

# US and Iranian Strategic Competition: Competition in Iraq

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## Executive Summary

*"Americans planted a tree in Iraq. They watered that tree, pruned it, and cared for it. Ask your American friends why they're leaving now before the tree bears fruit."*

*--Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>1</sup>*

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) and the 1991 Gulf War. Since the 2003 Iraq 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.

Iran 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, fuel deeply seeded Iraqi mistrust of Iran. 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.

The 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.

The State Department assumes full responsibility of the US mission in Iraq in October 2011, and will broaden diplomatic, advisory, training, and other development goals characterized under the Strategic Framework Agreement. The \$6.8 billion operation will be of unprecedented scope for State and will be tested by budgetary restraints, security concerns, the withdrawal of US troops, and the inconsistent political will on both sides.

A continued US troop presence past the December 2011 deadline could potentially ease the burden on State and allow it to assume a more traditional role; however, a limited number of

troops would likely only be able to focus on limited training objectives. Private security contractors will make up a majority of the 16,000 personnel under State's mission and their presence is particularly sensitive to Iraqis. Their current lack of oversight could also limit the scope of State's mission and the nascent Iraqi forces will bear the huge burden of internal security.

Continuing the US troop presence might fuel violent retaliations against the US and GOI. It might, however, limit the mission of security contractors, provide critical assistance to Iraqi security force training, address counterinsurgency needs and internal tensions, and grant Iraq the time needed to address barriers to oil sector growth and economic diversification. However, a renegotiation of the Security Agreement that leaves US troop levels significantly low, will subsequently limit their capabilities.

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 economic and political incentives 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. Necessary reforms will likely depend on US support and do not necessarily reflect Iranian interests.

Iran 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 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 US and Iran will continue to compete for influence, especially in aid, political development, military sales, and security training, and if the US does not compete consistently and adeptly, Iraq's insecurity and close ties to Iran might advance key Iranian interests.

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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.<sup>2</sup>

Both nations were rivals under the Shah, but avoided large-scale conflict. The Shah's support for revolts by Iraqi Kurds 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 initially opposed Iraq's invasion of 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. Iraq began to turn to the West 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.<sup>3</sup> 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. 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 most dominant military power in the region, but crippled economically and with massive debt to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, presenting a major threat to US strategic interests. The causes of the invasion stemmed from the repayment of Iraq's debt, disputes over Kuwaiti oil production, and territorial disputes between the two countries. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.

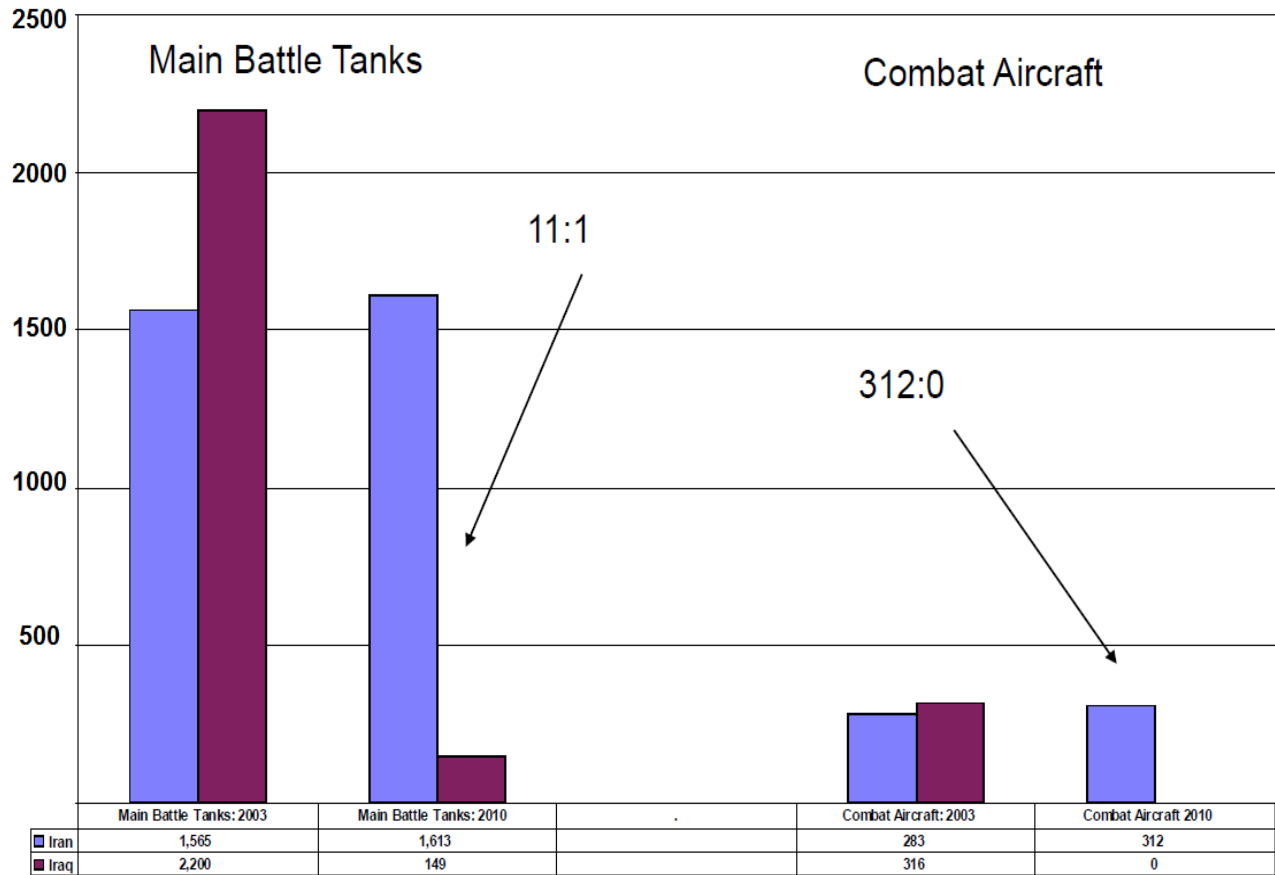
### **The 2003 Invasion of Iraq**

As **Figure 6.1** shows, this 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 because of its 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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 United States 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.<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup>**



Category	2003			2010		
	Iraq	Iran	Force Ratio	Iraq	Iran	Force Ratio
Active Manpower	424,000	513,000	8:10	191,957	523,000	2:5
Reserve Manpower	650,000	350,000	19:10	0	350,000	NA
Main Battle Tanks	2,200	1,565	7:5	149	1,613	1:10
OAFVs	1,300	815	8:5	505	725	7:10
APCs	2,400	590	4:1	1,479	650	23:10
Towed Artillery	1,900	2,085	9:10	0	2,010	NA
SP Artillery	150	310	1:2	0	310	NA
MRLs	200	889	1:5	0	876	NA
Combat Aircraft	316	283	11:10	0	312	NA
Attack Helicopters	100	85	6:5	0	50	NA
Major SAM Launchers	225	205	11:10	0	234	NA

### **The Aftermath of the Invasion**

Iraqi politics have become so complex and unstable that neither the US nor Iran has been able to exert dominant or consistent influence. The US position in Iraq has been undermined by US failures to plan for or execute anything approaching effective stability operations following its 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

The US has responded by gradually correcting many of the mistakes it made between 2003 and 2007. It changed its approach toward Iraq, attempting to build as unified a state as possible with security forces capable of defeating extremists and insurgents, as well as expanding Iraq's capabilities to deter and defend against threats posed by its neighbors. On November 13, 2009, the US embassy in Baghdad laid out its 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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. 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 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 establishes rules and procedures for US personnel operating in Iraq and the US military's role in countering threats. It includes 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 other provisions under the SOFA expire three years after its signing, or November of 2011. Among these provisions is an agreement to strengthen Iraqi Security Forces, which includes training, equipping, supporting, supplying, and addressing logistical systems, to include transportation, housing, and supplies.<sup>18</sup> The rights to conduct military operations and assist Iraqi forces against terrorists, outlaw groups, and remnants of the former regime, are unique to this SOFA.<sup>19</sup> Any presence of US troops beyond 2011 requires the renegotiation of the Security Agreement, or potentially through a memorandum of understanding.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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)."<sup>22</sup>

In September 2011, the US acknowledged it was in negotiations with Iraqi officials to maintain a troop presence after the December 2011 withdrawal deadline.<sup>23</sup> The Obama administration expressed a desire to keep a force of 3,000 to 5,000 troops to continue "training missions" for Iraqi forces.<sup>24</sup> In October 2011, the State Department will assume responsibility in Iraq, and continue a mission of building Iraqi institutional capacity under the SFA.

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.<sup>25</sup>

The creation of a new Iraqi government in late 2010 and the withdrawal of American troops by the end of 2011 will alter the pattern of Iranian-American competition. US influence has already

been sharply reduced by the end of the most serious fighting in 2008, ongoing US force withdrawals, and the conclusion of most US military operations in June 2010.

Iran's efforts have also met with mixed success, as Shi'ite political fragmentation and an anti-Iranian popular backlash have complicated its ability to gain influence and create a pro-Iranian coalition. 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.

Iran seeks to increase its political and economic influence as the US role recedes. Iran worked with Iraqi Shi'ites and other political leaders to form a new government in 2010, while continuing to back Sadr and various Shi'ite militias. Iran hopes Iraq will complicate rather than assist Western attempts to contain it. Iraq's much-reduced military capabilities make it dependent on aid, military sales, and training from United States, yet lacking the resources and cohesion to defend against outside coercion or aggression.

### **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 dependent on Iranian energy imports.<sup>26</sup> 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, for the time being, is both diplomatically and militarily weak, and has little ability to resist strong pressure from either the US or 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 Iraq needs aid and diplomatic/military support from the US.

Historically, Iran and Iraq have been enemies, 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 deeply resent the American presence in their country and blame much of the violence on coalition forces. Not surprisingly, most Iraqis don't want either country meddling 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.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Regional Response to Developments in Iraq**

Iran's influence in Iraq, and the uncertainty over the future US role in Iraq, has 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

The Saudis have expressed concern over Iran's role in Iraq<sup>31</sup> and are worried about the spread of the Iranian brand of Shi'ism, terrorists flowing from Iraq to Saudi Arabia, and the long-term oil issues in Iraq. 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."<sup>32</sup>

That same year, a leaked State Department memo shows, Saudi Arabia's king, in private, 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.'"<sup>33</sup> However, Ellen Laipson, President and CEO of the Stimson Center, argues that Iraq's Arab neighbors made few investments of political capital to counter Iranian influence despite their rhetoric and complaints to US diplomats.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Political Competition***

Iran has heavily influenced Iraqi politics ever 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.<sup>35</sup> 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 Hakim-led SCIRI and Maliki's Dawa Party.<sup>36</sup> 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 religious parties, with many leaders who had been in exile 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 the formation of the government that followed, which 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.<sup>37</sup> The long and drawn-out coalition building negotiations that followed the 2010 elections were brought to an end partially due to the pressure exerted by Iranian Majles Speaker Ali Larijani.<sup>38</sup>

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

More recent Iraqi elections did not favor either the US or Iran. 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.<sup>39</sup> 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 7 seats each out of 28 in the governorate council. Sadr's list performed even worse, failing to win any governorate outright.<sup>40</sup> 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 far different outcome than previous elections. Ayad 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.<sup>41</sup> The results were 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 regional influence, i.e. Iran.

The subsequent stalemate to form a majority coalition which could appoint a new prime minister lasted eight months, setting a 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 to be 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,<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

The US government also played a major role in forming the new government, and US officials applauded the inclusiveness of the new government when it was formed. American officials also pointed to the influence of the US in pushing for the outcome, including the adoption of an American suggestion that Allawi head a National Council for Security Policy. However, that council's powers remain poorly defined and some critics argue that the power-sharing arrangement will sharply reduce the quality of governance.

All of the new arrangements among Iraq's political leaders remain fragile. Allawi has broad-based appeal,<sup>44</sup> yet 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."<sup>45</sup> It is unclear how the National Council for Security Policy will fit into the legal framework of Iraq, since it is not mentioned in the constitution. 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 what this means in practice.

The creation of a new government resulted in a Shi'ite majority leadership in Iraq that Iran 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> Without Iranian backing, Sadr is left with a far less durable foundation, while Iran is far less influential in Iraq without Sadr.

The impasse, however, may have had some positive outcomes that help the US meet its goal to leave behind as stable of a government as possible. One has been the training of the bureaucratic machinery in the Iraqi government, which has been forced to mature as they run a country while Iraq's politicians struggled to form a new government. Another has been the judiciary's empowerment in first 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.<sup>48</sup>

If Iraqiya and the Sunnis can attain real power within the government after the 2010 elections, 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.<sup>49</sup> 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 give the head of the council powers over security policy, military appointments, and the budget.<sup>50</sup>

Generally, Sunnis recognize the importance of cooperating 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup>

### ***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.<sup>53</sup> Sayyid Abd el-Aziz al-Hakim of SCIRI even suggested Iraq pay reparations to Iran for the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>54</sup> As sectarian violence, political infighting, and economic hardship have ebbed and flowed, Iran has maintain its influence though close ties to Iraqi Shi'ites. The US, in turn, has sought to limit Iranian influence by focusing Shi'ite parties on security and governance, while persuading Iraq's Shi'ites to move toward conciliation with its Sunnis and Kurds through a national and independent government.<sup>55</sup>

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 junctions. Previously, Ba'athist rule suppressed open cultural connections to Persian culture and Iran.<sup>56</sup> Iraqi Shi'ites lost contact with relatives in Iran, and some Iraqis even received financial incentives to divorce their spouses if their spouses were suspected of having Persian ancestry.<sup>57</sup> Some urban Iraqi Arab Shi'ites stopped celebrating Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, though Kurds continued to celebrate it.<sup>58</sup>

This situation changed quickly in Iraq's Shi'ite-dominated areas once the invasion took place, 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 in Baghdad universities.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, even independent Iraqi clerics like Grand Ayatollah Sistani benefitted from Iranian knowledge of media and the Internet, which expanded the distribution of their work.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup>

Iran was 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 Mujahideen 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).<sup>62</sup> One estimate placed the amount of Iranian aid per month to Shi'ite militias like the Mahdi Army at \$3 million in 2009.<sup>63</sup> 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 deep 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.<sup>64</sup> Relationships 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 speaks Arabic with a Persian accent.<sup>65</sup> 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 in the Shi'ite community in Iraq if anything were to happen to al-Sistani.<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup> 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."<sup>68</sup> Most Shi'ite parties no longer even support the idea of a theocratic state, though there was some support from Shi'ite quarters initially for an Islamic state when Iraq's leaders drafted its constitution.<sup>69</sup> In 2004, Sistani criticized Iran's strategy of what some call "managed chaos":<sup>70</sup>

"Iran's policy in Iraq is 100 percent wrong. In trying to keep the Americans busy they have furthered the suffering of 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 sometime 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 Iyad Allawi's government.<sup>72</sup>

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 United States to delay Iraq's first elections with minimal unrest.<sup>73</sup> According to a leaked State Department memo, Sistani's "domineering authority and religious credibility" is Iran's "greatest political roadblock."<sup>74</sup>

The relationship between Iranian and Iraqi Shi'ites is far more complex than to suggest Sistani and the Najaf hierarchy are the pole opposing Iranian clerics, as some proponents of the Iraq War suggested they would be.<sup>75</sup> In addition, Iran may have made headway with clerics other than Sistani. A State Department source claimed that Sistani prevents Iranian students from enrolling in the religious seminary, or the *howzeh*, to curb Iranian infiltration; however, other imams are "'in the pocket of the Iranians', despite their proclaimed loyalties to Sistani."<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup>

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.<sup>78</sup>

### **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, one that illustrates the complex relationship between Iraq's Shi'ite leaders and those of Iran. Maliki had fled to Iran in 1979, where Iran had granted the Dawa Party space for a rebel training camp.<sup>79</sup> 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 while in exile and could never fully trust them. Many of those memories still incite Maliki. On one occasion, he was told he needed to travel twelve hours to reach the one Iranian official who could grant him the permit he needed, only to have the official reject his request.<sup>80</sup> On another occasion, Maliki's wife had given birth in Ahwaz as the city was under threat of a Saddam bombing, and no Iranians would help him evacuate his wife.<sup>81</sup>

Iran did play 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."<sup>82 83</sup> 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."<sup>84</sup> Maliki also resisted early American requests to outlaw Shi'ite militias because he depended on their political support.<sup>85</sup>

Maliki also put distance between himself and the US by criticizing a US raid on Sadr City,<sup>86</sup> condemning US forces and security contractors for civilian deaths,<sup>87</sup> and proposing amnesty for insurgents, even those who had killed Americans.<sup>88</sup> US displeasure with the amnesty proposal led to the sacking of the official in Maliki's government who had leaked it.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90 91</sup>

Maliki began to demonstrate that many Iraqi political leaders were their own men. 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.<sup>92</sup>

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.<sup>93</sup> Appearing with Ahmadinejad in Tehran in August 2007, he called Iran's role in Iraq's security "positive and constructive."<sup>94</sup> 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 Sadrists and Iran**

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.<sup>95</sup> Saddam Hussein also ordered the execution of Moqtada al-Sadr's father, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr in 1999.<sup>96</sup>

It was Baqr al-Sadr's cousin, Moqtada al-Sadr, who 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.<sup>97</sup> His Mahdi Army, 60,000-strong in 2003,<sup>98</sup> 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.

Mahdi Army attacks on US troops were serious enough by 2004 to threaten to delay the 2005 elections.<sup>99</sup> 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.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup>

Sadr, in turn, maintained links to Iran, and Iran to Sadr and Iraq. In 2006, Sadr pledged to support Iran if it were attacked.<sup>102</sup> At the same time, Sadr did have problems in controlling his militia in Iraq. The Mahdi Army's killings of Sunnis increased, especially after the February 2006 bombing of the Al Askari Mosque;<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

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."<sup>105</sup> In early 2007, Sadr fled to Iran,<sup>106</sup> 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.<sup>107</sup>

Shifts took place in 2007, however, which 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.<sup>108</sup> In 2007, that alliance broke down and the US launched a "surge" that targeted both Sunni and Shi'ite extremes.<sup>109</sup> This was a major factor in Sadr's declaration of a ceasefire in August 2007 that helped lower the level of violence in Iraq.<sup>110</sup> 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.<sup>111</sup>

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 in "Operation Charge of the Knights".<sup>112,113</sup> During the Battle of Basra, Iraqi security forces recovered weapons from Sadrists marked "Made in Iran."<sup>114</sup> Iran played an integral role in the ceasefire reached between Sadr and government forces.<sup>115</sup> 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.

In the 2009 provincial elections Sadr's faction failed to win outright control of any province, however gained several key appointments in southern Iraq through post-election deal making. In the 2010 parliamentary elections 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.<sup>116</sup>

The 2010 ministry appointments Sadrists gained in post-election negotiations may in effect hold them responsible for some of Iraq's on-going problems. Appointments to several service-related ministries, including Housing and Construction, Labor and Social Affairs, and Water Resources,<sup>117</sup> have made it difficult for Sadr to indiscriminately blame outside actors for Iraq's problems.

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.<sup>118</sup> 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.<sup>119</sup>

Sadr remains adamant that US troops should withdraw by the December 2011 deadline and has threatened to reinstate his Mahdi Army if this deadline is not met.<sup>120</sup> In May of 2011, Maliki

called on Sadr to accept an extension of US troops in the country if it is 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.<sup>121</sup> Maliki stated a request might be made if there were a “consensus” among political blocs, which could be achieved without Sadr’s support.<sup>122</sup>

In a May 13, 2011 sermon, Sadr hinted that he might retract the withdrawal demands if a consensus is 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.”<sup>123</sup> However, two week after this sermon, Sadr supporters held a massive march to demand US troops leave on scheduled,<sup>124</sup> and on August 9, 2011, Sadr again threatened direct retaliation against any US troops remaining past the deadline,<sup>125</sup> including those used to train Iraqi forces.<sup>126</sup>

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.”<sup>127</sup> How Sadr reacts to a prolonged US 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,<sup>128</sup> during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>129</sup><sup>130</sup> 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.<sup>131</sup> 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.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> and his sons Ayatollah Sayed Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim and Ayatollah Sayed Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr were among the founders of SCIRI.<sup>134</sup> 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.<sup>135</sup> Baqir al-Hakim was arrested and tortured in 1972, and re-arrested in 1977.<sup>136</sup> 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.<sup>137</sup> The next year, Saddam’s regime arrested 125 members of his family;<sup>138</sup> his brother Mahdi Al-Hakim was assassinated in Sudan in 1988.<sup>139</sup> ISCI led a failed Shi’ite uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991.<sup>140</sup> Over the years, the Hakim family claims over 60 members of the family were killed by the Saddam regime.<sup>141</sup> Sayed Baqir al-Hakim rose in the ranks of Iraqi Shi’ite leaders, and in 2003, he became a grand ayatollah and the marja’a ala, the leading

Shi'ite cleric.<sup>142</sup> In his speech after his return to post-invasion Iraq, he thanked Iran for its help and condemned the American occupation.<sup>143</sup> However, he later participated in the new Coalition-supported Iraqi government and claimed to support separation of church and state.<sup>144</sup>

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.<sup>145</sup> Baqir al-Hakim's brother, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, took over the leadership of SCIRI. Despite Abdel Aziz Hakim's connections to Iran, he built up a relationship with President George W. Bush.<sup>146</sup> He also changed his 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.<sup>147</sup> 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.<sup>148</sup> 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.<sup>149</sup> In 2007, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, formerly a heavy smoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer in Houston and went to Iran for treatment.<sup>150</sup> He died in August 2009.<sup>151</sup> Ammar al-Hakim followed in his father's footsteps to take over the formal leadership of ISCI.

Ammar al-Hakim oversaw a period of diminished support for ISCI in the most recent elections. 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.<sup>152</sup> Under the Iraqi National Alliance, ISCI joined with the Sadrists, the Iraqi National Congress, and other groups to win 70 seats in the March 2010 elections, placing a disappointing third after Iraqiya and State of Law.

After 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.<sup>153</sup> 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 agreed to the Irbil Agreement which brokered the impasse with the help of US diplomats.<sup>154</sup>

The 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.<sup>155</sup> Ammar al-Hakim has rejected the idea of extending the US troop presence past the December 2011 deadline.

### ***Competition for the Kurds***

Under the Shah, Iran supported Iraqi Kurds in their fight against Saddam as a way of putting pressure on Saddam over Iran-Iraq border issues and control of the Shatt al-Arab. The Khomeini government, however, ruthlessly suppressed Kurdish independence movements during the Iran-Iraq War. Iran has maintained offices in Irbil and Sulaimaniya since the Kurdish security zone was established in 1992.<sup>156</sup>

At the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran established relatively good relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).<sup>157</sup> 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.<sup>158</sup>

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.<sup>159</sup> 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.<sup>160</sup>

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.<sup>161</sup> Iran has also accused the United States of funding PEJAK.<sup>162</sup> In retaliation, Iran has carried out limited operations against Kurdish opposition groups inside the Iraqi border.<sup>163</sup> 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.<sup>164</sup> 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 and civilian deaths.<sup>165</sup>

### ***Competition for the Sunnis***

Former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, though a Shi'ite, has strong ties with Sunnis and has often criticized Iran for interference 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.<sup>166</sup> Ali A. Allawi, who served as an Iraqi political advisor, former Minister of Defense, and former Minister of Finance, has since argued in 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'ite.<sup>167</sup>

As long as Ayad 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.<sup>168</sup> The UAE and Qatar supported the Interim Government and voiced support for Allawi again when he ran in January 2005.<sup>169</sup> As the 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.<sup>170</sup> 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's pointed criticisms of Iran and the possibility of a religious state working in Iraq.<sup>171</sup> In both sets of 2005 elections Sunni did not fare well.

A key turning point occurred in 2008 when Sunnis turned on al-Qai'da 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.<sup>172</sup> As foreign fighters poured across Iraq's western border, many Sunnis in Anbar province were enticed into insurgency by al-Qai'da, who offered post-invasion security and a rationale that insurgency was their religious duty.<sup>173</sup>

However, Sunni attitudes towards al-Qai'da began to shift as they became familiar with al-Qai'da's methods. Al-Qai'da's harsh intimidation tactics, including using suicide bombers, were largely unacceptable to Iraq's Sunnis. Sunni tribes increasingly saw al-Qai'da as a foreign entity that posed a greater threat to their livelihood than Iranian or Shi'ite dominance.<sup>174</sup>

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-Qai'da sentiments. The Sunni Awakening had a considerable impact on the scale of al-Qai'da in Iraq from the end of 2006 through the fall of 2008.<sup>175</sup> 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 relative absence of al-Qai'da 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,<sup>176</sup> and members of the Awakening, who did not fare well as candidates.<sup>177</sup> 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.<sup>178</sup> 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 Iraq's political institutions.

The disqualification of nearly 500 Sunni candidates by the Justice and Accountability Commission (JAC) prior to the 2010 elections was 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.<sup>179</sup> General Odierno described al-Lami, and his predecessor Ahmed Chalabi, as "influenced by Iran" and working to undermine Iraqi elections.<sup>180</sup> Chalabi was also a main contributor of pre-war intelligence and has been accused of giving US secrets to Iran.<sup>181182</sup>

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-Qai'da threat and Shi'ites who question their allegiances. These frustrations have contributing to many Sunnis rejoining al-Qai'da.<sup>183</sup> 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.<sup>184</sup>

Despite August 2011 being the first month without a US casualty, it comes 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-Qai'da and other Sunni groups in first half of 2011.<sup>185</sup> 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.<sup>186</sup>

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

The Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), or the People's Mojahedin of Iran (PMOI), is a 5,000 – 10,000 member organization located in Camp Ashraf, Iraq dedicated to toppling the Iranian regime.<sup>187</sup> The group has carried out attacks against both Western and Iranian targets, previously with support from Saddam Hussein. During the Iran-Iraq War, the MEK was forced from their bases near the Iranian border and in 1981 relocated to Paris. In 1986, the MEK relocated to Iraq. In 2003, 3,400 members of the MEK were disarmed, isolated in Camp Ashraf, Iraq, and given protected status under the Geneva Convention.<sup>188</sup>

Iran has pressured Iraqi leaders to eliminate the MEK. The State Department designated the MEK as a terrorist organization, but the decision to disarm and protect the MEK did not send reassuring signals to Iran.<sup>189</sup> Although the MEK has been weakened in recent years, its revelations of Iran nuclear facilities in Natanz and Isfahan in 2002 lead to international concern over Iran's nuclear program.<sup>190</sup> The group also alleged in September 2010 that Iran has another nuclear site near Qazvin, 70 miles west of Tehran.<sup>191</sup>

In recent years the MEK has received increased attention in the United States. 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.<sup>192</sup> The MEK tightly safeguards its funding, but devotes large amounts of money to attract these powerful figures to their cause.<sup>193</sup> In 2007 the State Department stated that the MEK still had the "capacity and will" to commit terrorist acts and also rejected any notion the group was a viable opposition movement in Iran.<sup>194</sup> Several US think tanks, including RAND, have categorized the MEK as a cult.<sup>195</sup>

The impending US withdrawal may lead to targeted violence against the MEK. Both Shia 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.<sup>196</sup> In September 2011, ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim stated that the MEK must leave Iraq for past terrorist acts and betraying the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>197</sup>

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.<sup>198</sup>

### ***Security Competition***

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 Iraq must decide whether to pursue a strong strategic partnership with the US, and keep US military and police trainers and security advisors.

### **The US Role in Iraqi Security**

The US has been instrumental in the development of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior since 2003, including training, funding, arming, equipping, and fighting alongside Iraqi forces. The US presence and role in creating post-invasion Iraq not only gave it influence over the shape of their security forces but cultivated 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.<sup>199</sup>

The future level of US influence is uncertain. 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.<sup>200</sup> 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, including the military, intelligence, and police.<sup>201</sup> Unless Iraq's new government negotiates a new security agreement with the United States nearly all US military forces will depart Iraq by the end of December 2011.<sup>202</sup> The ability for the US to effectively aid Iraqi forces under different arrangements is unknown and creates an uncertainty within US- Iranian competition.

The same is true for Iraq's Ministry of the Interior. As the troop drawdown continues the Department of State and Department of Justice will assume responsibility of police training.<sup>203</sup> The US military will be reduced to an advisory role and providing arms transfers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) support. Funding for the transition is currently at risk as Congress contemplates Iraq funding cuts for the upcoming budget.<sup>204</sup> No one can be certain how the decisions of the new Iraqi government will affect a US strategic partnership, but the US-Iraq strategic relationship is likely to continue if it receives Congressional funding.

In the third quarter of 2010, Iraq received 11 US M1 Abrams tanks.<sup>205</sup> By December 2011, 129 more will arrive.<sup>206</sup> US plans for the sale of \$4.2 billion in arms to Iraq included land force weapons, naval systems, reconnaissance equipment, and several air force weapons systems.<sup>207</sup> In July 2011, Maliki expressed interest in the purchase 36 F16s, double the original number.<sup>208</sup> Although Iraq had previously attributed the delay in F16 purchases to national protests that diverted funds to the national food ration program,<sup>209</sup> eventually Iraq wants 96 of the F-16s, along with Sidewinder missiles to arm them.<sup>210</sup> 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.<sup>211</sup>

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. Current plans call for six OSC-I sites (Baghdad, Besmaya, Kirkuk, Taji, Tikrit, and Umm Qasr). The OSC-I will ensure a militarily deficient Iraq will not be susceptible to regional intimidation or coercion. The OSC-I will manage military sales, train the ISF on weapons systems, conduct joint military exercises, and lead additional trainings and exchange programs.<sup>212</sup> In the July 2011 SIGIR Quarterly Report, current plans for OSC-I were quoted as being "significantly behind schedule."<sup>213</sup>

Many Iraqi security experts and military officers believe Iraq should depend on the United States to provide a counterbalance against Iran because so many sources of tension still exist between Iraq and Iran. Territorial disputes over Shatt al-Arab<sup>214</sup> and Iranian incursions in Iraq are potential tinderboxes in the Iran-Iraq relationship.

### **The US Role in Shaping the 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.

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,<sup>215</sup> along with Sidewinder missiles to arm them.<sup>216</sup> 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.<sup>217</sup>

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.<sup>218</sup> 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.<sup>219</sup>

### **The US Role in shaping the Navy**

Naval security is critical to Iraqi exports and inevitably affects Iranian and US military competition as well as Iraqi security forces. The Iranian threat to Gulf energy exports is a key reason the US often deploys two US aircraft carrier groups in the Gulf region.<sup>220</sup> According to the Department of Defense, Iraq's oil infrastructure is vulnerable to the Iranian Republican Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN).<sup>221</sup> Iraq's off-shore oil loading points are potentially vulnerable to future attacks, highlighting the importance of rebuilding Iraq's fragile navy.

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.<sup>222</sup> In October 2010, the Iraqi navy inaugurated the first of 15 \$20 million US-built Swift Class patrol boats.<sup>223</sup><sup>224</sup> Iraq will also receive two \$70 million US-built offshore support vessels in 2011.<sup>225</sup> In July 2011, SIGIR reported Iraq's navy had grown to over 3,600 assigned personnel.<sup>226</sup> One of OSC-I planned ten locations will be in Umm Qasr, the primary location of Iraq's Navy.

Past 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 the warships were entering the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>227</sup> 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.<sup>228</sup>

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

Nearing a deadline for withdrawal, US troops still served a number of important security functions in Iraq: 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. 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.<sup>229</sup>

The decision to extend the US troop presence 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 budget pressures, and leaving even a fairly small number of US troops in Iraq entailed a bigger price tag. The 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.<sup>230</sup> As of September 2011, neither President Obama nor President Maliki were publicly backing plans to keep US troops in Iraq after 2011.

On the Iraqi side, Maliki had to constantly deal with accusations of being an American stooge (when he is not fending off accusations of being too close to Iran). He 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."<sup>231</sup>

Withdrawing US troops by the end of 2011 was supported by most Iraqis. 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.<sup>232</sup>

These concerns became steadily more critical to politicians and policymakers in both the US and Iraq as the deadline for removing US forces quickly approaches. Any plan to extend the US troop presence would have to be approved by the Iraqi Parliament. Following a series of high-level US visits, Maliki stated in May 2011 that a request for US troops might be considered if a 70% concurrence among Iraq's political blocs were reached.<sup>233</sup> On August 3, 2011, the major factions, excluding the Sadrists, gave Maliki their backing to negotiate a security agreement extension.<sup>234</sup> In September 2011, the US publically acknowledged negotiations were taking place to consider a troop presence after the December 2011 deadline.<sup>235</sup>

Both sides have 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 which support paramilitary security contractors in a police advisory effort. This plan also includes a strong Office of Security Cooperation staffed by civilians and military personnel to support training and equipping Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>236</sup> Military and intelligence officials have also pushed for greater CIA involvement following the US troop drawdown, primarily to counter Iranian influence and thwart arms smuggling.<sup>237</sup>

The Obama administration's apparent leanings towards keeping 3,000 to 5,000 troops would be used to continue training Iraqi security forces<sup>238</sup> and would likely depend on the use of Kuwaiti bases.<sup>239</sup> This number was far less than the desired amount expressed by top US military officials and has drawn 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.<sup>240</sup> NATO has also agreed to keep a small force in Iraq for training purposes. There is currently 160 NATO staff conducting training operations in Iraq, 12 of which are Americans.<sup>241</sup>

In early October 2011, Iraq's political leaders agreed to keep US military trainers in Iraq past the deadline, but without immunity from Iraqi law. The US stated previously that any such restriction would prevent from moving forward.

In October 2011, the State Department assumed responsibility for the ongoing mission in Iraq. The 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, with Embassy branch offices in Mosul and Kirkuk. In addition, OSC-I sites planned for Baghdad, Besmaya, Kirkuk, Taji, Tikrit, and Umm Qasr will be responsible for most military-to-military cooperation.

State's potential reliance on private security contractors as US troops withdraw creates another set of issues. 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.<sup>242</sup>

### ***The Iranian Role in Iraqi Security***

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.<sup>243</sup> 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.<sup>244</sup> 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.<sup>245</sup>

In 2010, leaked US intelligence reports outlined Iran's support for Shi'ites militias between 2006 and 2009 that targeted both American and Iraqi targets. In July 2010, General Odierno stated that the IRGC was using the Hezbollah Brigade to train would-be US attackers in Iraq.<sup>246</sup> 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.<sup>247</sup> 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.<sup>248</sup>

### **Iran's Broader Role in Iraqi Security**

Iranian and Iraqi security interests do coincide in specific areas. Security competition is complicated by the fact some Iraqis 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."<sup>249</sup> 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.<sup>250</sup> Iraq had to promise the United States that Iran would not train Iraqi security forces.

Iranian pressure has attempted to influence aspects of the security arrangements between the US and Iraq. Then-Commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq General Odierno said in October 12, 2008, that Iran might have tried to bribe members of the Council of Representatives to vote against the Status of Forces agreement.<sup>251</sup> 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.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> and has had intelligence agents in northern Iraq for at least 20 years.<sup>254</sup> One estimate puts the number of Iranian intelligence officers in Iraq in 2007 at 150.<sup>255</sup>

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."<sup>256</sup>

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." - Vice-Chairman of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Esmae'il Kosari, July 13, 2011

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

Iran began funneling much of its 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.<sup>257</sup> This 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.<sup>258 259</sup>

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.<sup>260</sup> 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.<sup>261</sup> One official estimate in 2007 puts the number of Qods and Iranian intelligence personnel in Iraq at 150, while some US commanders believe there was only one or two per Shi'ite province.<sup>262</sup>

The United States 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.<sup>263</sup> Iran denied any involvement, leading to more public confrontations over the issue beginning in December of that year.<sup>264</sup> 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."<sup>265</sup>

The Qods Force has also been Iran's tool for indirectly bleeding the US military and disrupting American interests in Iraq. In 2007, Gen. Petraeus stated, "There should be no question about the malign, lethal involvement and activities of the Qods Force in this country."<sup>266</sup> 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."<sup>267</sup> 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.<sup>268</sup> 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."<sup>269</sup>

A message from Qods Force leader Qassem Suleimani to Gen. Petraeus in 2008 during the Battle of Basra is revealing. Gen. Petraeus paraphrased the message as saying:<sup>270</sup>

General Petraeus, you should know that I, Kassim 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 is a central implementer of Iranian policy in Iraq and competitor with the US in trying to shape Iraqi security.<sup>271</sup>

Since at least 2003, Brigadier General Qasem 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 [Islamic Republic of Iran Government] 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 Abdal-Mahdi (ISCI), Prime Minister Maliki (Da'wa), former PM Jaafari, and more recently, Speaker Samarra'i (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 2006-2009 violence. The reports show that the IRGC often used Hezbollah to train militants in Iran prior to their crossing into Iraq. Gen. Petraeus had publically corroborated Hezbollah's role in a 2007 report to Congress.<sup>272</sup> 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.<sup>273</sup> 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.<sup>274</sup> Besides using Hezbollah to train terrorists, the reports point to both the Badr Corps and Mahdi Army as allies in Iranian efforts.<sup>275</sup>

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 Ramadan Corps.<sup>276</sup> 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.<sup>277</sup>

The various recipients of Qods Force aid include the Mahdi Army, the Badr Brigades, the Qazali Network, the Sheibani Network, and other groups. Their targets have included political rivals, the Iraqi Security Forces, and Coalition forces.<sup>278</sup> When the Badr Brigades and SCIRI integrated into the government, other Iranian-backed groups began targeting them as well.<sup>279</sup> Brigadier General Kevin Begner stated on July 2, 2007, that Iran supplied the Iraqi militias with \$3 million per month.<sup>280</sup>

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 July, Admiral Mullen accused Iran of supplying militias in Iraq in an attempt to take credit for American troops withdrawing at the end of the year.<sup>281</sup>

### **Iranian Arms Smuggling**

Iranian arms smuggled into Iraq have been deadly for 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,<sup>282</sup> 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.”<sup>283</sup>

EFPs have been particularly deadly for coalition forces. Militants use EFPs to penetrate the armor of Humvees and have been responsible for at least 200 American deaths in Iraq.<sup>284</sup> According to a *The Long War Journal* interview with US military officials, the EFPs are manufactured in Iranian factories in Ahvaz and Mehran.<sup>285</sup> Documents obtained by Wikileaks also demonstrate that officials in the US State Department believe the EFPs are from Iran.<sup>286</sup> 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.<sup>287</sup>

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 explosion alone might have rendered the chemical agents useless.<sup>288</sup> 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.<sup>289</sup>

In 2006, the Bush Administration authorized killing Iranian security agents in Iraq.<sup>290</sup> 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.<sup>291</sup> Others captured have included a commander in the Ramadan Corps, Mahmud Farhadi; a senior member of Lebanese Hezbollah, Ali Mussa Daqduq; and Qais Khazali, a former Sadr leader and head of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, or the League of the Righteous).<sup>292293</sup> In 2007, the US also captured the deputy commander of Lebanese Hezbollah Department 2800, which assisted the Qods Force in Iraq.<sup>294</sup>

Additional Shi’ite militants and extremists are often products of Special Groups and are mostly former Mahdi Army elements. According to Gen. Petraeus, Iran was arming these as a “Hezbollah-like force to serve its interests and fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces.”<sup>295</sup> 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.<sup>296</sup> AHH leader Khazali was released in December 2009 in exchange for a British hostage<sup>297</sup> and as part of an American effort to reintegrate Shi’ite militias into Iraqi politics.<sup>298</sup> Asaib Ahl al-Haq since reconciled with the Iraqi government, while the US designated Keta’ib Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.<sup>299</sup> However, Khazali still leads AAH and it remains a magnet for Shi’ite militants, as well as a threat to target US troops and destabilize Iraq after the US withdraw deadline.<sup>300</sup>

The US publically expressed concern over Iranian arms in 2011. On June 11, 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.”<sup>301</sup> In July Adm. Mike Mullen stated, “Iran is very directly supporting extremist Shia 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.”<sup>302</sup>

Iran, officially denies 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 Danayeefer, 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<sup>303</sup>

The US efforts to improve Iraqi security forces have helped 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.<sup>304</sup> 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.<sup>305306</sup>

The US has 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.<sup>307</sup> On September 26, 2007, the US Senate approved a resolution urging President Bush to designate the IRGC as a sponsor of terrorism.<sup>308</sup> 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.<sup>309</sup> However, the designations only escalated what were already strong sanctions on Iran which have been in place since 1979 and have shown to be mostly symbolic.<sup>310</sup>

### ***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: 198,633 men in the Army, 46,038 more in Army Training and Support Forces, 3,332 in the Air Force, and 2,595 in the Navy, as of the end of 2009.<sup>311</sup> But these numbers hide some serious weaknesses. The Iraqi military is now almost exclusively a COIN-focused force. Building up the IA into a conventional force will be a very complex, time-consuming, and 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.

Iraqi military weaknesses vis-à-vis Iran are too numerous to examine in detail, but below are just a few of the most important, reflected as of January 2011:

- *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 no modern jet fighters. Iraq is currently negotiating for 18 used French Mirage 2000s and 36 US F16s, and was reported to be considering 24 Chinese J17s.<sup>312</sup> 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.<sup>313</sup> 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.

The prospects for Iraqi efforts to rebuild their forces and capabilities to deter and defend against Iran will 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.<sup>314</sup> 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.<sup>315</sup> Iraqi troops massed nearby and the Iranians quickly retreated back across the border. The incident was peaceful, 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 long 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.<sup>316</sup>

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.<sup>317</sup> 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 and civilian victims.<sup>318</sup>

### ***Economic Competition***

The US-Iran competition for economic influence in Iraq has seen Iran take the lead through growing trade and investment, as the US scales back its aid. Trade between Iran and Iraq has steadily increased since the US invasion and Iran is now Iraq's biggest trading partner.<sup>319</sup> Legal trade now consists of building materials, chemicals, consumer goods, and foodstuffs, much of it via the border at Mehran and Mundhirriya/Qasr Shirin.<sup>320</sup> Iran has negotiated electricity deals with Iraq that were implemented after the CPA era.<sup>321</sup> According to the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Iran supplies 750 megawatts of electricity to Iraq daily.<sup>322</sup> Two Iranian banks, Parsian and Karafarin, have been approved to open up branches in Iraq.<sup>323</sup> In November 2003, President Talabani signed protocols on investment, oil, construction, and transportation with Iran.<sup>324</sup>

Many Iraqis, as well as some Arab states, resent Iraq's post-invasion shift towards trade with Iran.<sup>325</sup> 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, 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.<sup>326</sup> 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."<sup>327</sup>

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 Shia 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).<sup>328</sup>

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 Alharasa 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.<sup>329</sup>

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.<sup>330</sup>

Iran also has economic influence at the local level. In 2005, for example, there were reports that finding a job in Basra required the sponsorship of an Iranian-backed group, and teaching posts were filled only by those with leanings towards Iran. Traders in parts of southern Iran increasingly speak Farsi<sup>331</sup> and many accept Iranian currency. Iraqis receive more and more medical care in Iran. Iranian exports include electricity, refined oil products, and cars. It also helps to fund reconstruction.

Iranian economic ties in Iraq have come at a price. 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.<sup>332</sup> At the same time, Iran might leverage its resources to effectively bolster Iraqi Ministers who align with Iran.

American aid has been an important source of US influence in competing with Iran and will continue to be moving forward. As of June 2011, a total of \$182.08 billion has been made available for relief and reconstruction efforts in Iraq since 2003, \$61.64 billion of which has come from US appropriations. Of the \$61.64 billion, \$51.27 billion has been made available, and \$4.27 billion, or 5%, remains unexpended.<sup>333</sup> As of July 2011, US aid through five major funds was as follows:<sup>334</sup>

- Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF) - \$20.86 billion made available
- Iraq Security Forces Fund (ISFF) - \$20.54 billion made available (since 2005), \$1.69 billion available for new projects (nearly all of which expires on September 30, 2011),<sup>335</sup> with \$863 million in unexpended obligations.
- Economic Support Fund (ESF) - \$4.83 billion made available, \$549 million available for new projects, with \$348 million in unexpended obligations

- Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) - \$3.85 billion made available, \$24 million available for new projects, with \$8 million in unexpended obligations<sup>336</sup>
- International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) – \$1.18 billion made available (since 2006), \$333 million available for new project, with \$132 million in unexpended obligation<sup>337</sup>

The IRFF has expired for new obligations and quarterly IRFF totals now only account for a small fraction of overall expenditures. As a result, SIGIR no longer includes the IRRF in detail. The \$4.27 billion still available accounts for \$3.86 billion in unobligated funds plus \$1.67 billion in unexpended obligations minus \$1.27 billion in expired funds – a reoccurring phenomenon in US aid to Iraq. The Congress has also allocated \$10.37 billion in smaller funding streams. The majority of unexpended obligations (52%) are within the ISFF.<sup>338</sup>

On April 15, 2011, after several temporary extensions, a total of \$3.7 billion was appropriated for FY2011 to Iraq after \$5.05 billion was requested. 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.<sup>339</sup>

The FY2012 budget request totaled \$6.83 billion. There was no request for ISFF funding; 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”.<sup>340</sup> Under the US Budget Control Act of 2011, Contingency Operations would not be constrained by discretionary caps.<sup>341</sup>

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.<sup>342</sup>

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. The GOI took in \$20.11 billion in oil-export receipts the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2011, setting a post-2003 record.<sup>343</sup> The IMF projected Iraq's real GDP growth rate for 2011 at more than 12%, up from less than 1% in 2010, making it one of the world's fastest growing economies.<sup>344</sup> However, Iraq ranks 161<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>345</sup>

The quality of US aid is more of an issue than quantity. Past US aid has not necessarily helped America's image in Iraq. According to the SIGIR's October 2010 report, American reconstruction programs had too low a profile among Iraqi citizens.<sup>346</sup> 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.”<sup>347</sup>

The US may be able to compensate for cuts in future aid by focusing on the technical advice and expertise Iraq needs to use its own resources effectively. Congress has significantly reduced aid to Iraq in FY2011 and FY2012, which makes the current 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 publicly 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.<sup>348</sup> Iraq made no business sector reforms in 2010. 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.<sup>349</sup>

Progress in the petroleum sector has been aided by several American companies working in Basra, namely Halliburton, Baker Hughes, Schlumberger, and Weatherford.<sup>350</sup> Halliburton is working with Shell to develop the Majnoon oil field 37 miles from Basra.<sup>351</sup> 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.<sup>352</sup> However, the leading investor in Iraq's oil industry is not the United States, but China.<sup>353</sup>

Moreover, oil cooperation between Iraq and Iran may also strengthen Iraq's ties to Iran and increase its 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.<sup>354</sup> 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.<sup>355</sup> 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.<sup>356</sup>

The key problem this presents for Iran is that both have long competed to be the more important "oil power" – competition that has scarcely ended. In Maysan in 2009, Iranian troops crossed the Iraqi border and took control of Well 4 of the Fauqa Field, increasing crude oil futures by 2.2%.<sup>357</sup> This 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.<sup>358</sup>

Both were significant increases which had little substantive evidence to support them: Iraq's estimate was 25% higher than its previous estimate, while Iran's was 9% higher.<sup>359</sup> 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.<sup>360</sup> Iraq still has yet to rejoin OPEC's production quota system.<sup>361</sup>

### ***Competition in Diplomacy***

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.<sup>362</sup> Bilateral talks between the US and Iran took place between May and August of 2007, but produced several impasses and did not continue.<sup>363</sup> 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 an area to compete with the US, where it can win without 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).<sup>364</sup> In October 2007, Gen. Petraeus claimed that Kazemi-Qomi was still a member of the Qods Force.<sup>365</sup> Qomi had previously helped organized Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>366</sup> Danafar was commander in the IRGC, deputy commander in its navy, and also a member of the Qods Force.<sup>367</sup> Danafar is a native of Baghdad but was expelled by Saddam's regime for ethnic ties to Iran.<sup>368</sup> 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.<sup>369370</sup>

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.<sup>371</sup> 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.<sup>372</sup> Immediately before assuming the post of ambassador, Danafar headed the Center for Reconstruction of Holy Sites.<sup>373</sup>

A recent competition in diplomacy involving Iraq's regional relations played out in the summer of 2011. 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<sup>374</sup> and mimicked the accusation from Damascus and Tehran that Israel, not Syria's own citizenry, was responsible for Assad's situation. Muqtada 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."<sup>375</sup>

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.<sup>376</sup>

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."<sup>377</sup> 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 come mostly from Sunni Arabs, but also privately among Kurdish leaders and members of the Iraqi cabinet.<sup>378</sup>

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.<sup>379380</sup> 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 continues to support Assad's handling of the situation.<sup>381</sup> Additional concerns emanate from Syria's proven ability to infiltrate the Iraq border with Baathists, al-Qai'da, and other extremists.<sup>382</sup>

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. 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.<sup>383</sup> 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 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.<sup>384</sup>

## ***Conclusions***

There is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the US mission in Iraq after 2011. The withdrawal of American troops may be a boost to Iranian ambitions, but much depends on how successful US efforts are in building an 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.

US forces are scheduled to fully withdraw by the end of 2011, with provincial reconstruction teams finishing their work by September 2011,<sup>385</sup> and the State Department assuming full

responsibility of the ongoing US mission in October 2011. State's mission will fall under four pillars: broader diplomatic presence, development assistance, police development, and modernization of the Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>386</sup> 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.

The planned \$6.8 billion operation includes traditional 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 11 installations within Iraq,<sup>387</sup> including permanent consulates in Erbil and Basra, temporary Embassy Branch Offices in Kirkuk and Mosul, six OSC-I sites, three police training centers, and five Office of Security Cooperation sites. The plan calls for up to 16,000 government employees and contractors.<sup>388</sup>

A continued US troop presence past the December 2011 deadline could potentially ease the burden on State and allow it to assume a more traditional role. The 47,000 US forces currently in Iraq still perform key functions: Training, equipping, advising and supporting the ISF, conducting partnered counterterrorism operations with Iraqi forces, and protecting civilian capacity building efforts.<sup>389</sup> 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.

One key question remains how firmly and fully the US understands the challenges involved. The new 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, authoritarian tendencies, and ethnic and religious tensions. As the US departs, Iraq may increasingly look to its neighbors 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.

A continued US troop presence might fuel violent retaliations against the US and GOI. It may however, limit the mission scope of security contractors, provide critical assistance to Iraq security force training, address counterinsurgency needs and internal tensions, and grant Iraq the time needed to address barriers to oil sector growth and economic diversification. However, any renegotiation of the Security Agreement will still leave US troop levels significantly low and with limited capabilities.

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 economic and political incentives are as important as military and police training. Enforcing measures that stem corruption and enforce rule-of-law is long overdue. Continued ineptitudes question the Iraqi government's legitimacy and will ultimately compromise security. Necessary reforms will likely depend on US support and do not necessarily reflect Iranian interests.

Iran 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. Iraqiya, which loudly attacked Iranian influence, won the most votes out of any bloc. ISCI, Iran's closest ally, badly lost ground – although Sadr's followers made significant gains and remain pivotal. Iran has overplayed its hand at times, creating an anti-Iranian popular backlash that challenges its influence.

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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