq’s Shi’ite religious leaders may have ties to their counterparts in Iran, but most remain their own masters. Sistani has always pursued his own agenda, sometimes to the benefit of US interests in Iraq and sometimes not. It was Sistani’s nod of approval that allowed the US to delay Iraq’s first elections with minimal unrest. According to a leaked State Department memo, Sistani’s “domineering authority and religious credibility” is Iran’s “greatest political roadblock.”

These differences must be kept in perspective. The relationships between Iranian and Iraqi Shi’ites is far more complex than one where Sistani and the Najaf hierarchy are polar opposites to Iranian clerics, as some proponents of the Iraq War suggested they would be. Iran has also made headway with at least some Iraqi Shi’ite clerics that are not Sadrist. A State Department source claimed that Sistani prevents Iranian students from enrolling in the religious seminary, or the howzeh, to curb Iranian infiltration; however, according to State Department cables, other imams are “‘in the pocket of the Iranians’, despite their proclaimed loyalties to Sistani.” Furthermore, Sistani has long supported Shi’ite unity and has opposed blocs that would cut across sectarian lines. Sistani allegedly opposed the United Iraqi Alliance’s plans to ally with Kurds and Sunnis in 2006.

Nevertheless, most Iraqi Arabs remain Iraqis first rather than Shi’ites or Sunnis. Polls since 2003 have repeatedly shown that most Iraqi Arabs – Sunni and Shi’ite – see themselves as Iraqi and Arab, although the situation with Shi’ite extremists is very different. In a poll conducted in 2008 by the Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies of Iraqis, 69.8% of respondents identified themselves as Iraqi before any other identity.

**Maliki’s Role in US and Iranian Competition**

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s personal and political relationship with Iran has a long and complicated history, and one that illustrates the complex relationship between Iraq’s Shi’ite leaders and those of Iran. Maliki fled to Iran in 1979, where he and the Dawa Party were granted space for a rebel training camp. However, tensions between Dawa and the Iranian government
culminated in Iran’s initiative in 1982 to organize the Shi’ite resistance in the form of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), peeling away members from Dawa and turning over Dawa’s training camp to SCIRI.

As a senior member of Dawa in exile in Iran, Maliki cooperated with Iran to run missions against Saddam Hussein’s regime. However, Maliki chafed under his Iranian handlers and could never fully trust them. Many of those memories still rouse Maliki. On one occasion, he was told he needed to travel twelve hours to reach the one Iranian official who could grant him a travel permit he needed, only to have the official reject his request. On another occasion, Maliki’s recalls his wife giving birth in Ahwaz as the city was under threat from a Saddam bombing, and no Iranians would help him evacuate his wife.

Iran played an important role in bringing together the United Iraqi Alliance, which chose Maliki as their compromise candidate for Prime Minister in May 2006 following five months of negotiations. Iran thought, as Jeffrey White, a former Defense Intelligence Agency Middle East analyst, put it, "he was weak and pliable." At the same time, Maliki initially faced critics who saw him as America’s lackey and reportedly once told then-Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, "I'm a friend to the United States, but not America's man in Iraq." Maliki also resisted early American requests to outlaw Shi’ite militias because he depended on their political support.

Maliki also put distance between himself and the US by criticizing a US raid on Sadr City, condemning US forces and security contractors for civilian deaths, and proposing amnesty for insurgents, even those who had killed Americans. US displeasure with the amnesty proposal led to the sacking of the official in Maliki’s government who had leaked the proposal. Rumors began to circulate in late 2006 that the US was looking to replace the Maliki government for being weak on Shi’ite militias compared to efforts against Sunni insurgents, and its inability to rein in Shi’ite death squads within the Iraqi security forces that were feeding the sectarian civil war.

More broadly, Maliki demonstrated that Iraqi political leaders would steadily assert their own identity. He gradually emerged as a much stronger politician than his critics (and supporters) initially assumed. He maintained close ties with both Iran and the US. He worked with ISCI and the US to combat Shi’ite militias. He battled the Sunni insurgency, convinced disenfranchised Sunnis to participate in the government, integrated militia groups into the government’s security forces through the Sons of Iraq program, and won important battles against Sadr’s Mahdi Army.

Maliki had to carefully balance Iraq’s relationship between the United States and Iran. He depended on American forces to bring stability to Iraq, but needed to maintain an image of independence from the US. Only close cooperation could create enough stability for American forces to leave. According to some sources, Maliki was frustrated by his impression that the US was not committing enough equipment and training to Iraqi security forces, while the US was frustrated that US weapons would fall into the hands of rogue Shi’ite soldiers because Maliki had not done enough to break ties with Shi’ite militias.

Maliki maintained a relationship with Tehran while he fought against Iranian weapons smuggled into Iraq and increasingly committed forces to fight the Sadrist militias who were funded by Tehran. Appearing with Ahmadinejad in Tehran in August 2007, he called Iran’s role in Iraq’s security “positive and constructive.” In early 2008, he almost unilaterally shaped a major offensive against Sadr’s militias and other Iranian-backed Shi’ite militias in Basra. While the
success of the offensive depended on the US rapidly deploying forces and aid, it played a critical role in expanding the central government’s control in Shi’ite areas and limiting Iranian influence.

By late 2008, this campaign and overall patterns in the fighting already had a major impact on the pattern of US and Iranian competition. It produced increased stability that served both Iraqi and American interests and began to create the conditions that made it possible for US forces to drawdown. This success impeded Iran’s strategy of supporting unrest in Iraq, but it did not necessarily reduce Iran’s political power. Iran continued to build up both its political and economic ties to a more stable Shi’ite south and its political leaders. Iran was strong enough to play a major role in shaping the creation of a compromise Iraqi government following the 2010 election, and it also played a major – if not fully understood – role in getting Sadr to throw his support behind Maliki after the 2010 elections.

The end result is an almost complete reversal of the initial judgments of Maliki. Once seen as weak, many Iraqis and international observers are concerned with Maliki’s recent consolidation of power and authority in recent years. Since late 2010, Maliki has served as both acting Minister of Defense and acting Minister of Interior. Protesters, rival politicians, and journalist who speak out against corruption, lack of services, or criticize the government, have been intimidated, beaten, and detained. When tens of thousands protested in February in solidarity with the Arab uprisings elsewhere, 19 were killed and thousands more arrested. Iyad Allawi remains outside of the political system and his party has referred to Maliki as “authoritarian and despotic.”

The Sadrist faction has played a major role in the US and Iranian political competition over Iraq’s Shi’ites. The Sadrs have long been a prominent family in Iraq, both for religious scholarship and their resistance against Saddam. Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr, founder of the Dawa Party in the late 1950’s was hanged by Saddam Hussein in 1980. Baqr al Sadr was an ally of Ayatollah Khomeini during his years in exile in Najaf from 1964-1978. Saddam Hussein also ordered the execution of Moqtada al-Sadr’s father, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, in 1999.

Baqr al-Sadr’s cousin, Moqtada al-Sadr, emerged as a key voice of Shi’ite opposition to the US after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and whose followers began attacking coalition forces in Iraq. Moqtada al-Sadr’s base of support is in Sadr City, a Shi’ite neighborhood in Baghdad, and encompasses mainly lower-class Iraqi Shi’ites. His Mahdi Army, 60,000-strong in 2003, relied on Iranian funding and arms through Iran’s Qods Force. Sadr used the Mahdi Army to challenge the US occupation and attack Sunnis between 2004 and 2008.

The Mahdi Army attacks on US troops were serious enough by 2004 to threaten postponement of the 2005 elections. This could have produced a level of instability and division between Shi’ite factions that did not serve either Iranian or US interests. Iran pressured Sadr into a ceasefire, and the elections proceeded in 2005 as scheduled, bringing to power an Iran-friendly coalition of the United Iraqi Alliance, the PUK, and the KDP. The end result helped both Iran and Sadr. The Sadrist Trend won 30 seats in the December 2005 elections, the largest group in the United Iraqi Alliance, which was the largest bloc with 128 seats.

Sadr, in turn, maintained links to Iran, and Iran to Sadr and Iraq. In 2006, Sadr pledged to support Iran if it were attacked. At the same time, Sadr had problems in maintaining his political position, personal security, and controlling his militia and followers. The Mahdi Army’s killings of Sunnis increased, especially after the February 2006 bombing of the Al Askari
Mosque;107 a Shi’ite mosque in Samarra built in 944 C.E. where Shi’ites believe the 12th Imam hid, marking the first time a religious site was targeted in Iraq after the invasion.108 Although Sadr was the formal leader of the Mahdi Army, he was not completely in control of violence committed by his loyalists. On October 27, 2006, his deputy denounced the dissidents as “people who violated and stood against the wise and honorable leadership.”109

In early 2007, Sadr fled to Iran,110 fearing arrest by the Iraqi government or Coalition forces, as well as various assassination threats. In Iran, he purportedly split his time between living in Tehran and studying at an Islamic seminary in Qom, where he would boost his clerical standing.111

Shifts also took place in 2007 that limited both Sadr and Iran’s influence. Maliki had initially prevented the US from forcefully attacking Sadr’s Mahdi Army in order to maintain the Shi’ite political alliance that Iran had played a role in creating.112 In 2007, that alliance broke down and the US launched a “surge” that targeted both Sunni and Shi’ite extremes.113 This was a major factor in Sadr’s declaration of a ceasefire in August 2007 and helped lower the level of violence in Iraq.114 Maliki, SCIRI, and government forces cooperated with the US to combat Sadr’s Mahdi Army, which was suffering backlash from Iraqi Shi’ites, especially after it took over Karbala’s religious sites.115

Another major turning point in the power struggle between Sadr and Maliki occurred in 2008, when Maliki retook Basra from the Sadrists using government forces, Badr fighters, and SCIRI loyalists in “Operation Charge of the Knights”.116117 During the Battle of Basra, Iraqi security forces recovered weapons from Sadrists marked “Made in Iran.”118 Iran played an integral role in the ceasefire reached between Sadr and government forces.119 Sadr’s defeat in the Battle of Basra helped bring stability, while it shifted the power balance among Iran’s allies. Iran took advantage of the subsequent fracturing of Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army into Special Groups to increase its influence across these more independent Shi’ite groups.

Sadr’s faction failed to win outright control of any province in the 2009 provincial elections. However, it gained several key appointments in southern Iraq through post-election deal making. Sadr did, however, come to benefit from the broad perception on the part of Iraq’s Shi’ites and others that SCIRI and other more moderate Shi’ite parties failed to govern effectively, were often corrupt, and served their own interests.

The 2010 parliamentary elections took a striking anti-incumbent course, greatly diminishing the strength of other Shi’ite parties. The Sadrist Movement, as part of the Iraqi National Alliance, won 70 seats, compared to Iraqiya’s 91 and State of the Law’s 89. After eight months of deadlock following the elections, Iran likely brokered the deal that brought Sadr and Maliki together to represent a majority bloc. However, the “Irbil Agreement” reached in November 2010, which preceded the formation of the Iraqi government, was pushed by US diplomats and did not give any concessions to Sadr.120 The Sadrist faction gained control over several ministries, although this my ultimately lead Iraqi voters to hold them responsible for some of Iraq’s on-going problems. This included appointments to several service-related ministries, including Housing and Construction, Labor and Social Affairs, and Water Resources, making it difficult for Sadr to indiscriminately blame outside actors for Iraq’s problems.121 As of November 2011, Sadrist also chaired the Integrity Committee, Public Works, and the key post of Minister of Planning and Development Coordination.
Sadr returned to Iraq in January 2011, after almost four years of self-imposed exile in Iran. Many hailed his return as a sign of strength and a new era in Iraqi politics. However, threats to his safety again cropped up in 2011, this time from a Mahdi Army splinter group known as Asaib al-Haq. Sadr returned to Iran just two weeks after his initial return to Iraq. In July 2011, the US accused Sadr’s militias for the elevated level of US troop deaths in June 2011. The officials also accused Iran of arming the militias with upgraded rocket-propelled munitions, possibly in an effort to ensure a full US withdrawal and to claim credit for forcing that withdrawal.

Sadr remains adamant that US troops should withdraw by the December 2011 deadline and threatened to reinstate his Mahdi Army if this deadline was not met. In May of 2011, Maliki called on Sadr to accept an extension of US troops in the country if it was backed by a solid majority of Iraqi political parties, the possible result of several high-level US visits with Iraqi leaders in 2011 urging Iraq to make such a request. Maliki stated a request might be made if there were a “consensus” among political blocs, which could be achieved without Sadr’s support.

In a May 13, 2011 sermon, Sadr hinted that he might retract the withdrawal demand if a consensus was formed among Iraqi people that US troops should stay. Sadr stated, “The matter of the lifting of the freezing of the Mahdi Army is connected to the public and political agreement among Iraqis.” However, two week after this sermon, Sadr supporters held a massive march to demand US troops leave on scheduled, and on August 9, 2011, Sadr again threatened direct retaliation against any US troops remaining past the deadline, including those used to train Iraqi forces.

In September 2011, Sadr suspended attacks, stating, “Out of my desire to complete Iraq’s independence and finish the withdrawal of the occupation forces from our holy lands, I am obliged to halt military operations of the honest resistance until the withdrawal of the occupation forces is complete,” but went on to state that, “if the withdrawal doesn’t happen…military operations will be resumed in a new and tougher way.” How Sadr reacts to a limited US advisory presence is a critical aspect of future US-Iranian competition. Sadr remains a pivotal player in Iraqi politics, especially for Maliki’s legitimacy, and within Iraqi society.

**SCIRI/ISCI**

The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), formerly known as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), has strong ties to Iran that began with SCIRI’s refuge in Iran during the Saddam Hussein era. ISCI’s originally followed the vilayet-e faqih and the Iranian Ayatollah, while the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps trained and staffed its 15,000-member militia, now called the Badr Organization, during the Iran-Iraq War. US intelligence officials claim that members of SCIRI were closely tied to Iranian intelligence during the period immediately after the invasion and that the group was heavily funded by Iran. ISCI also served to bolster Iran’s influence in Iraq through ISCI member Bayan Jabr’s tenure as Minister of Interior, when he inserted the Badr Brigade into the Iraqi Security Forces.

The leadership of ISCI has, however, undergone many changes over the years and has been more independent of Iran than these initial US assessments indicate. Mohsen Hakim was the foremost Shi’ite leader in the world from 1955 to 1970 and his sons Ayatollah Sayed Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim and Ayatollah Sayed Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr were among the founders of SCIRI. Sayed Baqir al-Hakim was his father’s representative and eventually worked with Sayed Baqir al-Sadr to establish the Islamic Movement, a political group opposed to the Baathists.
Hakim was arrested and tortured in 1972, and re-arrested in 1977. He was eventually released in 1979, but in 1980 fled to Iran, shortly after his brother Baqir al-Sadr was assassinated by Saddam’s regime.

Sayed Baqir al-Hakim played an important role in forming SCIRI in 1982 while in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. The next year, Saddam’s regime arrested 125 members of his family; his brother Mahdi Al-Hakim was assassinated in Sudan in 1988. In 1991, ISCI led a failed Shi’ite uprising against Saddam Hussein. Over the years, the Hakim family claims over 60 members of the family were killed by the Saddam regime. Sayed Baqir al-Hakim rose in the ranks of Iraqi Shi’ite leadership, and in 2003, he became a grand ayatollah and the marja’a ala, the leading Shi’ite cleric. In his speech after his return to post-invasion Iraq, he thanked Iran for its help and condemned the American occupation. However, he later participated in the new Coalition-supported Iraqi government and claimed to support separation of church and state.

In August 2003, Sayed Baqir al-Hakim and about 75 others died in a car bomb attack on the Imam Ali Mosque, Shi’ite Islam’s holiest mosque. Baqir al-Hakim’s brother, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, took over the leadership of SCIRI. Despite Abdel Aziz Hakim’s connections to Iran, he reformed the organization and even built a relationship with President George W. Bush. He also changed the movement’s name from SCIRI to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), removing the word “Revolutionary,” which ISCI officials said was in reference to the Saddam Hussein regime. That same year, ISCI distanced itself from Iran by stating that it would place more importance on the leadership of Iraq’s Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.

Under Aziz al-Hakim’s leadership, ISCI pushed for greater decentralization and for a period advocated the creation of an autonomous region of nine Shi’ite-majority provinces, much like the Kurdistan Region. In 2008, al-Hakim collaborated with Maliki in getting the Iraqi Army and ISCI’s Badr Organization to cooperate in fighting against Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army in Basra. The resulting victory strengthened Maliki’s hand in security and was a turning point in the civil war.

Since that time, the Hakim faction and SCIRI have lost a significant amount of their influence and power. In 2007, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, formerly a heavy smoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer in Houston and went to Iran for treatment. He died in August 2009. Ammar al-Hakim followed in his father’s footsteps to take over the formal leadership of ISCI.

This was followed by sharply diminished support for ISCI in the elections that followed. The provincial power law of 2008 enacted prior to the 2009 provincial elections favored the ISCI’s desire to decentralize power. However, splits among Shi’ite factions contributed to major losses for ISCI in the 2009 elections, including in Baghdad, Najaf, and Basra. ISCI joined with the Sadrists, the Iraqi National Congress, and other groups in the Iraqi National Alliance, to win 70 seats in the March 2010 elections. However, ISCI placed a disappointing third after Iraqiya and State of Law.

This may explain why Ammar al-Hakim traveled to Iran in April of 2010. ISCI agreed to accept Iraqiya’s inclusion in the government. Iran simultaneously echoed this public support, which was considered as a possible calculation by Iran that its interests were best served through stability. The ISCI’s continued reluctance to support Maliki as prime minister contributed to the long impasse that followed. However, Ammar al-Hakim was among Iraq’s leaders that supported the Irbil Agreement that brokered the impasse with the help of US diplomats.
ISCI remains a powerful Shi’ite group in Iraq and according to a State Department memo released by Wikileaks in November 2009, Iran provides an estimated $70 million to ISCI each year. Ammar al-Hakim consistently rejected the idea of extending the US troop presence past the December 2011 deadline.

**Competition for the Kurds**

Under the Shah, Iran supported Iraqi Kurd’s fight against Saddam as a way of putting pressure on Saddam concerning Iran-Iraq border issues and control of the Shatt al-Arab. The Khomeini government, however, ruthlessly suppressed Kurdish independence movements during the Iran-Iran War. Iran has maintained offices in Irbil and Sulaimaniya since the Kurdish security zone was established in 1992.

At the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran maintained relatively good relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). However, Iran’s internal Kurdish problem has continued to complicate its relationship with Iraqi Kurds. Like Syria and Turkey, Iran does not want to see Kurdish independence and wants to limit Iraqi Kurdish influence. Meanwhile, President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, has spoken out against Iran’s regional influence.

A leaked State Department cable suggests that Iran may have tried to give indirect financial assistance to Gorran, a small Kurdish group that ran in the March 2010 elections, by funding the Jaff tribe, the largest Kurdish tribe in Iraq, some of whom are members of Gorran. Stephen Zunes, who chairs the Middle Eastern studies program at the University of San Francisco, suggests that this may be because Iran saw Talabani as inching too close to the US.

As with Azeris and Baluchis, the United States has worked with Kurds to limit Iranian influence and help them resist Iranian pressure. Tensions exist between Iran and the Kurds namely because Iraqi Kurdistan gives sanctuary to the Kurdish resistance group Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PEJAK), which has carried out successful attacks on Iran.

Iran also accused the United States of funding PEJAK. In retaliation, Iran has carried out limited operations against Kurdish opposition groups inside the Iraqi border. After a bombing in Iran killed 10 civilians in late 2010, Iran publicly announced that it had carried out an anti-terrorist operation in Iraq that Kurdish leaders denied took place. In August 2011, Iran again shelled PJAK targets in northern Iraq, spawning Kurdish President Talabani’s request in front of the UN General Assembly in September that both Turkey and Iran stop bombing Iraqi territories in the Kurdistan region, saying it caused innocent civilian deaths.

Arab-Kurd tensions in northern Iraq are a primary concern moving forward. Land disputes over the oil-rich area continue without proper attention from Baghdad. Tensions between Kurdish fighters and the Iraqi Army remain high despite US-led programs to encourage collaboration. In November 2011, a standoff occurred between the two sides as the Iraqi Army attempted to assume control over a US base in Kirkuk due to be transferred in the coming weeks. A compromise was negotiated, though details of the incident highlight the mistrust Kurds have for Baghdad and the measures Maliki may consider simply to showcase his control.

**Competition for the Sunnis**

Former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, though a Shi’ite, has strong ties with Sunnis and has often criticized Iran for interfering in Iraq. When he rose to power in post-invasion Iraq, he was
supported by Jordan, Egypt, the UAE, Qatar and Rafik Hariri in Lebanon.\textsuperscript{171} Ali A. Allawi, who served as an Iraqi political advisor, former Minister of Defense, and former Minister of Finance, has since argued in \textit{The Occupation of Iraq} that the underlying objective of the Interim Government was to limit Iran’s influence in Iraq prior to the 2005 election, which would likely see increased Iranian influence and domination by Iraqi Shi’ites.\textsuperscript{172}

As long as Allawi was the head of the Interim Government, the US and regional Arab states had an ally in place who would limit religious Shi’ite power in the government.\textsuperscript{173} The UAE and Qatar supported the Interim Government and voiced support for Allawi again when he ran in January 2005.\textsuperscript{174} As the 2005 elections approached, Allawi’s Minister of Defense, Hazem Sha’alan, denounced Iran by calling it “Iraq’s number one enemy” and accused Iran of seizing border posts, sending spies into Iraq, and infiltrating the Iraqi government.\textsuperscript{175} Iran’s support for Shi’ite militia groups who targeted Sunnis further deepened Sunni mistrust of Iran.

The low turnout of Sunnis brought the legitimacy of the January 2005 elections into question and sharply undercut the viability of American efforts in Iraq by giving Iran more influence in the government. This situation eased, however, as the December 2005 elections approached, which saw a rise in Sunni voter participation. Sunni leaders again criticized Iranian influence in the election, such as Interim President Ghazi al-Yawer, and the possibility of a religious state working in Iraq.\textsuperscript{176} However, in both sets of 2005 elections Sunnis did not fare well.

A key turning point occurred in 2008 when Sunnis turned on al-Qa’ida and other insurgents and cooperated with coalition forces in what became known as the Sunni Awakening. In the events that followed the US invasion many Sunnis were alienated by de-Ba’athification laws, the disbanding of the Iraqi military, and exclusion from the 2003 Governing Council, where Shi’ites and Kurds close to Iran gained power.\textsuperscript{177} As foreign fighters poured across Iraq’s western border, many Sunnis in Anbar province were enticed into insurgency by al-Qa’ida, who offered post-invasion security and a rationale that insurgency was their religious duty.\textsuperscript{178}

However, Sunni attitudes towards al-Qa’ida began to shift as they became familiar with al-Qai’da’s methods. Al-Qa’ida’s harsh intimidation tactics, including using suicide bombers, were largely unacceptable to Iraq’s Sunnis. Sunni tribes increasingly saw al-Qa’ida as a foreign entity that posed a greater threat to their livelihood than Iranian or Shi’ite dominance.\textsuperscript{179}

US attitudes towards Iraq’s Sunnis also began to change around this time. The US began to openly acknowledge the importance of Sunni tribes in post-Saddam Iraq and quickly took advantage of growing anti-al-Qa’ida sentiments. The 2007 US troop surge subsequently supported the Sons of Iraq program – a US initiative to transfer the success of the indigenous Sunni Awakening to other Sunni areas in Iraq. The Sunni Awakening had a considerable impact on the scale of al-Qa’ida in Iraq from the end of 2006 through the fall of 2008.\textsuperscript{180}

The relative absence of al-Qa’ida intimidation contributed to Sunnis participating in large numbers in the January 2009 provincial elections and the March 2010 parliamentary elections. Allawi’s Iraqiya slate presented an appealing option for many Sunnis, though likely undercut the success of other Sunni parties, namely the Iraqi Accordance.\textsuperscript{181} Members of the Awakening also did not fare well as candidates.\textsuperscript{182} However, Allawi’s inability to form a majority coalition, and Sadr’s acceptance of Maliki as prime minister under Iranian influence, was a setback for Sunnis hoping to see Allawi as prime minister.\textsuperscript{183} The long-term acceptance of Allawi’s Iraqiya bloc and Maliki’s willingness to ease his grasp on power and lead with an even hand, could dictate the level of acceptance Sunnis have for Iraqi government institutions.
The disqualification of nearly 500 Sunni candidates by the Justice and Accountability Commission (JAC) prior to the 2010 elections was also a major setback for Sunnis. The JAC was headed by Ali al-Lami, a Shi’ite under US custody in 2005-2006 for assisting Iranian agents in Iraq. General Odierno described al-Lami, and his predecessor Ahmed Chalabi, as “influenced by Iran” and working to undermine Iraqi elections. Chalabi was also a main contributor of pre-war intelligence and has been accused of giving US secrets to Iran.

Many Sunnis who fought under the Awakening and Sons of Iraq program anticipated integration into the ISF, appointment to government posts, and payment for their sacrifice. All of these entitlements have been slow to occur and Sunnis have become increasingly frustrated with the Shi’ite-led government. The Awakening fighters have reported being harassed by both sides – by a reemerging al-Qa’ida threat and Shi’ites who question their allegiances. These frustrations have contributing to many Sunnis rejoining al-Qa’ida.

In February of 2011, US Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey testified that Sunnis were experiencing no payment difficulties under Awakening agreements, and as of August 2011, the US reported more than half, or 50,000, had been integrated into the ISF or given civilian government jobs.

The October 2011 SIGIR report to Congress acknowledged the job placement of Sunnis promised under the Sons of Iraq program was stalled. The GOI was considering reforming the program to ensure that the SOI in heavily dominated Sunni provinces like Anbar receive equal compensation as their counterparts in Baghdad. As of November, 2011, the Sons of Iraq continued to operate in nine provinces and numbered approximately 48,000.

The impact of these efforts on US security and ability to main its presence in Iraq was mixed. Although August 2011 was the first month without a US casualty since the invasion, it came after the worst month for US troops and a clear resurgence of Sunni-inspired violence, particularly in Anbar province. Attacks on Iraqi Security Forces and Shi’ites, often by militants posing as soldiers or guards, question Iraq’s ability to maintain its internal security and prevent sectarian retaliations. According to General Jeffrey Buchanan, the Iraqi government focused its counterinsurgency efforts primarily on al-Qa’ida and other Sunni groups in first half of 2011. However, many Sunnis in Anbar believe the Iraqi Army’s presence is Maliki’s attempt to control Sunni populations and efforts to actually address extremists that destabilize Anbar are minimal.

US official estimates of Al Qa’ida’s current threat have been mentioned earlier. Although al-Qa’ida in Iraq is weaker than it was at the height of the Sunni insurgency, analysts suggest it is shifting its tactics and strategies to exploit gaps left by the withdrawal of US troops in an attempt to rekindle sectarian conflict. Instead of attempting to control territory and impose their ideology, it has gone underground and periodically conducts large-scale attacks. In November 2011, General Buchanan stated there were 800 to 1,000 members of al-Qa’ida in Iraq. The military reported in July 2010 there were approximately 200 “hard core” fighters.

The Maliki government has also claimed that there are other significant Sunni threats. In November 2011, intelligence supposedly provided by the interim Libyan government suggested a Ba’athist coup was being devised in Iraq. Maliki responded by arresting over 600 alleged Ba’athist conspirators. Though the scale of arrests is unprecedented, similar actions have occurred periodically. The previous, month, for example, 145 university employees in Tikrit were arrested for being Ba’athists. An unidentified source within the Iraqi government later stated the intelligence tip never occurred. The Sunni response has been symbolic calls for
autonomy from Baghdad. These developments, combined with a resurgent al-Qa’ida and Maliki’s authoritarian streak, are a troubling pattern of sectarian tensions leading up to US troop withdrawal.

**The Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK)**

The Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), or the People's Mujahedin of Iran (PMOI), is a 5,000-10,000-member organization located in Camp Ashraf, Iraq claimed to be dedicated to toppling the Iranian regime. The group is a radical mix of a cult center around its leaders – the Rajavis, and opposition to the Iranian regime. Under the Shah, it killed US and Iranian officers and officials, including the murder of Colonel Lewis Hawkins in front of his family. After the Shah’s fall, it carried out terrorist attacks against Iranian targets inside Iran. When it lost its power struggle with Khomeini in the early 1980s, it moved to Iraq and got funding, arms, and training from Saddam Hussein.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the MEK was forced from their bases near the Iranian border and its leaders relocated to Paris in 1981. In 1986, the MEK relocated to Iraq with the support of the Iraqi government. After the US invasion in 2003, 3,400 members of the MEK were disarmed, isolated in Camp Ashraf, Iraq, and given protected status under the Geneva Convention.

Iran has pressured Iraqi leaders to eliminate the MEK. The State Department designated the MEK as a terrorist organization, but this and the decision to disarm and protect the MEK did not satisfy Iran. Although the MEK has been weakened in recent years, its revelations of Iranian nuclear facilities in Natanz and Isfahan in 2002 lead to international concern over Iran’s nuclear program and altered their significance. The group also alleged in September 2010 that Iran has another nuclear site near Qazvin, 70 miles west of Tehran.

In recent years MEK supporters have lobbied Washington to end the group’s isolation at Camp Ashraf and to remove its name from the list of foreign terrorist organizations. Among its supporters, the MEK enlists several current and former high-level US diplomats, politician, and military leaders. The MEK tightly safeguards its funding, but has long devoted large amounts of money to lobbying Congress and attracting powerful figures to their cause. In 2007, the State Department stated that the MEK still had the “capacity and will” to commit terrorist acts and also rejected any notion that the group was a viable opposition movement in Iran. Several US think tanks, including RAND, have categorized the MEK as a cult.

Iran has put increasing pressure on Iraq to deal with the MEK while attacking the US for its continued existence. In May of 2011, Iranian state media reported that the US was actively training the MEK at Tajil military base in Iraq. The report states that the US is training the MEK in bombing and other terrorist operations, and characterized the MEK as wishing to “break away” the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan.

The US withdrawal may lead to targeted violence against the MEK. Both Shi’a and Kurdish groups believe the MEK was used by Saddam to quell uprisings in 1991, and Iran continues to push the Iraqi government to expel the MEK. In September 2011, ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim stated that the MEK must leave Iraq for past terrorist acts and for betraying the Islamic Republic of Iran.
**Competition for Influence in Iraq’s Security Forces**

Since the 2003 invasion, the US and Iran have competed for influence over the Iraqi security forces. This competition has now reached a critical stage as the US and Iraq must decide the degree in which a strategic partnership is formed, including military, police, and security training and advising.

**The Struggle to Create a Strategic Partnership and Extend the US Troop Presence**

The last active US combat forces left Iraq in August 2010, marking the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the beginning of Operation New Dawn. Some 49,000 advisory troops, four advisor assistance brigades, and a limited number of special operations forces (SOF) remained to train, advise, and assist Iraq’s security forces after that date, including the military, intelligence, and police. These US troops continued to serve a number of other important security functions: carry out kinetic operations against Iranian-backed and other militant groups; provide training to the ISF; take part in joint patrols along the borders of the Kurdish provinces and help integrate ISF and Kurdish forces; and act as a deterrent to Iraq’s neighbors — in particular Iran.

Both the US command in Iraq and many senior Iraqi officers and officials felt that US forces should continue to play such role after December 2011 as part of the Security Framework Agreement. Moreover, several US allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, voiced concerns that withdrawing all US troops would leave Iraq open to Iranian influence.

Nevertheless, implementing a meaningful Strategic Framework agreement and extending a US troop presence after December 2011 presented problems on both sides. In the US, public support for a strategic relationship with Iraq was uncertain, and budget pressures and war-weariness created a strong incentive to withdraw all US troops. Indeed, even the more modest plans for the State Department and USAID to take over much of the US effort in Iraq faced growing budget pressures, and leaving even a fairly small number of US troops in Iraq entailed a bigger price tag. A slight rise in American combat deaths in Iraq in 2011 did not help matters. Neither did the perception that Iraqi security forces were not doing enough to go after the Shi’ite groups attacking Americans. Neither President Obama nor President Maliki was publicly backing plans to keep US troops in Iraq after 2011.

On the Iraqi side, Prime Minister Maliki had to deal with Sadr, Iranian pressure, and accusations that he was an American stooge, at the same time he had to fend off accusations of being too close to Iran. He had previous ruled out extending the US troop presence in the past, stating, “The last American soldier will leave Iraq...this agreement is not subject to extension, not subject to alteration. It is sealed.” Any plan to extend the US troop presence would also have to be approved by the Iraqi Parliament.

Public opinion was another factor. Most Iraqis supported withdrawing US troops by the end of 2011. According to a 2009 ABC News poll, 46% of Iraqis felt that US troops should leave sooner than the end of 2011, with only 16% wanting them to stay longer, and 35% feeling that the withdrawal timetable was right. Sunnis were particularly opposed, with 61% in favor of a faster timetable and only 4% wanting troops to stay longer.

These issues became steadily more critical to politicians and policymakers in both the US and Iraq as the deadline for removing US forces approached. In May 2001, Maliki had stated that a request for US troops might be considered if a 70% concurrence among Iraq’s political blocs were reached. On August 3, 2011, the major factions, excluding the Sadrist, gave Maliki their
backing to negotiate, and in September, the US publically acknowledged negotiations were taking place.

Both sides privately examined options for extending the presence of at least a small number of US troops. The senior US commander in Iraq, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, originally recommended some 14,000-18,000 troops, while other reports speculated leaving 10,000 troops. In September 2011, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta endorsed keeping a smaller force of 3,000-4,000 as what one senior official called, “a small, temporary military presence,” as part of a plan to create a major American Embassy presence in five different parts of Iraq that would support security contractors in a police advisory effort. This plan also included a strong Office of Security Cooperation staffed by civilians and military personnel to support training and equipping Iraqi Security Forces.

NATO agreed to keep a small force in Iraq for training purposes; there are currently 160 NATO staff conducting training operations in Iraq, of which are American, and military and intelligence officials pushed for greater CIA involvement following the US troop drawdown, primarily to counter Iranian influence and thwart arms smuggling.

By September, however, the total force was far smaller than the force desired by top US military officials and drew growing criticism from several US politicians. Iraqis across the sectarian spectrum also voiced their discomfort with such a small US force, while others still remain adamantly opposed to any presence. Many Iraqis remained conflicted over a desire for the US to withdrawal and feelings of mistrust and fear towards Iraqi institutions.

As has been touched upon earlier, these issues became most in October 2011. In early October 2011, Iraq’s political leaders finally agreed to keep US military trainers in Iraq past the December deadline, but failed to agree they could without immunity from Iraqi law. The US had stated previously that any such restriction would prevent it from keeping US forces in Iraq. As a result, the Obama administration decided to withdraw all forces aside from a small office linked to the US Embassy. The closest it came to keeping US forces in Iraq was the announcement that it would work with Kuwait to keep US forces in Kuwaiti bases that could react to crisis scenarios. The US had 23,000 in Kuwait as of October 2011, and had deployed at least a combat battalion in Kuwait -- and sometimes a full combat brigade to secure the area. It also had propositioned supplies for larger force if one had to be deployed to the region.

In late-November, 2011, the US Commander in Iraq, General Lloyd Austin, summarized US-Iraqi relation moving forward:

“As we leave, we can expect to see some turbulence in security initially, and that’s because you’ll see various elements try to increase their freedom of movement and freedom of action,” despite better conditions than at any other point, “there will probably be unfinished business for many, many years to come…Al-Qaeda will continue to do what it’s done in the past, and we expect that it’s possible they could even increase their capability…If the Iraqi security forces and the government of Iraq are able to counter that, it will be a good thing. If they can’t, they’ll continue to grow in capacity.” In addition, he warned against militias, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Promised Day Brigade, which could threaten the remaining US civilian presence. He stated, “These are elements that are really focused on creating a Lebanese Hezbollah kind of organization in this country…As we leave, if those elements are left unchecked, they will eventually turn on the government, and they should be concerned about that.” He did conclude that “there’s likely to be setbacks, some tough times in the days ahead…But I’m very hopeful we’ll stay on course…This is clearly not an endpoint…We really intend to remain engaged with Iraq, and we look forward to having Iraq as a great strategic partner in the future.”
The Future US Role in Iraqi Security

The US took the lead in the development of the Iraqi security forces from the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior after 2003. From 2003-2011, it trained, partly funded, armed and equipped Iraqi forces, and increasingly fought beside them. This US presence and role in creating post-invasion Iraq not only gave the US influence over the shape of Iraqi security forces, but also developed important relationships between the US and Iraqi security leaders. Western intelligence agencies developed close ties to the Interim Government’s Defense Minister, Hazem Sha’alan; Interior Minister, Falah al-Naqib; and the head of Iraq’s intelligence services, General Muhammed Shahwani, each of who warned of the influence of Iran.226

The future level of such US influence is uncertain. At the end of December 2011, the US military will be reduced to an advisory role and to providing arms transfers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) support. Funding for this role is also at risk as Congress contemplates funding cuts. Moreover, no one can be certain how the decisions of the Iraqi government will affect a US strategic partnership after December 2011.

If the US effort is funded, and the Iraqi government supports such US efforts, the Office of Security Cooperation - Iraq (OSC-I) will be the channel for all military ties between the US and Iraq in the coming years. The OSC-I will manage military sales, train the ISF on weapons systems, conduct joint military exercises, and lead additional trainings and exchange programs.227 Currently, OSC-I has 157 personnel who provide security cooperation and assistance for approximately 64 Foreign Military Sales (FMS) cases valued at approximately $500 million. By January 2012, the OSC-I is expected to support no more than 763 Security Assistance Team (SAT) members at 10 sites in Iraq, and administer nearly 600 cases valued at approximately $9.9 billion.228 Figure 6.5 shows OSC-I sites with personnel levels and assigned functions. In the July 2011 SIGIR Quarterly Report, plans for OSC-I were said to be “significantly behind schedule.”229

This is not enough US personnel to support a mix of Iraqi security forces that Figure 6.6 shows currently number over 900,000. Moreover, the US still provides intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, logistics, and air support to the ISF. According to USF-I, the ability of the ISF to integrate the effects of artillery, armor, and attack aviation with infantry against a conventional force is “really at the beginning stage, and will take some years to develop.”230

The US Role in Shaping the Iraqi Army

The Iraqi Army (IA) has made progress in its ability to defend Iraq’s borders, due in part to a concerted effort in 2011 by US military advisors towards more traditional defensive operations.231 However, it continues to lack logistical and intelligence capabilities – areas that OSC-I will focus on improving.232 Many Iraqi security experts and military officers believe Iraq should depend on the United States to provide a counterbalance against Iran due to existing tensions between Iraq and Iran, particularly over the Shatt al-Arab233 and Iranian incursions into northern parts Iraq.

As Figure 6.1 has already shown, much will depend on the nature and scale of future US arms transfers. Earlier plans for the US sale of some $4.2 billion in arms to Iraq included land force weapons, naval systems, reconnaissance equipment, and several air force weapons systems, but these plans are increasingly uncertain.234 The Iraqi Army is only beginning to build up units with modern heavy weapons. In the third quarter of 2010, Iraq received 11 US M1 Abrams tanks.235
By December 2011, 129 more will arrive, but this will produce a total strength of less than one light armored division’s worth of main battle tanks and the Iraqi Army will lack a balanced mix of other heavy arms.\textsuperscript{236}

Figure 6.5: OSC-I Sites: Personnel and Functions

Sources: SIGIR, Quarterly Report, October 30, 2011, p 6
The US Role in Shaping the Iraqi Air Force

The basis for US-Iranian military competition in Iraq differs by service. Iraq’s undeveloped air force means that it will need to continue to depend on some outside power for its air defenses. As with many other issues, the late formation of Iraq’s government after the March 2010 elections made it difficult to clearly define the US’s role in improving the Iraqi Air Force after the 2011 US transition. However, progress developing Iraqi air capabilities has generally been slow.

The $4.2 billion security package mentioned earlier would include reconnaissance equipment, Raytheon AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air heat-seeking missiles, laser-guided bombs, and 36
Lockheed Martin F-16 strike jets, along with Sidewinder missiles to arm them. In June 2011, the US Army Corps of Engineers completed construction of the $5.38 million Ali Air Base in southern Iraq, with an air defense system that allows Iraq’s Air Force to secure its borders against air attack.

In July 2011, Maliki expressed interest in the purchase of 36 F16s, double the original number. Although Iraq had previously attributed the delay in F16 purchases to national protests that diverted funds to the national food ration program, eventually Iraq wants 96 of the F-16s, along with Sidewinder missiles to arm them. Deliveries from the US and other foreign sources from the third quarter of 2011 included: 8 Russian Helicopters, 36 Abram Tanks, 41 Howitzers, 31 Heavy Equipment trucks/trailers, and 16 Armored Security Vehicles.

If the Iraqi Air Force continues to seek support from the US, much depends on US willingness to help Iraq train personnel, develop logistics, and strategize on the use of the Air Force. The July 2011 SIGR report suggested that one of the main objectives of a continued US presence in Iraq should be to provide an air-defense umbrella for Iraq while the Iraqi Air Force develops its capacity to conduct independent operations.

The US Iraqi pilot training program has trained more than 60 Iraqi pilots and 30 instructor pilots since its inception in 2008. Currently, 10 Iraqi pilots are being trained in the US to fly the first set of F-16s due to arrive by 2014. As of September 30, 2011, the Iraq Training and Advisory Mission-Air (ITAM-Air) had nearly 1,200 personnel directly engaged with Iraq’s air force personnel. Iraqi General Zibari emphasized that “an army without an air force is exposed” and stated that Iraq will not be able to defend its own air space until 2020, at the earliest.

The US Role in shaping the Iraqi Navy

The US role in shaping the Iraqi navy inevitably affects Iranian and US military competition. US support is critical to securing the flow of Iraqi commerce and deterring against external threats. The Iranian threat to Gulf energy exports is a key reason the US often deploys two US aircraft carrier groups in the Gulf region. According to the Department of Defense, Iraq’s oil infrastructure is vulnerable to the Iranian Republican Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and Iraq’s offshore oil loading points are vulnerable to attack.

Recent naval incidents are a reminder that Iranian and Western relations in the Gulf remain tense. The IRGC captured 15 British soldiers in Iraqi waters in March 2007. On January 6, 2008, five armed Iranian speedboats maneuvered aggressively towards and issued radio threats against three American Navy warships in international waters while entering the Strait of Hormuz. According to Pentagon officials, the American commander was close to issuing an order to fire on one of the speedboats which came within 200 yards of the warship – and within range of one of the machine guns aimed at it – before it suddenly veered away.

In 2007, Iraq had a 1200-man navy, 2 afloat squadrons, and 4 marine companies. It was also adding offshore support vessels, patrol ships and boats, and smaller vessels. In October 2010, the Iraqi navy inaugurated the first of 15 $20 million US-built Swift Class patrol boats and two more in August 2011, to bring the total to 5 of 12 ordered. Iraq will also receive two $70 million US-built offshore support vessels in 2011. In July 2011, SIGIR reported Iraq’s navy had grown to over 3,600 assigned personnel. One of OSC-I planned ten locations will be in Umm Qasr, the primary location of Iraq’s Navy.
As part of the transition to State Department lead in Iraq, the US Coast Guard Maritime Security Advisory Team (MSAT) began oversight of maritime training and reports to the US Embassy. In partnership with the Department of Homeland Security, OSC-I Basra, and INL, MSAT will develop Iraq’s capacity to secure, regulate, and manage its coastal water and rivers. This includes developing legislative and regulatory authorities and instructing courses on small-boat operations.\textsuperscript{257}

Much is still undetermined regarding the future of US-Iraq security ties. Like its air force, Iraq’s navy remains underdeveloped and critically deficient compared to its neighbors. Budgetary issues are concerns for both the US and Iraq; however, the US willingness to deter Iran and secure the Gulf is constant.

**The US Role in Supporting the Iraqi Police force and Ministry of Interior**

The US faces similar problems in supporting the Iraqi police force and Iraq’s Ministry of the Interior. On October 1, 2011, State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) began its police-assistance program. This effort is downsized from its predecessor, from 350 to 115 advisors. FY2012 appropriations will dictate future numbers. Since 2003, the United States has spent approximately $8 billion to train, staff, and equip Iraq’s police forces and moving forward will focus on developing better lines of communication between the MOI and the Embassy.\textsuperscript{258}

The October 2011 SIGIR reported State lacks a viable assessment of Iraqi police force capabilities, has not drafted a detailed plan providing specifics on what is to be accomplished, or outlined costs and performance outcomes. In addition, only 12% of current spending plans will directly assist the Iraqi police and State has yet to secure commitments from Iraq regarding its planned financial commitments to police programs.\textsuperscript{259}

State Department will continue bilateral relationships outlined under the Strategic Framework Agreement, though it lacks strict parameters, personnel requirements, or funding to be affective on its own. State’s mission will rely on consulates in Basra and Irbil, though embassy branch offices in Mosul and Kirkuk were cut due to budget constraints. In addition, the ten OSC-I sites will be responsible for most military-to-military cooperation.

State’s heavy reliance on private security contractors creates another set of issues and their use is a sensitive issue among Iraqis. The July 2011 SIGIR Report noted that a system for monitoring serious incidents involving private security contractors was still absent. SIGIR reported that this will likely remain unchanged through 2011 and the State Department would not provide SIGIR any information on how they would likely govern PSCs.\textsuperscript{260}

Many of the broader economic and political incentives that can be expanded on from the SFA are as important as military and police training. Measures that stem corruption and enforce rule-of-law give the Iraqi government legitimacy while building the foundation for security. Fraud, nepotism, intimidation, and corruption are rampant in Baghdad. Iraqi oversight bodies, like the Commission of Integrity, remain incapable of doing their job, while senior officials lack the incentives to correct their actions.

**The Iranian Role in Iraqi Security**

Iran is certain to exploit every cut and weakness in the post withdrawal US security effort. Iran has played a significant spoiler role in Iraqi security, both in an effort to ensure Iraq does not
reemerge as a threat or rival, and to eliminate US influence and the prospect of a strong US-Iraqi security relationship. Iran has supported insurgents and militias while also extending its influence through the infiltration of Iraq’s security forces and ministries.\textsuperscript{261}

Iran’s support of Shi’ite groups in Iraq has sometimes meant that Iran’s ability to restrain those same groups has been decisive in reducing violence. As violence increased in 2006, Iran pushed Iraqi Shi’ites to not retaliate against Sunnis.\textsuperscript{262} This along with the Sunni Awakening and the US troop surge led to a decrease in violence over the second half of 2007. Iran has also been anything but helpful in the fight against al-Qai’da, refusing to bring to justice, identify, or transfer its al-Qai’da detainees.\textsuperscript{263}

In 2010, leaked US intelligence reports outlined Iran’s support for Shi’ite militias between 2006 and 2009 that targeted both Americans and Iraqis. In July 2010, General Odierno stated that the IRGC was using the Hezbollah Brigade to train would-be US attackers in Iraq.\textsuperscript{264} This came five months after US and Iraqi forces raided various Hezbollah Brigade locations in Amarah, Iraq and Maysan province, areas known to be under the influence of Iran’s Qods Force.\textsuperscript{265} In 2011, the US again accused Iran of supplying militias with weapons and training which lead to a spike in US casualties in the summer of that year.\textsuperscript{266}

**Iran’s Broader Role in Iraqi Security**

Iranian and Iraqi security interests have coincided in some areas. Iran has given some funding to Iraq’s security forces. In 2005, for example, Iraq and Iran agreed to a billion dollar aid package, some of which went to the Ministry of Defense.\textsuperscript{267} However, Iraq had to assure the United States that Iran would not train Iraqi security forces. Some Iraqis also see Iran’s efforts to acquire nuclear weapons in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and thus as a “Muslim bomb, and not as a threat to Iraq.”\textsuperscript{268}

Iran has, however, focused on undercutting the security arrangements between the US and Iraq. The Commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq at the time, General Odierno, said in October 12, 2008, that Iran likely tried to bribe members of the Council of Representatives to vote against the Status of Forces agreement.\textsuperscript{269} Iran managed to convince the Iraqi government to include a December 2011 withdrawal date for US forces and a provision that Iraqi land, sea, and air not be used as a launching or transit point for attacks against other countries.\textsuperscript{270}

Some Iraqi military and intelligence officials fear that Iran has significant influence over elements of the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, and have accused Iran of providing shaped charges and artillery to Iraqi militants. Iran has also recruited thousands of Iraqis for intelligence gathering\textsuperscript{271} and has had intelligence agents in northern Iraq for at least 20 years.\textsuperscript{272} One estimate puts the number of Iranian intelligence officers in Iraq in 2007 at 150.\textsuperscript{273}

While some Iranians see the rise of the Iraqi military as a threat, others have attempted to use Iraq’s military as a wedge to force the US out of Iraq. According to Iran’s Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, "Considering the fact that the Iraqi Army can provide security, their presence in the country is not justifiable."\textsuperscript{274}

Iran has been adamant in pushing Iraq to reject any modifications to the US-Iraq security agreement that would allow US military forces to stay in Iraq after 2011. Not surprisingly, Iran sees the presence of US military forces in Iraq as a direct threat to its interests in the country, as well as a possible launching pad for attacks on Iran itself. A number of senior Iranian officials have expressed their opinions regarding the US and Iraq:
"Occupiers of Iraq will be forced to escape the quagmire of Iraq sooner or later." - Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, current head of the Expediency Council, May 17, 2011.

"Based on the security agreement, the US forces should leave Iraq by the end of 2011 and Iraq insists on the issue too." - Ali Akbar Salehi, Iranian Foreign Minister, May 17, 2011.

"The United States does not do anything in the interest of the regional nations. Whatever they have done so far has been against the regional nations." - Ayatollah Khamenei, June 4, 2011.

"Iran has announced many times that the US should leave Iraq and leave administration of the country's affairs to its people." - Esmaeil Kosari, Vice-Chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, July 13, 2011.

**The Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the Qods Force, the Ramazan Corps, and the Special Groups**

Iran began to funnel aid to militias in Iraq via the Qods Force – a branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – immediately after the fall of Saddam in 2003. The Qods Force also provides or has provided funding, weapons, operatives, and training to groups in Palestine, Islamic militants in Bosnia, fighters in south Sudan, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Qods Force provides training, funding, and weapons in Iraq, and much of Iranian policy affecting security towards Iraq is formulated and carried out by the Qods Force. Both of Iran’s post-2003 ambassadors, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi and Hassan Danaifar, served in the Qods Force. Mahan Abedin, director of research at the London-based Center for the Study of Terrorism, argues that Qods training largely focuses on gathering and utilizing intelligence, which is key to successful operations in a place as fluid and complex as Iraq. One official estimate in 2007 puts the number of Qods and Iranian intelligence personnel in Iraq at 150, though some US commanders believe there was only one or two per Shi’ite province.

The US was slow to grasp the full extent of Iran’s expanding role in Iraq. On July 19, 2005, the United States sent Iran a secret cable stating that a British soldier was killed by an explosive supplied by Iran. Iran denied any involvement, leading to more public confrontations over the issue beginning in December of that year. The then-Commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq, General Petraeus, stated in his September 2007 testimony to Congress that “none of us earlier this year appreciated the extent of Iranian involvement in Iraq, something about which we and Iraq’s leaders all now have greater concern.”

The Qods Force has also been a key Iranian tool in indirect attacks on the US military and disrupting American interests in Iraq. In 2007, General Petraeus stated, “There should be no question about the malign, lethal involvement and activities of the Qods Force in this country.” He went on to add that Iran was “responsible for providing the weapons, the training, the funding and in some cases the direction for operations that have indeed killed US soldiers.” American officials have typically avoided accusing the Qods Force of directly attacking Americans and have been careful to say that they do not know to what extent the top leadership of the Iranian government knows of or is involved in the Qods Force’s activities. On February 14, 2007, President Bush said that he was certain that explosively formed projectiles, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars used in Iraq came from the Qods Force, but “what we don't know is whether or not the head leaders of Iran ordered the Qods Force to do what they did.”

A message Qods Force leader Qassem Suleimani sent to General Petraeus in 2008 during the Battle of Basra is revealing. General Petraeus paraphrased the message as saying:  

General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassem Suleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan. And indeed, the ambassador in Baghdad is a Qods Force member. The individual who’s going to replace him is a Qods Force member. Now, that makes diplomacy difficult if you think that you’re going to do the traditional means of diplomacy by dealing with another country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs because in this case, it is not the ministry. It’s not Mottaki who controls the foreign policy, again, for these countries, at least. It is, again, a security apparatus, the Qods Force, which is also carrying out other activities.

A leaked November 2009 State Department memo indicates that the Qods Force has remained a central implementer of Iranian policy in Iraq and competitor with the US in trying to shape Iraqi security:

Since at least 2003, Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), has been the point man directing the formulation and implementation of the IRIG’s Iraq policy, with authority second only to Supreme Leader Khamenei. Through his IRGC-QF officers and Iraqi proxies in Iraq, notably Iranian Ambassador and IRGC-QF associate Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, Suleimani employs the full range of diplomatic, security, intelligence, and economic tools to influence Iraqi allies and detractors in order to shape a more pro-Iran regime in Baghdad and the provinces.

Suleimani enjoys long-standing close ties with several prominent GOI officials, including President Talabani, Vice-President Adel Abdel-Mahdi (ISCI), Prime Minister Maliki (Dawa), former PM Jaafari, and more recently, Speaker Samarrai (Septel [a separate telegram] reports Iranian Speaker Larijani's November 4-7 visit to Iraq at Samarra'i's invitation.). Khamenei, President Ahmadinejad, Speaker Larijani, and former president Rafsanjani consult regularly with visiting GOI officials as part of the IRIG's broader "strategic" council of advisers seeking to influence the GOI.

US intelligence reports leaked in 2010 detail the extent of Iran’s hand in the 2006-2009 violence. The reports show that the IRGC often used Hezbollah to train militants in Iran prior to their crossing into Iraq. General Petraeus had publicly corroborated Hezbollah’s role in a 2007 report to Congress. The reports draw on testimony from detainees, captured diaries, and weapons originating in Iran – including “explosively formed penetrators”, “sticky bombs”, and surface-to-air missiles. The reports conclude that Iran was behind the training and resourcing of specific attacks, including assassinations of Iraq ministry officials, mortar attacks on the Green Zone, and kidnappings of American soldiers.

Iran has also been implicated in using lethal force to shape politics in Iraq. For example, Gen. Petraeus implicated Iran in the 2007 car bomb assassinations of two southern Iraqi governors. Besides using Hezbollah to train terrorists, the reports point to both the Badr Corps and Mahdi Army as allies in Iranian efforts.

According to The Long War Journal, which draws heavily on interviews with mid-level and senior military and intelligence officials, the Qods Force streamlined its operations in Iraq by creating the Ramazan Corps. The Corps, which the spokesman for the Multinational Forces Iraq said was responsible for most of Qods Forces operations in Iraq in 2007, is composed of the Nasr command in the north, Zafar command in central Iraq, and Fajr command in the south.

The various recipients of Qods Force aid include the Mahdi Army, the Badr Brigades, the Qazali Network, and the Sheibani Network, among other groups. Their targets have included political rivals, the Iraqi Security Forces, and Coalition forces. When the Badr Brigades and SCIRI integrated into the government, other Iranian-backed groups began targeting them as well.
Brigadier General Kevin Begner stated on July 2, 2007, that Iran supplied the Iraqi militias with $3 million per month.298

In 2011, the US again voiced concern over Iran’s covert involvement in Iraqi violence. The US claimed the rising number of American deaths over the summer of 2011 was due to Iran’s support for Iraqi militants. In June, 2011, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated “We're very concerned about Iran and weapons they're providing to extremists here in Iraq...And the reality is that we've seen the results of that — in June, we lost a hell of a lot of Americans ... and we cannot just simply stand back and allow this to continue to happen.”299 In July, Admiral Mike Mullen stated, “Iran is very directly supporting extremist Shi’a groups which are killing our troops...and there's no reason...for me to believe that they're going to stop that as our numbers come down...There's no question they want to influence, and particularly in the south they are shipping hi-tech weapons in there....which are killing our people and.... the forensics prove that.”300 Admiral Mullen also accused Iran of supplying militias in Iraq in an attempt to take credit for American troops withdrawing at the end of the year.301

**Iranian Arms Smuggling**

Iran has smuggling arms into Iraq to attack Americans and Iraqis alike. Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, a former member of SCIRI and the head of the Sheibani Network, is one of many suspected of operating a smuggling network for Iran’s Qods Force. Suspected Iranian arms given to militants in Iraq have included 122-millimeter mortars fired at the Green Zone in Baghdad,302 improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosively formed projectiles (EFPs), and missiles. Iranian 107 mm rockets can carry 100 pounds of explosives that turn them into “flying bombs” known as “Improvised Rocket Assisted Munitions.”303

EFPs have been particularly deadly. Militants use EFPs to penetrate the armor of Humvees and have been responsible for at least 200 American deaths in Iraq.304 According to a *The Long War Journal* interview with US military officials, the EFPs are manufactured in Iranian factories in Ahvaz and Mehran.305 Documents obtained by Wikileaks also demonstrate that officials in the US State Department believe the EFPs are from Iran.306 In 2005, Shi’ite militias in Iraq began to place the EFPs in foam blocks that resembled rocks. Lebanon’s Hezbollah, a close ally of Iran, began adopting the technique in 2006 against Israel.307

Leaked documents show that some officials in the State Department believe that Iran had indirectly supplied 50 82mm rockets with neuroparalytic agents to Iraqi militants in January 2006, although the rocket’s explosion might have rendered the chemical agents useless.308 Another Iranian plot, according to the leaked documents, was to combine poisonous chemicals with a car bomb meant to be detonated in the Green Zone, though bomb experts contend that the plot would have been impractical.309

In 2006, the Bush Administration authorized killing Iranian security agents in Iraq.310 From the winter of 2006 to the end 2007, the US performed high-profile raids that resulted in the arrests of several Iranian security officers. Since then, the US has killed several Qods Force members.311 Others captured have included a commander in the Ramazan Corps, Mahmud Farhadi; a senior member of Lebanese Hezbollah, Ali Musa Daqduq; and Qais Khazali, a former Sadrist leader and head of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, or the League of the Righteous).312313 In 2007, the US also captured the deputy commander of Lebanese Hezbollah Department 2800, which assisted the Qods Force in Iraq.314
Additional Shi’ite militants and extremists have taken the form of Special Groups, many formed from former elements of the Mahdi Army. According to General Petraeus, Iran armed these groups as a “Hezbollah-like force to serve its interests and fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces.” Gen. Petraeus accused Asaib Ahl al-Haq of carrying out a January 2007 attack on Karbala’s provincial Joint Coordination Center, which killed five American soldiers. AHH leader Khazali was released in December 2009 in exchange for a British hostage and as part of an American effort to reintegrate Shi’ite militias into Iraqi politics. Asaib Ahl al-Haq since reconciled with the Iraqi government, while the US designated Kata’ib Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. However, Khazali still leads AAH and it remains a magnet for Shi’ite militants, as well as a threat to target US personnel and destabilize Iraq after the US withdraw deadline.

Iran has consistently denied that it arms and supports militias inside Iraq. A number of senior Iranian officials have made statements denying that Iran’s military is meddling in Iraq:

"Such claims are a blame-game on part of the US officials" - Ahmad Vahidi, Iran’s Minister of Defense, July 15, 2011.

“These comments are repetitious and display the United States' trouble in earning the attention of the Iraqi parliament and government for extending its presence in Iraq…These remarks are a lie and aim to put the blame on the other countries…Americans are seeking an excuse to implement their Iranophobia plans and stir doubt and anxiety among Iraqi politicians and statesmen. They want to pretend that Iraq would be threatened by Iran, if Americans leave Iraq” - Hassan Danayefar, Iran's Envoy to Baghdad, July 13, 2011.

“The groups that wage terrorist attacks in Iraq today have all been created by the US." - Parviz Sorouri, member of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, July 12, 2011.

“The issues raised by the Americans and their allegations that the IRGC supplies weapons to different groups in Iraq and Afghanistan and stirs insecurity is a big lie.”- Rahmin Mehman Parast, Foreign Ministry spokesman. July 5, 2011.

The US has made a series of efforts to help Iraqi security forces deal with these threats, as well as other unilateral and multilateral approaches. The US pushed the UN Security Council to include a ban on arms exports by Iran in Resolution 1747 on March 24, 2007. On October 25, 2007, the United States named the Qods Force a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, along with naming four state-owned banks sponsors of terrorism, though it did not go as far as designating the IRGC itself as a terrorist organization.

The US also placed sanctions on the Qods Force and the banks serving it. In 2007 and 2008, the US built bases near the Iranian border to block the smuggling of Iranian weapons into Iraq. On September 26, 2007, the US Senate approved a resolution urging President Bush to designate the IRGC as a sponsor of terrorism. On September 16, 2008, the United States froze the assets of a deputy commander of the Qods Force and a Mahdi Army leader, in addition to several others and a Syrian television station. However, the designations only escalated what were already strong sanctions on Iran that have been in place since 1979 and have shown to be mostly symbolic.

**The Impact of the Power Vacuum in the Iran – Iraq Military Balance**

All of these developments must be considered in the light of the near power vacuum in the Iran-Iraq military balance. As has been shown earlier, the US invasion and later disbanding of Saddam’s army eliminated Iraq as a major military competitor of Iran. While the Iraqi Army (IA) suffered readiness problems and equipment shortages after the first Gulf War in 1991, it maintained a rough parity or even superiority with Iran in most major military capabilities. The
Iranian military is structured to face a multitude of threats, but up until 2003 had seen Iraq as one of its main opponents, and countering an Iraqi invasion had been a major preoccupation for Iranian military planners.

Some US analysts have hoped that Iraq can again play the role of military competitor of Iran in the future. Despite a number of former ISCI members joining the IA, and some pro-Iranian military leaders, many in the Iraqi Army do view Iran as a potential threat. While Iraq may someday be a realistic check on Iranian military power, the timelines involved are quite long. As the previous figures have shown, the Iraqi military now poses virtually no conventional threat to Iran, nor can it hope to successfully oppose an Iranian invasion. The IA will remain quite weak for many years to come.

This is not a matter of manpower numbers. The Iraqi military has grown impressively since 2003, and it is not far behind Iran in terms of sheer size: 200,000 men in the Army, 68,000 more in Army Training and Support Forces, 5,053 in the Air Force, and 3,650 in the Navy, as of the end of 2010. But these numbers hide some serious weaknesses. The Iraqi military was almost exclusively a COIN-focused force until 2010. Building up the IA into a conventional force is very complex, time-consuming, and an expensive task. Iraqi plans call for a phased transition into a more conventional force focused on external threats, but this transition will not be completed until 2020, even under very favorable conditions. The recent political deadlock and budget crises in Iraq do not bode well for this transition meeting a 2020 deadline.

Iraq’s military weaknesses vis-à-vis Iran are too numerous to examine in detail, but some of the most important problems can be summarized as follows:

- **Air defenses:** Iraq has no indigenous air defense capabilities. This is Iraq’s most glaring conventional military shortcoming. Iraq has no SAMs (not even MANPADs), no air defense radars, and only acquired its first modern jet fighters in late 2011. Iraq expressed interest in used French Mirage 2000s, is in the process of acquiring a total of 36 US F16s, and was reported to be considering 24 Chinese J17s. Air defense systems are extremely complex and expensive, and Iraq currently has no clear plans to acquire one in the near future. The Iranian air force may be obsolete by western standards, but it is decades ahead of Iraq.

- **Armor:** Iraq has only 140 modern M1A1 Abrams tanks, and a small number of less-advanced Soviet tanks. While Iraq has plans to purchase more, and to convert several infantry divisions to armored, further M1A1 purchases have been postponed due to budget shortfalls. Iraq’s insistence on buying modern, but very expensive, American tanks will result in it taking a decade or more before the IA has enough tanks to realistically resist an Iranian invasion.

- **Artillery:** The IA has very little in the way of artillery, and what it does possess is mostly light and outdated. The IA has virtually no counter-battery capabilities. Iran, despite readiness and training problems, maintains a large number of artillery units.

- **Antitank Capabilities:** Iraq’s only current real anti-tank capabilities are its small number of tanks, as well as a small number of ATGWs on its armored personnel carriers. The only anti-tank capability Iraqi infantry possess is short-ranged RPGs. Iraq has a light helicopter force, but no real anti-tank helicopter capability, nor plans to procure one. Anti-tank weapons, particularly man-portable systems, are cheaper and somewhat easier to operate than many of the other weapons systems that Iraq needs to acquire in order to oppose Iran. However, as of yet no clear plans to obtain a serious anti-tank capability have been announced by the IA.

Iraqi efforts to rebuild its forces and capabilities to deter and defend against Iran will now be shaped by Iraq’s politics, but Iraq does have significant security concerns. The two countries also technically remain at war, and incursions by the Iranian military are a constant threat. Their
border is not clearly demarcated, particularly in the waterways in the south. Many border areas remain contested.

A minor clash at the Fakka Oil field on the Iran-Iraq border served to underline Iraqi fears of Iranian encroachment. The Fakka field is very close to the border, and while it has been in Iraqi hands since the Iran-Iraq war, its ownership is still in dispute. On December 18, 2009, a small number of Iranian troops backed by armor seized oil well number 4 in the Fakka field and set up defensive positions. Iraqi troops massed nearby and the Iranians quickly retreated back across the border. The incident avoided serious confrontation, with no shots fired by either side. However, had Iran chose to reinforce its position and defend the well it seized, there would be limitations to what Iraq could do without US help. The incident galvanized Iraqi public opinion and has contributed to a nationalist backlash against Iranian meddling in Iraq.

The Fakka incursion was only one in a series of Iranian military incursions across Iraq’s border. On average, Iran shells Kurdish rebel camps in northern Iraq twice per month. Incursions by Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles have occurred since the late 1990s. In June 2010, Iranian ground forces penetrated ten kilometers over the border near Penjwin to destroy rebel arms caches. Iranian helicopters have undertaken rocket attacks in northern Iraq and Iran has fired artillery against targets in Iraqi territory.

In July 2011, Iranian troops crossed the border into Iraq to pursue Kurdish separatist forces. Roughly 5,000 IRGC personnel deployed along the border with Iraqi Kurdistan, with an unknown number crossing the border. According to the IRGC, they inflicted a “heavy and historic defeat” on the Kurdish separatist group PJAK (Free Life Party of Kurdistan). The PJAK also claimed to have killed 53 Iranians in the fighting. In August 2011, Iran again shelled PJAK targets in northern Iraq at the same time Turkey bombed PKK fighters. In September 2011 in front of the UN General Assembly, Kurdish President Talabani requested that both Turkey and Iran stop bombing Iraqi territories in the Kurdistan region, saying it was causing many innocent civilian victims.

Economic Competition

The US-Iran competition for economic influence in Iraq has seen Iran take the lead through growing Iranian trade and investment. Trade between Iran and Iraq has steadily increased since the US invasion and Iran is now Iraq’s biggest trading partner. Legal trade now consists of building materials, chemicals, consumer goods, and foodstuffs, much of it via the border at Mehran and Mundhirriya/Qasr Shirin. Iran has also implemented electricity deals with Iraq that were negotiated after the CPA era. According to the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Iran supplied 750 megawatts of electricity to Iraq daily, in mid-2010. Two Iranian banks, Parsian and Karafarin, have been approved to open up branches in Iraq. As early as November 2003, President Talabani signed protocols on investment, oil, construction, and transportation with Iran.

Iran’s Growing Economic Role in Iraq

Many Iraqis, as well as some Arab states, resent Iraq’s post-invasion shift towards trade with Iran. Iran and Iraq compete industrially and commercially, and in terms of agricultural products, this creates tension because Iran has the upper hand for the time being. Moreover, its investments in real estate and businesses in Basra, Karbala, and Najaf have been seen as exploitative rather than winning gratitude from Iraqis.
However, there is evidence that Iran has economic influence in at least some local communities. In 2005, for example, there were reports that finding a job in Basra required the sponsorship of an Iranian-backed group, and only those with leanings towards Iran filled teaching posts. Traders in parts of southern Iran increasingly speak Farsi and many accept Iranian currency. Many Iraqis also receive medical care in Iran. Iranian exports include electricity, refined oil products, and cars.

In October 2011, a growing trend in Basra was reported showing the basis for its connections to Tehran. Many Basrawis feel they have been unfairly treated by Baghdad, Washington, and its Kuwait neighbor, so have turned to Iran for its development needs. Basra is a potential economic hub and contains the majority of Iraq’s oil. At the core of Basra’s complaints towards Baghdad is revenue sharing. Basra sends $50 billion each year to Baghdad from oil and gas sales, or 75% of the Iraqi government’s total revenue, yet sees only $1 billion in return. They blame Kuwait for developing ports and using drilling methods that infringe on Basra’s economic livelihood. Washington has ignored Basra’s complaints, which has opened up an opportunity for Tehran.

Iran-Iraq economic ties are strong, and have been encouraged to some degree by the impact of international sanctions on Iran in other markets. In August 2010, Iran’s ambassador said Iran would double its trade volume with Iraq. Iranian officials have indicated that they welcome a strong economic integration between the two nations: “Our message to Iraqi brothers in my visit is that Iran is fully ready to expand ties with Baghdad. We announced that Tehran is prepared to put its scientific, technical, engineering, economic and commercial potentials at the disposal of Iraq.”

A leaked State Department memo from November 2009 noted that Iran’s geographic proximity and willingness to take business risks in the insecure environment help make it an important trading partner for Iraq:

> With annual bilateral trade estimated at USD 4 billion (up 30 percent since 2008) and comprised mostly of Iranian imports (approximately 48 percent of Iraq's imports are Iranian goods), the IRIG [Islamic Republic of Iran Government] continues to jockey for economic domination in Iraq through targeted development assistance, focused largely on refurbishment of Shi’a religious shrines, and trade deals and bilateral agreements aimed at fostering greater Iraqi economic dependency on Iran. This measure has been successful, largely because of Iran's geographic proximity and access to Iraqi markets that are otherwise financially or politically less appealing to other states, notably the United States, Europe, and other industrialized nations. Turkey, on the other hand, remains Iran's biggest economic competitor, particularly in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Mohsen Milani has different numbers for this trade, but they reflect the same trends and note the importance of Iran in providing electricity to Iraq:

> Iraq is Iran's second-largest importer of non-oil goods. In 2003, Iraq's non-oil imports from Iran totaled $184 million; by 2008, this figure was $7 billion and is expected to top $10 billion by 2012. Iraq is also largely dependent on energy imports from Iran. In 2009, it imported $1 billion in energy -- 40 percent of which was electricity and 30 percent refined petroleum products. Iran has also been involved in rebuilding Iraq's energy infrastructure. In 2007, for example, Tehran signed a $150 million contract to build a 300-megawatt power plant in Baghdad, and in 2008 it agreed to build a 400-megawatt electricity line between Abadan, a port city in southwestern Iran, and Alharasas in southern Iraq. Iran is also heavily invested in Basra, a strategically important port and Iraq's second-largest city: Iran plans to develop a free-trade zone there and build crude oil and oil-product pipelines between the city and Abadan. Its commercial relations with Kurdistan have expanded as well; there are more than 100 Iranian companies operating there, and Kurdistan has been exporting its surplus oil to Iran in exchange for the import of Iranian electricity.
As Iraq struggles to build its electricity infrastructure, Iranian influence in this sector will continue to be vital to Iraq’s growth. Overall Iran provides about 5% of Iraq’s electricity, although in some border areas this figure is much higher.\(^{350}\) As power shortages persist across most of Iraq, still affecting about 80% of the population in late 2011,\(^{351}\) Iran might be relied on to a greater extent.

Iran’s economic ties to Iraq have come at a price to many Iraqis. Many Iraqi business owners complain of cheap Iranian goods and food that are subsidized by Tehran being dumped on the Iraqi market. This has retarded growth in Iraq’s light manufacturing and Agriculture sectors.\(^{352}\) At the same time, Iran might be leveraging its resources to effectively bolster Iraqi Ministers who align with Iran.

**The Declining Size of US Aid**

Figure 6.7 shows that American aid has been an important source of US influence in competing with Iran in the past, but its impact will decline sharply in the future. As of October 2011, a total of $182.27 billion had been made available to Iraq for relief and reconstruction efforts since 2003. A total of $61.83 billion of this amount had come from US appropriations. A total of $51.38 billion of the $61.83 billion had been obligated, and $5.16 billion remained unexpended.

**Figure 6.8** shows only limited amounts of past US funding is still available. As of October 2011, the status of US aid in five major funds was as follows:\(^{353}\)

- **Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF)** - $20.86 billion made available, none of which was available for new projects
- **Iraq Security Forces Fund (ISFF)** - $20.54 billion made available (since 2005), $1.39 billion available for new projects $807 million in unexpended obligations, and $1.98 billion not yet obligated.
- **Economic Support Fund (ESF)** - $4.83 billion made available, $301 million available for new projects, with $26 million in unexpended obligations available until September 30, 2012
- **Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP)** - $3.96 billion made available, $3.73 of which has been expended and the rest expired
- **International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE)** – $1.18 billion made available (since 2006), $220 million available for new project, with $161 million in unexpended obligation

The IRFF and CERP funds can no longer be used for new obligations. Nearly half of the unexpended obligations are within the ISFF. The Congress has also allocated $10.45 billion in smaller funding streams.\(^{354}\)

The Congress has already made cuts in the US aid requests and has shown increasing resistance to large amounts of future funding. On April 15, 2011, after several temporary extensions, a total of $3.7 billion was appropriated for FY2011 to Iraq versus a request of $5.05 billion. Just $2.3 million of that amount (one-tenth of 1%) was obligated from ISFF, ESF, and INCLE, while $42 million was obligated from the CERP, or 64% of its FY2011 appropriation.\(^{355}\)

The FY2012 budget request totaled $6.83 billion. There was no request for ISFF funding in the FY2012 budget; instead requests were made for $1 billion each for Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and in INCLE to support ISF as part of “Overseas Contingency Operations”.\(^{356}\) Under the US Budget Control Act of 2011, Contingency Operations would not be constrained by discretionary caps.\(^{357}\) Congress has passed short-term funding for operations in Iraq on several occasions, including through November 18, 2011, while the FY2012 budget was being considered.
Figure 6.7: Funding for Iraqi Reconstruction and the Impact of US Aid: 2003-2011


Figure 6.8: Status of US Aid Funds as of 9/30/2011
Iraqi Funding of Iraq Development

Figure 6.9 shows that the Iraqi economy is improving and that increased oil revenues have reduced Iraqi dependence on both Iran and the US. Iraq is now largely funding its own development with outside support from other organizations. Reporting by SIGIR notes that oil revenues have risen sharply and moved Iraq out of the major budget crisis it encountered during 2008-2009:

As of September 30, 2011, the GOI had received $56.07 billion in oil receipts for the year, exceeding the amount received in all of 2010. Annual oil receipts to date are 57% more than the $35.60 billion received during the first nine months of last year and 22% more than the $45.95 billion projected through September 30, 2011

Overall, the 2011 GOI budget estimated that 89% of annual revenue would come from oil exports…So far this year, price levels and export volumes are both higher than what they were in 2010. As of September 30, 2011, Iraq had received an average of $102.83 per barrel of oil exported – well above the average of $74.56 per barrel received in 2010. Oil export volumes averaged 2.1 million barrels per day (MBPD) during the first nine months of the year — 4% less than the projected rate of 2.2 MBPD, but more than last year’s average of 1.9 MBPD. Iraq had record-high annual oil receipts of $58.79 billion in 2008; at the current pace, the GOI will surpass that amount by mid-October.358
Maliki announced a National Development Plan in July 2010 estimated to cost $186 billion between 2010 and 2014, with over half of the funding from the government and the rest coming from the private sector. In February 2010, the IMF approved a two-year, $3.7 billion loan package for Iraq for the purpose of budget support, structural reforms, and macroeconomic stability.\(^{359}\)

As Figure 6.10 shows, Iraq’s oil revenues are capable of funding larger budgets – a factor that makes Iraq less dependent on both Iran and the US, but critically dependent on both high oil revenues and an effective level of governance and political action that does not yet exist and may not exist for years to come. In February 2011, the GOI approved a budget of $82.62 billion, while projecting $69.18 billion in revenues – creating a deficit of $13.44 billion. The budget figures are dependent on oil production and prices. An estimated 89% of the budget was dependent on oil revenues. The GOI took in $20.11 billion in oil-export receipts the 3rd quarter of 2011, setting a post-2003 record.\(^{360}\) As of November 2011, Baghdad received $56.07 billion in oil revenues for the year, more than all of 2010 combined.\(^{361}\) As of November 2011, the GOI was debating a preliminary 2012 budget of more than $100 billion.\(^{362}\)

The IMF projected Iraq’s real GDP growth rate for 2011 at 9.6%,\(^{363}\) up from less than 1% in 2010. However, Iraq ranks 161st in the world in per capita income and has a population that has risen from 18.1 million in 1990, to 30.4 million in 2011, and will have a UN estimated 64 million in 2050.\(^{364}\)
Figure 6.9: Progress in the Iraqi Economy: 2004-2011

SIGIR, Quarterly Report, October 30, 2011, p. 72
Figure 6.10: Oil revenues vs. the Iraqi Budget: 2004-2011

Note: Data not audited. Numbers affected by rounding. Not all oil export revenue accrues to the GOI; 5% is paid in war reparations to Kuwait, which accounts for the difference between the Receipts and Revenue lines in this chart. Monthly price per barrel is derived by dividing the monthly revenue by monthly exports.


SIGIR, Quarterly Report, October 30, 2011, p. 28
Chapter 6: US Strategic Competition with Iran: Competition in Iraq 24/11/11 Rev

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The Uncertain Quality of US Aid and the Need to Focus on Advice and US Private Investment

Looking towards the future, the quality of US aid and the scale of US private investment will be the key factors in both competition with Iran and in meeting Iraq’s needs for economic development and stability. In spite of massive spending, past US aid has had an uncertain impact on America’s image in Iraq. According to the SIGIR’s October 2010 report, American reconstruction programs had too low a profile among Iraqi citizens. Safia al-Souhail, a member of the Council of Representatives and of Maliki’s State of Law coalition, told the SIGIR, “If you lived in a community and someone donated money to expand the water treatment plant in your neighborhood, it is unlikely the average household would know who donated the money.”

The US is now focused on small programs to help Iraq build capacity in key areas, though these efforts are likely to have limited visibility and impact on Iraqis and US and Iranian competition. USAID now has five such projects; two ongoing and three new. SIGIR reports that the ongoing projects include:

The Iraq National and Provincial Administrative Reform Project (called Tarabot, or “linkages” in Arabic), with $151 million from the ESF. The new initiative follows the long-running National Capacity Development Program (called Tatweer, or “development,” in Arabic), which was concluded on July 31, 2011. Like Tatweer, Tarabot aims to support the GOI by strengthening federal, provincial, and sub-provincial government entities while working to increase provincial control over public-policy decision-making and government resources. The project is scheduled to conclude in 2015.

The Governance Strengthening Project (GSP), a $131 million ESF-funded effort that aims to continue the work of the Local Governance Program (LGP), which ended in September. The project will aim to develop Iraq’s provincial governments amid concerns raised in evaluations of the LGP about the ability of the central government to devolve power to the provinces.

The new US projects are shown in Figure 6.11, and it is clear that they are relatively small and narrowly focused. Major new funding will be needed to sustain these efforts – and US competition with Iran – in FY2013 and beyond.

While the US may be able to partially compensate for cuts in aid by focusing on the technical advice and expertise Iraq needs to use its own resources effectively, the levels involved and their visibility are very low. Congress significantly reduced aid to Iraq in FY2011 and FY2012, and may well do so again in FY2013 and beyond.

This makes the lag in American energy investment and commercial ties even more important. It is also unlikely that near- to mid-term US private investment will be able to replace American aid or compete with Iraq’s trade relationship with Iran. Some American companies have been increasing investment in Iraq, but many have been risk-averse.

US Ambassador Jim Jeffrey has actively encouraged American investment, but American businesses have been slow to jump into Iraq’s business environment, which ranks 166th out of 183 countries in a World Bank report. It also ranked as the tenth most difficult country to start a business, fifth most difficult for cross-border trade, and seventh most difficult to enforce a contract. Iraq made no business sector reforms in 2010.
US and Iranian Competition in Iraq’s Petroleum Sector

Figure 6.12 shows that non-US firms have dominated the bidding for Iraq’s efforts to rehabilitate and expand its oil and petroleum-related sector. Progress in the petroleum sector has been aided, however, by several American companies working in Basra, namely Halliburton, Baker Hughes, Schlumberger, and Weatherford, while Exxon circumvented Baghdad and signed deals with the Kurds in late 2011. Halliburton is working with Shell to develop the Majnoon oil field 37 miles from Basra. Majnoon is one of the world’s largest oil fields, named after the Arabic word for “crazy” because of the size of its oil reserve estimates of up to 25 billion barrels. However, the leading investor in Iraq’s oil industry is not the United States, but China.

Moreover, oil cooperation between Iraq and Iran may also strengthen Iraq’s ties to Iran and increase Iranian ability to deal with sanctions. Construction of a proposed pipeline between Basra, Iraq and Abadan, Iran is still stalled at the doorstep of the Iraqi government, six years after both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding. The pipeline would transport up to 150,000 barrels of crude a day from Iraq to Iran, and Iranian refined products would ship back to Basra. Iraq’s Kurdish region also exports oil through Iran, incentivizes Iraqi cooperation with Iran, and allows Iran to soften the impact of American-backed sanctions.

The key problem this presents for Iran is that both Iran and Iraq have long competed to be the more important “oil power” – competition that has scarcely ended. When Iranian troops crossed the Iraqi border and took control of Well 4 of the Fauqa Field in 2009, crude oil futures increased by 2.2%. Energy competition led both states to suddenly raise their claims for oil reserves during the Iran-Iraq War – an experience they have recently repeated. In 2010, weeks after Iraq
announced crude oil reserve estimates of 143.1 billion barrels, Iran announced a new estimate of 150.31 billion barrels.\(^{379}\)

Both were significant increases that had little substantive evidence to support them: Iraq’s estimate was 25% higher than its previous estimate, while Iran’s was 9% higher.\(^{380}\) The timing of the announcements could indicate the intensity of oil competition between the two countries and Iran’s intention not to be outdone by its neighbor. A former oil minister who served under Saddam Hussein, however, said both estimates are politically motivated and unreliable.\(^{381}\) Iraq still has yet to rejoin OPEC’s production quota system.\(^{382}\)

**Figure 6.12: Results of the First Two Rounds of Bidding for Oil Development in Iraq**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Bidding Round (brownfields)</th>
<th>Operators</th>
<th>2009 Prod. (1,000 bbl/day)</th>
<th>Target Prod. (1,000 bbl/day)</th>
<th>Target Incr. (1,000 bbl/day)</th>
<th>Reserves (billion bbl)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rumaila</td>
<td>BP, CNPC, SOMO</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>2,850</td>
<td>1,850</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Qurna, Phase I</td>
<td>ExxonMobil, Shell, NOC</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>2,325</td>
<td>2,055</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zubair</td>
<td>Eni, Occidental, Koges, Misan Oil</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>995</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Round Total (billion barrels)</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,475</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,375</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,900</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second Bidding Round (greenfields)</th>
<th>Operators</th>
<th>2009 Prod. (1,000 bbl/day)</th>
<th>Target Prod. (1,000 bbl/day)</th>
<th>Target Incr. (1,000 bbl/day)</th>
<th>Reserves (billion bbl)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Qurna, Phase I</td>
<td>LUKOIl, Statoil, Oil Exploration CO</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maincon</td>
<td>Shell, Petronas, Misan Oil</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>1,745</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halfaya</td>
<td>CNPC, Petronas, Total, South Oil</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gheriff</td>
<td>Petronas, JAPEx, North Oil</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badra</td>
<td>Gazprom, KOGAS, Petronas, TFAO, Midlends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayarah</td>
<td>Sonangol, Nineveh</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najmah</td>
<td>Sonangol, Nineveh</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Round Total (billion barrels)</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,765</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,705</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals - Rounds 1 &amp; 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,535</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,140</strong></td>
<td><strong>9,605.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>62.7</strong></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Competition in Diplomacy and for Iranian Ability to Create an “Axis” of Influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon**

Diplomatic efforts to encourage US-Iranian collaboration, rather than competition, in Iraq have failed, and this aspect of competition continues to expand. Following the December 2006 Iraq
Study Group recommendation to include Iran in stabilization efforts in Iraq, the US and Iran took part in three regional conferences on Iraqi stability between March 2007 and April 2008. Bilateral talks between the US and Iran took place between May and August of 2007, but produced several impasses and did not continue. The US and Iran have since competed diplomatically to shape Iraq’s political system and each has intervened in Iraqi political deadlocks to broker agreements favorable to their interests.

Iran sees diplomacy in Iraq as a key area to compete with the US, and one where it can win with little compromise or cooperation. This is illustrated by the role of the Qods Force over Iran’s diplomacy and in the background of Iranian ambassadors and other officials in Iraq. The current Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Danafar, and his predecessor, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, were members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

In October 2007, General Petraeus claimed that Kazemi-Qomi was still a member of the Qods Force. Qomi had previously helped organized Hezbollah in Lebanon. Danafar was commander in the IRGC, deputy commander in its navy, and also a member of the Qods Force. Danafar is a native of Baghdad but was expelled by Saddam’s regime for ethnic ties to Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, he was an IRGC ground forces operations commander and was responsible for the planning and operations division of Khatam-ol-Anbia (“The Last Prophet”), an Iranian company under IRGC control.

Khatam-ol-Anbia, which employs 40,000 people and has ties to Chinese oil companies, is responsible for projects in oil, industry, natural gas, transportation, and construction. Danafar was also Secretary of the Department of Iran-Iraq Economic Development and headed the Mobayen Center, a cultural center that Iran Focus News and Analysis accuses of training Iraqis to work with the Qods Force. The oppositionist National Council of Resistance of Iran also accuses the Qods Force of having its members pose as Iranian businessmen. Immediately before assuming the post of ambassador, Danafar headed the Center for Reconstruction of Holy Sites.

Recent competition in diplomacy involving Iraq’s relations with Syria has made Iraq a regional issue. A violent crackdown by President Bashar al-Assad’s security forces against protesters in Syria led to widespread condemnation in much of the Arab and Western world, while Iran remained one of Syria’s few supporters in the Middle East.

In May, Maliki publicly advocated reform in Syria, but under Assad's direction. By August, he urged protestors not to “sabotage” the Syrian state and mimicked the accusation from Damascus and Tehran that Israel, not Syria's own citizenry, was responsible for Assad's situation. Moqtada al-Sadr also stated in late August that he was against the calls for Assad's resignation “by the 'Leader of Evilness' Obama and others.”

In July and August, Iraq expanded its economic and political ties with Syria, including hosting high-level representatives and supplying Syria with urgently needed oil. The Iraqi government reportedly even agreed to renew hundreds of millions of dollars in Saddam-era contracts with Syria, in turn, lining the pockets of Assad's cronies. Additionally, unlike Turkey, Baghdad has closed its border to Syrians fleeing violence and dissidents looking to organize.

On September 20, 2011 Iraq changed its position and stated that Assad should transition power. An Iraqi government spokesman stated, “Our goals are the same as the United States has in changing the regime.” The spokesman noted that this was Iraq’s long-held view, but concern
over a post-Assad sectarian conflict restrained a tougher stance. The growing international condemnation of Assad was never absent in Iraq. Many Iraqi leaders and citizens did not believe in the Iraqi government’s initial pro-Assad stance. Public anti-Assad sentiments came mostly from Sunni Arabs, but also privately among Kurdish leaders and members of the Iraqi cabinet.

Baghdad's initial position on Syria had been affected by pressure from Iran and the perception that Iran will be needed to fill coming voids after the US withdraws. US officials are also concerned that Iran will increase its involvement in Iraqi affairs to compensate for any loss of its Syrian ally. In late August, Iran increased attacks in Iraq’s Kurdish north, just as a major Iranian newspaper warned Syria could export "warfare" to its neighbors if they turned against Assad.

On September 8, 2011, President Ahmadinejad called for Assad to end the violent crackdown, likely a political attempt to repair Iran’s image in the Muslim world, given that privately Iran continued to support Assad’s handling of the situation. Additional concerns emanate from Syria’s proven ability to infiltrate the Iraq border with Baathists, al-Qai’da, and other extremists.

Iraq’s reversal on Assad has several undetermined implications. The Syrian protests were becoming more violent in certain areas as of late September, marking the beginning of a potential turning point in the conflict. This continued into October and November with signs that an emboldened opposition may lead Syria into civil war. Assad will likely use the violence as political ammunition, linking any insurgency with external meddling. How Iraq reacts in terms of facilitating or obstructing aid from Iran, trade with Syria, and accepting displaced Syrians and insurgents, will ultimately determine its intentions. Tehran’s subsequent reaction to Baghdad will likely be a defining moment in Iran-Iraq relations. Iran’s support for Assad has also affected Turkey’s willingness to counterbalance Iranian influence in the region. In September 2011, Turkey agreed to house the sophisticated X-Band, or AN/TPY-2, US radar system in Kurecik, Turkey, 435 miles from the Iranian border. The agreement came amid Turkey’s reservations over Iran’s evolving missile capabilities and concern over Iran’s support for Assad. Turkey was adamant that the agreement not pinpoint Iran as the motive behind the agreement, but as part of a broader NATO/Turkish defense system. Turkey enjoys close economic ties to Iran and has criticized the US posture on Iran’s nuclear program. Iran has stated the deal will only escalate regional tensions.

The American radar will be part of a larger system that will include sharing intelligence with Israel – a major point of contention within Turkey. The deal, however, is still a milestone in improving US-Turkish relations. Turkey also permits US drones that monitor Kurdish rebels in Iraq’s north to be launched from their soil and has confirmed talks for their continued use after the US leaves Iraq. It is unclear whether armed drones or just surveillance drones would be considered.

Conclusions

There is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the size, purpose, and funding of both the civil and military US effort in Iraq after 2011. The withdrawal of American troops seems likely to be a significant short-term boost to Iranian ambitions, but much depends on how successful US efforts are in finding some way to build a meaningful and enduring strategic partnership with Iraq. The size, composition, and ultimate success of the military training mission are particularly
crucial and uncertain. It is not clear whether US aid programs can successfully be scaled back without compromising their intended goals. It remains uncertain how an influx of contractors will perform, and whether or not State can effectively manage them.

Much will depend on the level of continuing US diplomatic, advisory, military, and police training presence in Iraq. The same is true of US aid. American reconstruction funding, though much reduced, is planned to continue to support Iraq. Unfortunately, the politics surrounding the foreign affairs budget of both the State and Defense Departments are volatile, and there may be significant further cuts to expenditures in Iraq.

By the end of 2011, US forces will have fully withdrawn, provincial reconstruction teams will have ended, and the State Department will have taken control of operations. State’s mission will fall under four pillars: broader diplomatic presence, development assistance, police development, and modernization of the Iraqi Security Forces. State will rely heavily on existing relationships characterized in the SFA, including important advisory roles that can be maintained without a large US troop presence.

These operations – which were originally planned to cost $6.83 billion, but will get far less – include technical assistance to government ministries and provinces through agencies like USAID and the DOJ, as well as less familiar roles, such as the coordination of the largest Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programs in the world. State will rely on a variety of permanent installations within Iraq, including consulates in Erbil and Basra and ten OSC-I sites. The plan calls for up to 16,000 government employees and contractors.

The lack of continued US troops will complicate many of State’s efforts. US forces in Iraq performed several key functions prior to State taking the lead, including training, equipping, advising and supporting the ISF, conducting partnered counterterrorism operations with Iraqi forces, and protecting civilian capacity building efforts. Not only will State take on oversight of many of these functions, but there will also be a heavier reliance on Iraqi forces to fill security voids.

It is far from clear how firmly and fully the US Congress and Administration as whole understand the challenges involved. The Iraqi government will have to grapple with lack of government capacity, the loss of foreign aid, the smoldering remnants of the insurgency and foreign fighters, broken infrastructure, basic insufficiencies in public services due in part to corruption, ineffective institutions, authoritarian tendencies, internal calls for autonomy, and ethnic and religious tensions. As the US departs, Iraq may increasingly look to Iran for support.

The US will vastly reduce its spending in Iraq with the withdrawal of US troops. However, their absence presents the US with several compromising decisions. Private security contractors will make up a majority of the 16,000 personnel and among other tasks will provide security for US personnel. Their presence is a sensitive issue in Iraq, and continued lack of oversight could ultimately limit State’s ability to traverse the country. Iraq will bear the huge burden of internal security, as pressure from its neighbors and extremists might grow.

Ultimately, the US will depend on State Department-led political, economic, and military efforts to bolster Iraq’s capacities and to counter Iranian influence. Many of the broader initiatives that encourage measures that stem corruption and enforce rule-of-law are long overdue and might prove as important as military and police training. The current ineptitudes question the Iraqi
government’s legitimacy and ultimately compromise security. Necessary reforms are dependent on US support and do not necessarily reflect Iranian interests.

Iran now seems to be the de facto winner of the US invasion of Iraq. It now enjoys deep ties in a neighboring country with which it once fought a fierce and bloody eight-year war. Iran has a great deal of cultural, military, and economic resources available to influence Iraq. Iran will leverage its resources to ensure Iraq prevails as a malleable ally. Yet Iran’s role in Iraq is complex, and it will be no simple task to mold Iraq into the ally Iran wishes it to be.

Iran does, however, face problems of its own. One is Iraqi public resentment over Iran’s political and economic influence. Iran’s incursion in the Fakka oil fields sparked widespread protests across Iraq and continued attacks in the Kurdish north are creating growing resentment. Iran’s strongest Iraqi allies did not perform well in recent polls, but Sadr’s followers remain pivotal and Basra’s ties to Iran are growing stronger.

Iraq’s leaders face critical choices regarding internal violence, deficiencies in government oversight and corruption, regional and international politics, and how to reshape and modernize their governance, economy, and security forces. In the process, the US and Iran will continue to compete for influence, especially in aid, military sales, and security training. If the US does not compete skillfully and consistently, Iraq’s insecurity and ties to Iran may tether Iraq closer and closer to Iran and further from the US. Iran’s relative influence in Iraq may rise even if Iraqi nationalism chafes against Iranian interference. The US unleashed forces in 2003 it must now deal with or risk seeing Iran as the real winner of the war in Iraq.
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Also see:


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