
Iranian Meddling and Iraqi Security: Policy Options for Europe

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1. INTRODUCTION

Iran is one of the most important actors in the Middle East when it comes to addressing the security issues of the region. This brief will analyze one specific dimension of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East, namely its relationship with neighboring Iraq. In fact, by virtue of their geographic positions, human resources and natural endowments, any attempt at tackling the Middle Eastern security crisis must address the specific dynamic between the two countries. Thanks to deep historical, cultural and religious ties, Iran and Iraq enjoy a bond that cannot be fully captured by referring only to geostrategic considerations, as crucial as these remain in any case.

In what follows, we shall address two key questions. First, which features of Iraqi politics enable Iranian meddling in its domestic affairs? Second, what are the consequences for Iraq from a security perspective, and consequently for its viability as a state? Iran's current capacity of interfering in Iraqi internal affairs is a direct result of the United States' 2003 invasion of the country. The American intervention was ostensibly carried out to remove Saddam Hussein's threat to international security,

and thereby spur a regional democratization process. This operation removed a Sunni Arab dominated regime, hostile to both Western and Iranian interests. In its place, post-invasion Iraq featured a hybrid confessional-democratic system, where Shi'a Arabs rose to prominence. This new scenario enabled Iran to try and leverage on shared sectarian-religious ties. This development resulted not only in Iran's increased clout in the region, but also in further compromising Iraq's internal security and viability as a sovereign, independent state.

This brief will offer recommendations primarily for European Union foreign policy to assist Iraq in its efforts to tackle internal security and establish relations with Iran that are not subservient to the latter's regional policy designs and ambitions. These recommendations may also be beneficial to policy makers elsewhere, including Africa, as they seek to strengthening ties with Iraq while maintaining good relations with Iran.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This brief is based on an in-depth study of Iran's foreign policy making towards Iraq (Ramaioli 2025). Iran can exercise a specific kind of soft power vis à vis its neighbor by virtue of three interrelated factors: a shared

sectarian bond; revolutionary doctrine; and imperial inclinations. Such insights are here complemented with the analysis of a series of works – mostly secondary literature, experts’ and journalists’ analysis, and policy brief reports – that discuss more recent (post 2020) developments in the relation between the two countries. These analysis focus on the internal Iraqi security landscape and offer insights about Iraq’s main challenges towards becoming a viable, sovereign state. The material for this brief was mainly produced by prominent European research centers and think tanks which aimed at providing a framework for understanding Europe’s intervention in the Iran-Iraq relations.

3. KEY INSIGHTS

The Iraqi Ba’athist regime (1968-2003) was officially secular and non-confessional. However, the cadres and apparatchik who dominated it hailed primarily, though not exclusively, from the Sunni tribal landscape of central-northern Iraq. The highly repressive nature of that regime manifested itself in two crucial events: the suppression of Kurdish separatism in the north during the 1980s; and the crushing of a (mostly) Shi’a uprising in the south in March 1991, in aftermath of the failed attempt to annex Kuwait (August 1990). Hence, upon removing the Ba’athists from power in 2003, the occupying American forces, via the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), proceeded to dismantle both the Ba’ath party as well as the national army, which was tightly linked to it. The CPA judged these

two executive orders crucial for the establishment of a pluralist, multi-confessional and thus democratic Iraqi polity. The new constitutional framework intended to represent properly the various sectarian and ethnic components of the diverse Iraqi society. A system known as ‘*muhasasa*’ (International Crisis Group, 2023a) was then implemented. According to this system, sectarian and ethnic demographic numbers would command the apportionment and assignment of institutional offices. This framework did allow for other ethno-sectarian groups beyond Sunni Arabs – that is primarily Kurds and Shi’a Arabs, respectively around 25% and 55% of the Iraqi population – to partake in the government of the country.

Three main takeaways must be considered against this backdrop. Iraq’s prospects for national sovereignty confront the coeval Iranian project of expansion of its power in the region, first and foremost in Iraq.

Sects, Parties, Militias

Iraq currently enjoys a modicum of political and civil freedoms. There is a degree of freedom of conscience, opinion and association. This development is reflected in a multiparty system, broadly representing the various components of society. The institutional system intends to sustain power sharing and plurality (International Crisis Group, 2023b). In this contexts, two things are true at the same time. First, such a system (the *muhasasa*) has crystallized ethno-sectarian politics, heightening their

political salience. Second, ethnic groups and sects are not unified or monolithic entities. They are instead riveted by internal divisions and rivalries; other affiliations (class, clan, ideology, patronage networks, etc.) may well supersede ethno-sectarian loyalties or allow for individual and groups to collaborate across those.

As they remain important identity markers, ethno-sectarian affiliations produced political groupings that gave birth to political parties. These parties can hardly be classified along ideological lines. Rather, they often represent articulations of ethno-sectarian and patrimonial politics. In the Shi'a domain, these political formations are expressions, for instance, of a particular clan or family (the notorious Sadr Movement); or of former opponents of the Saddam regime (the Da'wa Party); or again, of a combination of the above *cum* foreign sponsorship (the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq [ISCI], abetted by Iran). Furthermore, these political movements do not develop just a political arm. Often times, over the last two decades they have also established military wings. The emergence of such militias can be traced back to the security issues Iraqis had to face given the overnight disappearance of central state authority in March 2003. The most dramatic development of this dynamic was the Iraqi civil war (2006-8) which was characterized by marked sectarian overtones (Sunnis versus Shia). The militias further justified their presence because of two main reasons: 1) to fight the Coalition forces occupying the country after the fall of the

the regime (the US will pull out combat troops only in 2011) and 2) the threat represented by the rise of the Islamic State (2014-17), which for a time seemed to pose an existential menace to both Iraq and Syria (Kagan et al., 2022).

Iranian Meddling

In this scenario, Iran sought to exploit ethno-sectarian identities by deploying a combination of both soft and hard power (Robinson, 2024). In relation to the latter, Iran established links and supported parties and militias hailing from the Shi'a camp (Tabatabai et al, 2021). Its chief proxy agent in the country is still the Badr Brigade, the armed wing of the ISCI. This relationship goes back to the early days of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), and pivots on the role of the Hakim family, from whom many prominent Shi'a religious leaders come. Other formations, like Kata'eb Hezbollah, emerged as part of the Popular Mobilization Units or *Hashd*, a national mobilization – though primarily Shi'a – that answered the call of ayatollah Ali al Sistani in 2014 to resist and combat the rise of the Islamic State (Hadad, 2024). More complex has been otherwise the relation between Iran and Muqtada al Sadr, whose Army of the Savoir (*Jaish al Mahdi*) has been arguably the most powerful Shi'a militia since its creation on the eve of the US invasion. The logistical structure to train, finance, coordinate and sustain Shi'a militias willing to answer Tehran's requests had been created quite successfully under the leadership of former head of the Quds Forces (a branch of the Iranian Revolutionary

Guards Corp [IRGC]) Qasem Suleimani and his Iraqi aid Abu Mahdi al Muhandis. They were both killed by a US drone strike in January 2020 (Seloom, 2024).

Iran has since faced a series of setback in the Middle East, especially after the escalation of the conflict with both Israel and the US following the wars between Israel and Hamas and Israel and Hezbollah. The network of proxies and allies nurtured by Iran came under most severe attack by the Israel Defense Forces. These setbacks have been evident in Lebanon and Syria (notably after the fall of the Asad's regime in December 2024, an erstwhile close ally of Tehran); in Iraq, it is possible as well to speak of diminished Iranian influence, but not to the degree witnessed in the other two countries (Mamouri, 2024). The solidity of the relations established with parties and militias remains a major element of the Iraqi political landscape.

In fact, beyond these relations, Iran has utilized soft power tools to extend its reach in neighboring Iraq. In particular, it has offered relatively lavish patronage to restore and renovate holy Shi'a sites, in particular the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala; it has established or supported religious schools and cultural centers; it has created or sponsored TV channel broadcasts of religious content; it has launched visa programs for Iraqis willing to go on pilgrimage in Iranian holy sites, like Qom or Mashhad, and sponsored Iranians to do the same in Iraq (Watkins, 2020).

Iraqi Response

Iran has thereby sought to make Iraq into a pliant, stable ally. Closeness with key Shi'a actors in Iraq would make the country a pivotal ally to foster and sustain Iran's power projection in the region. As a co-requisite, Iraq had to be maintained incapable of re-asserting itself as a fully sovereign state. Iran's continued presence in the country (via affiliated parties, militias, but also security personnel and advisers) seems to confirm its constant prominent role. However, as mentioned before, Iraq features a complex socio-cultural fabric. It is fair to presume that non-Shi'a Iraqis may not be well disposed towards a foreign country with a history of interference in their affairs (not to mention an eight year long war). We must also take notice that this feeling may be spread to a noticeable degree even within the Shi'a public that Iran primarily tries to reach. In particular, popular national protests in 2019 (at the height of Suleimani and Al Muhandis's influence in Iraq), triggered by poor law and order, widespread corruption, economic crisis and mismanagement of the country's resources, pointed fingers to Tehran as a foreign power bent on maintaining Iraq as a vassal appendage (Watkins 2020). However challenged, Iraqi nationalism is in fact part of the fabric of political identity of most Iraqis. In times of perceived undue interference (as it has been the case for over two decades now), such sentiments may well resist attempts on the part of Tehran to be kingmaker in the country.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The assumption that a pluralist and democratic Iraq, by virtue of being a predominantly Shi'a country, is bound to be close to Iran is rooted in an oversimplified view of the complex relationship between the two countries. Iran has indeed powerful tools to intervene in the affairs of its neighbor. But it faces also hard challenges to its political project, including a national sentiment shared by vast swaths of Iraqis, including Shi'a. If the EU or African countries are interested in supporting Iraq to re-establish meaningful sovereignty within its border, and possibly an independent foreign policy without, they have therefore room to do so.

Two main recommendations are in order. The first tackles the hard power security aspect. The European Commission may launch and sponsor Security Sector Reform (SSR) programs (Costantini and O'Driscoll, 2022) to help the Iraqi government reining in Iran sponsored militias. In the SSR context, the overall objective is to support the entire security apparatus (police, army, judiciary) to enhance state monopoly of violence. A more effective, well-functioning, professional security apparatus may then discourage individuals from joining non-state, foreign sponsored militias. This dynamic may possibly limit to a significant extent the clout and sway of Iranian proxies in the country, diminishing their capacity to utilize Iraq for Tehran's regional plans.

Second, the EU needs to engage in soft power policies, too. Given the cultural and religious ties between Iraq and Iran, Europe may not have the capacity to stop Iranian cultural influence and presence in Iraq – but neither it should. Rather, it has to implement active measures on its own to offer more support – diplomatic, educational, financial, economic, commercial – for the Iraqi civil society and business community. This approach may apply as well to African states looking to engage Iraq.

The EU should not overplay its hand while doing this. Its reputation may be easily tarnished if we consider that a number of prominent European countries (such as Italy, Spain and Poland) did participate in the US led invasion of 2003. However, EU policies and programs can offer an alternative opening to the Iraqi public and government. These should include establishing closer relations via enhanced access to European Union markets, similar to agreements the EU has with countries like Morocco and Egypt; setting up an easier visa regime for Iraqis, especially for students and young professionals, possibly including provisions for returning to Iraq (similar to the Fulbright program for the US, for instance) to limit brain-drain; and the establishment of direct connections (flights) between Europe and Iraq. While modest if considered separately, the cumulative effect of these policies may offer Iraqis options for social, economic and political mobility. In conjunction with a proper restoration of the security institutions, increased socio-

economic perspectives may sway Iraq outside the Iranian clout.

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