

# Iraq moving closer into Iran's orbit

BITTE HAMMARGREN







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## Major findings

- Iraq has been moving closer to Iran's orbit since the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003, a trend that the United States has been unable to break.
- Washington's sway over Iraq weakens further as a consequence of Iraq's refusal to host U.S. troops who withdrew from Syria, which was followed by a non-binding resolution in parliament calling for a withdrawal of U.S. troops stationed in Iraq.
- Iraq risks becoming a battlefield in a major proxy war, pitting the United States and Iran against each other. The flare-up of violence between Iran and the United States on Iraqi soil in December 2019 and January 2020, was dampened temporarily, but core issues remain unsolved and the tension between the parties in Iraq is high.
- Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq are seeking retaliation for the U.S. killings of Qassem Soleimani, a top Iranian commander, and his close Iraqi ally, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, leader of the paramilitary forces, in early 2020.
- Iraq has not heeded the Pentagon's calls to demobilise Iranian-backed militias, which currently appear to be the most potent armed units in Iraq.
- Iran has a strategic interest that Iraq continues to be weak.
- Iran has several advantages over the United States in Iraq. Iran and Iraq share a 1,400 km-long border, a common history, holy places, and the religion of their majority populations, Twelver Shia Islam. Moreover, Tehran has deep-rooted connections to people in power in Baghdad.
- Pro-Iranian Shiite leaders control key government positions as well as Iraq's paramilitary forces, the Popular Mobilisation Forces, PMF, created in 2014.
- The PMF, recognised as autonomous units under the prime minister's office, have become increasingly influential, not only militarily, but also in politics and in the economy.
- Post-2003 history has proven that Iran is the kingmaker for Iraqi prime ministers.
- With its loyalists in power in Baghdad, Iran can further strengthen its strategic depth in the Middle East. Pro-Iranian PMF in Iraq constitute important lines of defence for Iran against the United States, Israel, and the Arab Gulf states – similar to how Tehran sees Hezbollah's role in Lebanon. However, while Hezbollah is more dependent on Iran economically, Iraq's PMF draw their financial resources from national oil revenues.
- The autonomous structure of the PMF within the Iraqi state helps Tehran in upholding its air corridor to Syria and Lebanon and in opening new land corridors. The U.S. withdrawal from northeast Syria in October 2019 further improved Iran's access to the Levant.
- Iraq's instability makes the country susceptible to a re-emergence of Sunni jihadism.
- Remedies against Iraq's inherent weaknesses would comprise an inclusive government; stable institutions; disarmament, or incorporation of paramilitary units into Iraq's Army; determined efforts in rebuilding war-torn areas; serious measures against corruption – all of which are lacking.
- Grand Ayatollah Sistani, spiritual leader for Twelver Shiites, has expressed his support of Iraq's leaderless protest movement. Decimated by arrests, kidnappings, and killings, it has difficulties to open a clean page for Iraq since it challenges a system imbued with corruption.
- The United States efforts to rebuild Iraq's Army have been extremely costly, yet yielded uncertain results, as was proven during the army's collapse after the offensive of the so-called Islamic State, in June 2014.

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## Abbreviations

AAH – Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous).

CPA – Coalition Provisional Authority; following the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, the CPA was the U.S. occupation's administration in Iraq, established on 19 March 2003, and led by Paul Bremer. The CPA was dissolved in July 2004, leaving the authority to an Iraqi interim government.

CTS – Counter-terrorism Service.

QF – Quds Force (Jerusalem Force); the extraterritorial branch of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, founded in the early years of the Iran-Iraq war, 1980–1988.

IRGC – Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps; the IRGC was founded after Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, as a counterweight to Iran's regular army.

IS – Islamic State (previously called ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). Daesh, which is used in some quotes, is the Arabic pejorative acronym for ISIS.

ISCI (or SIIC) – The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (previously called SCIRI, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq).

MENA – Middle East and North Africa.

PMF – Popular Mobilisation Forces (sometimes called PMU where the U stands for Units) was created in 2014. The Arabic name is *al-Hashd al-Shaabi (The Popular Mobilisation)*. In 2017, the PMF were formally incorporated into the Iraqi state apparatus.

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# 1 Introduction

Modern Iraq suffers from a legacy of dictatorship, sanctions, and war, together with today's political weakness and economic mismanagement. This makes Iraq susceptible to a resurgence of Sunni jihadism as well as to the power struggle between the United States and Iran – with Iran holding the upper hand. This report aims to describe why Iran is not likely to loosen its grip over its Western neighbour. It also draws attention to the formation of Iraq's paramilitary Popular Mobilisation Forces, the PMF, formed during the battle against the so-called Islamic State (IS), as a tool for promoting Tehran's geostrategic interests in the Arab world. Notably, the PMF, which increasingly resemble Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, function as a parallel military structure in Iraq.

A popular uprising, starting in the autumn of 2019, constitutes a major challenge to Iran's influence, but anti-American sentiments run deep within the political elite and among various layers of society. The military escalation between the United States and Iran on Iraqi soil that began in the end of 2019 indicates that the country still faces the risk of becoming a battleground for a major proxy war, which could spread to a regional war. Iran continues to benefit from the instability in Iraq by filling power vacuums for its own strategic purposes.

This report is limited in scope to central and south Iraq and does not encompass the disputes between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Timewise, the main focus is the period from 2014 until present.

Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of Iraq during recent decades. Chapter 3 describes Iraq's oil economy, corruption, and the grievances behind the protests that erupted in the fall of 2019. Chapter 4 discusses why identity-based politics in Iraq make it prone to Iranian influence. Chapter 5 elaborates on the PMF. Chapter 6 summarises the major findings and gives a brief future outlook.



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## 2 Background: Iraq – a battlefield

Under Saddam Hussein's tenure, first as Vice President, from 1975, and later as President, from 1979 to 2003, Iraq started two devastating wars: the Iran-Iraq war, during 1980–1988, and the invasion of Kuwait, in 1990. After the UN-mandated and multinational operation to drive out Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, more than a decade of heavy United Nations (UN) sanctions against Baghdad followed. Wars, sanctions, and mismanagement by the dictatorship destroyed much of Iraq's economy and infrastructure. Saddam's Baathist regime persecuted its domestic enemies, not least the Shiites. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s it also launched the genocidal Anfal campaign against Kurds,<sup>1</sup> whereby chemical weapons were used against Iraqi civilians in Halabja, at the end of the Iran-Iraq war<sup>2</sup> and, earlier, against Iranian soldiers on the front line.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. invasion and ousting of Saddam Hussein and his Republican Guard in 2003 came as a relief to millions of Iraqis, especially Kurds and Shiites. The losers were mainly Sunni Arabs. The U.S. occupation paved the way for a federal state, including autonomy for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the north, and a new, decisive role for leaders of Iraq's previously downtrodden Shiite majority. However, the dissolution in 2003 of Iraq's army and the entire Baath system by the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), an occupation authority, made Iraq a failed state, and thus a new playground for various interests, including Iran and various paramilitary Iraqi organisations, such as Sunni jihadists.

This volatility has strengthened Iran's influence in Iraq, something successive U.S. administrations have failed to prevent. Prior to the 2003 invasion, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states had tried in vain to persuade the previous Bush administration to refrain from a military intervention of Iraq, since they predicted that it would strengthen Iran's foothold in the Arab world.<sup>4</sup> However, in Washington D.C., the architects of the invasion had their own vision of how to redraw the geopolitical map of "the Greater Middle East".<sup>5</sup> The political outcome of the American intervention in Iraq was not in line with the neoconservative agenda, and its emphasis on unilateral U.S. military action, since it came to strengthen Iran's role in the country. The Bush administration neglected the role that the Shiite majority in Iraq, especially those loyal to Iran, would play after the fall of Saddam's minority-led, Sunni-dominated regime.

At an early stage, the Shia Islamist SCIRI (the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and its armed wing, the Badr Brigades, became important actors in post-2003 Iraq. The Badr Brigades (which later changed its name to Badr Organisation)<sup>6</sup> had been created by Iranian intelligence and a Shiite Iraqi leader<sup>7</sup> with the aim of fighting Saddam Hussein's regime during the Iran-Iraq war. Iraq's previous Sunni rulers saw the Badr Brigades as Tehran's fifth column.<sup>8</sup> After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Badr Brigades became a dominant armed actor in Iraq, in control of the Ministry of the Interior and the police, while maintaining an armed presence outside the state system.<sup>9</sup> This hybrid formation, acting both within and separate from the state apparatus, became a model for many other armed factions, as discussed below. Meanwhile, the Mahdi Army, a Shiite militia, targeted both American-led forces and Sunni Arabs, which heightened the sectarian tensions in Iraq.

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Hammargren (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Hammargren (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Hammargren (2015), p 175–176, refers to an interview with Saudi Arabia's former Foreign Minister Prince Saud bin Faisal.

<sup>5</sup> Cofman Wittes (2004).

<sup>6</sup> The name was change after a new law prohibited armed actors from running for political positions. See: Cambanis et al. (2019), p. 30

<sup>7</sup> Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim, a senior Shia cleric (1939–2003).

<sup>8</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015), pp 51–57.

<sup>9</sup> Cambanis et al. (2019), p 24.

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Nevertheless, one of the most astute political figures in Iraq is the leading cleric, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, in Najaf.<sup>10</sup> With his religious quietism, he seldom intervenes directly in political affairs, thereby differing from the Iranian clergy-led political system, *velayat-e faqih*. However, when Sistani does issue an opinion on political affairs, his fatwas (religious decrees), elucidated in Friday sermons, carry tremendous importance. His followers are not only found among Shiites in Iraq, but also among millions of Twelver Shiites in the Middle East at large and in the West.<sup>11</sup> In 2003, he ruined the plans to let a U.S.-appointed body write Iraq's new constitution. After a fatwa from Sistani, the constitution was penned only after the first national elections, in January 2005.

Post-2003 Iraq has always had a Shia prime minister. The more ceremonial post of president has been held by Kurds from northern Iraq, first Jalal Talabani, former leader of the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), and currently, Barham Salih, a PUK comeback with a wide international network.<sup>12</sup> However, Salih's attempts to succeed Talabani as the president of PUK were hampered by Iran supporters within the party.<sup>13</sup>

## Sunni revanchism hard to abate

Vital for Iraq's power struggle is also Sunni Arab revanchism, which led to the birth of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS/Daesh, which later rebranded itself as the Islamic State (IS). Sectarian and pro-Iranian policies by Iraqi prime ministers and paramilitary forces in post-Saddam Iraq has fuelled Sunni revanchism. A former advisor to the United States military in Iraq, notes that there is a narrative in the Arab world that the United States "gave Iraq to Iran" in 2003. The analyst considered this perception to be a primary reason for Sunnis' attraction to IS.<sup>14</sup>

The former leader of IS, the Iraqi national, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was held in U.S. captivity in Iraq around 2004, together with thousands of others who later became military leaders or foot soldiers of IS. Camp Bucca, a U.S. prison camp in south Iraq, became their "jihadi university", where contacts between former Baathist officers and Sunni jihadists were established.<sup>15</sup> Baathist revanchists and *takfiri*<sup>16</sup> jihadists shared a hatred against the U.S. occupation forces, Iran, and the new Shiite leaders in Baghdad. With Baghdadi's declaration of a Sunni caliphate, IS intended to break up the borders in the Middle East, starting by erasing border controls between Iraq and Syria<sup>17</sup> and taking control over large swathes of both countries.

Iraq's Yazidi minority was persecuted as *kufar* (infidels) in a genocidal battle by IS, with thousands of girls and women being enslaved. Christians, Sunni dissidents, and Shiites were also targeted, in accordance to the Islamic State's extreme interpretations of Sunni Islam. Declaring its Sunni enemies, as well as Shiites in general, as apostates of Islam and punishable by death is inherent to IS ideology.<sup>18</sup>

In 2014, IS threatened Baghdad in the centre and Erbil in the north. The jihadi offensive constituted a threat not only to Iraqis, but also to Tehran's goal of creating strategic depth in the Arab world. Both Iran and the United States helped Iraq during the war of liberation from IS, in 2014–2017: the United States via its Strategic Framework Agreement with Baghdad, and as the leader of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS,<sup>19</sup> and Iran, by propping up paramilitary groups, which are described below.

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<sup>10</sup> Sistani, b 1930, is originally from Iran.

<sup>11</sup> Twelver Shia, *ithna ashariyya*, is the largest branch of Shia Islam.

<sup>12</sup> Deutsche Welle (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with two Middle East experts from the region, January 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Emmy Sky quoted by Weiss & Hassan (2015), p 57.

<sup>15</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015), p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> Takfiri Salafists are Sunni extremists who declare other Muslims as non-believers, apostates.

<sup>17</sup> This border was a result of the Sykes-Picot agreement, a secret division of the Ottoman Empire made by Britain and France during the First World War.

<sup>18</sup> Larsson, Göran (2017).

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State: U.S. Relations with Iraq (2018).

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After having recaptured IS-held territories in 2017, the United States and Iran are again pitted against each other on Iraqi soil. This came to the limelight during the paramilitary, pro-Iranian attacks on U.S. military bases in 2019, followed by U.S. retaliation against Iraqi paramilitary forces, which later triggered an attempt by pro-Iranian militia members to storm the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. The Trump administration responded on 3 January 2020 by the targeted killings of the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds forces, and his Iraqi ally, the chief of staff of the paramilitary forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>20</sup> Iran's non-lethal strikes against two U.S. air bases in Iraq was seen by President Trump as "Iran standing down"<sup>21</sup> and defused the immediate risk of a major war. However, such a peril is still looming, as the core issues between the parties remain unsolved.

This regional power struggle not only makes Iraq vulnerable to becoming a battlefield between Iran and the U.S., but also to the resurgence of IS. *Takfiri* jihadism thrives in turmoil, and IS cells in central and western Iraq are still active.<sup>22</sup> They might be invigorated by pro-Iranian sectarianism in Iraq as well as by prison-breaks from Syria after the rapid withdrawal of the United States from northeast Syria. A merger between al-Qaeda and IS, possibly starting from Syria's Idlib province, which is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an offshoot of al-Qaeda, can make Iraq a new tinder box.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Abu Mahdi Muhandis is a *nom de guerre*. His real name was Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi. See: Cambanis et al. (2019), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Trump's speech: 'Iran standing down', 8 January 2020. YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri\\_9xj0fD00](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri_9xj0fD00).

<sup>22</sup> Rudaw, 5 January 2020.

<sup>23</sup> McGuirk (2019).

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### 3 Economy: A rich state with people in penury

Although Iraq is an oil-rich country, nearly three-fifths of the population live on less than six U.S. dollars a day.<sup>24</sup> It is the world's third biggest exporter of oil,<sup>25</sup> with a production that has almost doubled over the past decade.<sup>26</sup> Yet, Iraq suffers from a mismanaged economy and endemic corruption. Much of Iraq's national oil income is unaccounted for, according to international experts based in Baghdad.<sup>27</sup>

Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranks Iraq as 162 out of 180 countries.<sup>28</sup> Corruption, some experts argue, has done more damage to the country's economy and political stability than Al-Qaeda and IS.<sup>29</sup> Due to lax governance, payments are siphoned away from investments in human and physical capital, such as improvements to the infrastructure and reconstruction of areas that have been liberated from IS.<sup>30</sup> Corruption and the absence of legal frameworks keep foreign investors away.<sup>31</sup>

Iraq's dependence on oil, accounting for around 92 per cent of the state budget, makes it one of the least diversified economies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>32</sup> Iraq is hence exceptionally vulnerable to swings in the oil price, something its institutions are ill-equipped to deal with.<sup>33</sup>

#### Iraq's riches do not reach the most vulnerable

The population of nearly 40 million is young, following a trend in the MENA region. In total, Iraq's labour force participation of only 43 per cent is one of the lowest in the world.<sup>34</sup> Yearly, around 800,000 young Iraqis enter the work force.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, new jobs are lacking. According to the World Bank, more than a fifth of the economically active young (ages 15–24) are unemployed.<sup>36</sup> Among the internally displaced, the under- or unemployment rate is 24 per cent.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, only around 12 per cent of women are engaged in the workforce.

The high unemployment constitutes a base for recruitment to the Shia-led PMF, which is discussed below, or to criminal gangs and insurgent Sunni groups. Among the refugees who crossed the border to Iraq after the U.S. withdrawal from Syria, some are supposedly infiltrators from IS,<sup>38</sup> which increases the risk that Iraq becomes the cradle for the next generation of Sunni jihadist fighters.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the PMF's paramilitary units have become important economic actors, drawing enormous sums from the state budget, in parity with other state security institutions.<sup>40</sup> The PMF have set up an

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<sup>24</sup> World Bank (April 2019).

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration (January 2019).

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration (January 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Baghdad-based international development coordinator, January 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Transparency International (January 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Gunter (2018), p. 396.

<sup>30</sup> IMF Iraq Country Report No 19/249, July 3, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Gunter (2018), p 396.

<sup>32</sup> IMF Iraq Country Report No 19/249, July 3, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> IMF Iraq Country Report No 19/249, July 3, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved in October 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Unicef World Population Review.

<sup>36</sup> World Bank (April 2019).

<sup>37</sup> World Bank, April 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Fache (2019).

<sup>39</sup> Gunter (2018).

<sup>40</sup> Cambanis et al. (2019), p. 30-31.

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array of institutions parallel to the state's, but also draw revenues from illicit trade. In particular, they have become engaged in lucrative reconstruction activities.<sup>41</sup>

During the war against IS (2014–2017), six million Iraqis were displaced. In May 2019, around 1.8 million still remained displaced, which means that nearly 5 per cent of the population are internally displaced persons (IDPs)<sup>42</sup>, most of whom are still anxious to return to previously IS-controlled areas.<sup>43</sup> With an influx of new refugees from northeast Syria, following the retreat of U.S. troops and Turkey's incursion in October 2019, the need to provide safe living conditions for vulnerable families in Iraq increased even further. However, the federal government lacks both a coordinated system of distribution to its provinces and plans for reconstruction.<sup>44</sup> Most aid to the IDPs is provided by the UN or nongovernmental organisations.<sup>45</sup> In some cases, the PMF have been providing citizens with services that should be the state's responsibility.<sup>46</sup>

The economy is also exhausted by a growing public sector. The Iraqi system enables the leaders of the blocs in parliament to offer money-spinning state-paid jobs to their loyalists and family members. The government's contracting procedures is "the father of all corruption issues", as an Iraqi judge once put it.<sup>47</sup> This has led to a rapid expansion of the public sector. From 2003 to 2016, the number of civil servants expanded from 850,000 to between seven and nine million.<sup>48</sup>

## Iraq's dependence on imports from Iran

Iraq relies heavily on imports, with Iran as one of its major suppliers. Iran accounts for approximately 16 per cent of Iraq's total imports.<sup>49</sup> In spite of its vast domestic oil resources, Iraq is dependent on Iranian natural gas and electricity. Even though the United States has given Iraq a sanctions waiver for imports of gas and electricity from Iran, power cuts are frequent in Iraq, which makes the summer heat unbearable and imports a must.<sup>50</sup> Currently, no other country can replace Iranian supplies of gas and electricity, even though the United States tried to push for Saudi Arabia as an alternative.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, food and other consumer goods in Iraq often originate from Iran,<sup>52</sup> as do chemicals, construction materials, machinery, and vehicles.<sup>53</sup>

Iran and Iraq have set a target to grow their bilateral trade from around USD 12 billion a year, currently, to USD 20 billion.<sup>54</sup> This goes hand in hand with Tehran's ambitions to reorient its non-oil trade away from distant customers in Europe and Asia to its immediate neighbours.<sup>55</sup> From this perspective, the long-shared land border and waterway in Shatt al-Arab offers ample opportunities for bilateral trade, and possibly also sites for oil smuggling.<sup>56</sup> In May 2019, during an official visit to Iraq by Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, both countries agreed to set up a mechanism for bilateral trade, aiming to make it unaffected by U.S sanctions. Under the agreement, Tehran opened a special bank account in Iraq, where it can deposit its income from Iraq's purchases of gas and electricity. The deposits can be

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<sup>41</sup> International Crisis Group (2018).

<sup>42</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2019).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a Baghdad-based foreign analyst, January 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with a London-based Iraqi researcher, October 2019; corroborated by a Baghdad-based foreign analyst in January 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a Baghdad-based international aid coordinator, December 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Cambanis et al. (2019), p 32.

<sup>47</sup> Judge Radhi Hamza al-Radhi, quoted by Toby Dodge (2019).

<sup>48</sup> Dodge (2019).

<sup>49</sup> Financial Tribune (2018).

<sup>50</sup> S&P Global (2019).

<sup>51</sup> Twaij, Ahmed (2018).

<sup>52</sup> Al Jazeera (2019).

<sup>53</sup> Financial Tribune, Tehran (2018).

<sup>54</sup> Vatanka (2019).

<sup>55</sup> Tehran Times, 26 November 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Reuters, 25 September 2019.

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used to pay for food and medical supplies. Tehran and Baghdad also agreed to develop two natural gas fields in the border areas.<sup>57</sup> Baghdad provides Iran with oil via barter trade.<sup>58</sup>

The U.S. State Department, on its hand, has threatened to freeze Iraq's account at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, in case the parliament in Baghdad votes for a binding resolution of U.S. troop withdrawal.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Radio Farda (2 July 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Reuters (2019).

<sup>59</sup> Wall Street Journal, 11 January 2020.

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## 4 Politics: Iran – the kingmaker in a weak state

Since the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq's politics have been dominated by Shiite factions engulfed in rivalries and backroom deals, where they have split ministries and government posts between them.<sup>60</sup> This system is beneficial to Iran, due to its deep-rooted ties to the new political elite in Baghdad.

For years, during the Saddam regime, Iraqi Shiite clergy and dissidents found refuge in either Iran, or, at times, in Syria.<sup>61</sup> Secular Iraqi Arabs who were opposed to Saddam in some cases altered their loyalties when geopolitics changed. Adel Abdul-Mahdi, caretaker prime minister for two months after his resignation in late November 2019, is one example. During Iran's Islamic revolution, he abandoned his previous Marxist ideals to become a member of SCIRI, a Shiite party created in Iran. When he became prime minister in October 2018, he took his position with the blessing of Tehran and powerful pro-Iranian paramilitary groups.<sup>62</sup>

### Shiite rivals in quest for power

Shiite leaders in Iraq are rivals on the domestic scene, but they are all dependent on working relations with Tehran. The former Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki (in office 2006–2014) is one of Tehran's favourites.<sup>63</sup> One of his rivals is the populist Muqtada Sadr, a Shiite leader with a nationalist agenda. Muqtada Sadr is not a parliamentarian, but leads Sairoon, the biggest block in Parliament, and comes from a family which is influential among Arab Shiites, both politically and religiously, and not only in Iraq. Capable of mobilising urban poor from Shiite neighbourhoods, he previously led the Mahdi Army, which for years targeted the U.S. forces in Iraq, as well as Sunni neighbourhoods during a sectarian war in 2006 and 2007.<sup>64</sup>

Without Muqtada Sadr's support, no Iraqi prime minister is likely to be nominated or stay in power. Sadr held centre ground when Iraq's political elite met to discuss the replacement of Abdel-Mahdi in early January 2020. Muqtada Sadr has a second residence in Qom, a city in Iran which is a centre for Shiite clergy, where he hosted Iraqi militia leaders and pro-Iranian Iraqi parliamentarians to debate Abdel-Mahdi's succession. Sadr's most influential interlocutor was Hadi al-Ameri, leader of a pro-Iranian block in parliament, as well as head of the Badr Organistaion. In early February 2020, when President Salih nominated Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi as the new prime minister, Muqtada Sadr threw all his weight behind the appointee and called for protesters, who were blocking roads in Baghdad and other cities, to be arrested. Iran's foreign ministry quickly offered its full support of Allawi, whereas Iraqi protesters rejected him as a stooge of the political elite.<sup>65</sup> Allawi, who served twice as a communications minister under Maliki, is not known to have criticised Iran.<sup>66</sup>

Iraq's latest parliamentary elections, in 2018, had no outright winner. Muqtada Sadr's Sairoon list captured 54 of 329 seats, whereas Hadi al-Ameri's staunchly pro-Iranian Fateh (Conquest) Alliance won 47 seats. Former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Nasr (Victory) Alliance came third, with 42 seats. As a demonstration of Iran's influence over Baghdad, Abadi's chances of forming a government were undermined after his statement that Iraq would abide by the U.S. sanctions on Iran. In October 2018, Sadr's Sairoon and Ameri's Fatah Alliance forced him to resign, whereby he was succeeded by the former finance and oil minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. Initially observers saw him as a compromise candidate, acceptable to both the United States and Iran. Nevertheless, Iran had the upper hand. Leaked

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<sup>60</sup> Mansour (2019), p 7.

<sup>61</sup> One month before the fall of Saddam Hussein in April, this author interviewed Shiite Iraqi leaders in exile in Damascus that expected to return home.

<sup>62</sup> Interviews with Iraqi and Middle East experts, October-November 2019.

<sup>63</sup> The Intercept (2019), p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> Center for International Security and Cooperation (updated in 2019).

<sup>65</sup> Reuters, 2 February 2020

<sup>66</sup> Interviews with Iraqi sources, February 2020.

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Iranian intelligence cables reveal that no Iraqi politician can become prime minister without Iran's blessing.<sup>67</sup> Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and their allies among Iraq's pro-Iranian paramilitary leaders are the kingmakers.<sup>68</sup>

Abdul-Mahdi assumed office without proposing any plans for how to combat corruption, rebuild war-torn Sunni areas after the liberation from IS, or provide jobs and services to those in need.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the violent crackdown on protesters in the fall of 2019 left stains on his reputation. After a call from the 88-year-old spiritual leader Sistani, who urged parliament to withdraw its support for Abdul-Mahdi, he submitted his resignation on 29 November 2019. His successor, Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi, cousin of the former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, has until 2 March 2020 to form Iraq's new government. In order to quash the public anger, he has promised protesters to include one of them in his government, to release Iraqis who were detained for taking part in demonstrations and to compensate families whose loved ones were victims of the violent crack-downs.<sup>70</sup> Yet, sceptic Iraqis claim that they cannot believe in empty promises, claiming that Allawi lacks a strong network which will easily make him fall prey to stronger political, economic and military interests.<sup>71</sup>

## Protesters challenging the elite – and Iran's influence

Since the eruption of the first demonstrations in eleven of Iraq's 18 provinces, in October 2019, gatherings of crowds in Iraqi streets have been calling for a complete removal of the political class, which they see as corrupt and unable to provide jobs and services. The mostly young, Shiite, and leaderless protesters have directed their anger at Shia-led political parties in the central and southern parts of the country. With slogans that reverberated from the Arab Spring, in 2011, they shouted, "The people wish the fall of the regime".<sup>72</sup> However, another message from the streets was directed against Iran's influence in the country, via chants such as, "*Iraq hurra, Iran barra*" (Free Iraq, Iran get out). Some protesters had a different twist: "*la lil-Amrika, la li-Iran*" (No to America, no to Iran).<sup>73</sup> During outbursts of popular anger, Iranian consulates in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf were torched.<sup>74</sup> A Baghdad-based analyst cannot exclude that Iranian-backed Iraqis have infiltrated the protest movement, by instigating violent acts.<sup>75</sup> A high number of casualties among the protesters, at time journalists or individuals with leadership skills, has negatively affected Iran's standing in the civil society.<sup>76</sup>

After the U.S-Iran military escalation in Iraq around the new year 2020, demonstrations resumed, with protesters calling for both the United States and Iran to leave Iraq.<sup>77</sup> Using slogans and deeds, demonstrators showed that there is ground for non-sectarian politics in Iraq. An opinion poll in July 2018 delivered the same assessment.<sup>78</sup> The fact that Iraq's Sunni Arab areas remained mostly quiet during the fall of 2019 is explained by their fear of new waves of sectarian repression against them.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>67</sup> The Intercept (2019).

<sup>68</sup> Interview with informed source in September 2019; the assessment is corroborated by various reports. See: Stratfor (2019).

<sup>69</sup> Dawood, Hussein (2019).

<sup>70</sup> The National, 6 February 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Iraqi sources, February 2020.

<sup>72</sup> In Arabic: الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام, (*Ash-sha'b yurid isqāt an-nizām*)

<sup>73</sup> Swedish Radio correspondent Cecilia Uddén reporting from Baghdad, 22 January 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Al-Monitor, 4 December 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Baghdad-based analyst in January 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Twitter: @husseinraham201 <https://twitter.com/husseinraham201/status/1215588689595764769>.

<sup>78</sup> Mansour (2019).

<sup>79</sup> Tsreibat News (November 2019)



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## Iraq adds to Iran's strategic depth

In spite of the widespread protests, Iraq's identity-based political system is difficult to rock. Tehran has no interest to see it crumble. Iraq constitutes one of Iran's primary foreign lines of defence against the United States and its regional allies, mainly Saudi Arabia and Israel. Hezbollah, in Lebanon, founded by the IRGC in the early 1980s, is another important part of Iran's external line of defence. Iran's allies in Baghdad, however, draw their financial resources from Iraq's national oil income, whereas Hezbollah in Lebanon is economically dependent on Iran. According to one estimate, the PMF's allocation from Iraq's national budget in 2019 was nearly USD 2.2 billion.<sup>80</sup>

The United States has slim chances of reconquering lost political territory in Iraq, since American interests and policies are widely questioned by the political elite in central and south Iraq. This was stressed in October 2019, when Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi refused to let U.S. forces, that were withdrawn from Syria, be deployed in Iraq. The troops were only allowed to transit Iraq.<sup>81</sup> His stance was further reinforced by his vocal support of a non-binding parliamentary resolution on 5 January 2020, which asked the Iraqi government to cancel its request for military aid from the U.S.-led Global Coalition to defeat ISIS.<sup>82</sup> As a result of the resolution, the international coalition, including troops from Sweden, decided to pause its activities to train Iraqi security forces.<sup>83</sup> The vote also enabled the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to file a complaint to the UN against lethal U.S. airstrikes.<sup>84</sup> 170 of 329 members of parliament supported the vote. Kurdish parties and most Sunni Arab MPs were absent. Contesting the resolution, Nechirvan Barzani, president of the Kurdish-dominated region in northern Iraq, stated that Iraq still needs the coalition forces to fight IS/Daesh.<sup>85</sup> However, Abdul-Mahdi, former leader of the caretaker government, insisted that resolution must be implemented.<sup>86</sup> This is in line with Iran's strategic interest to push the American forces out of the Middle East.

As the leader of an interim government, Abdul-Mahdi could not propose new legislation. However, given the composition in parliament, his successor Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi will have difficulties to abandon plans of ending, or decreasing, the U.S. military presence in Iraq.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Cambanis et al. (2019), p. 30-31.

<sup>81</sup> Reuters (23 October 2019).

<sup>82</sup> Lawlor, Katherine (2020), Iraq's Parliament Votes to End U.S. Troop Presence in Iraq

<sup>83</sup> Reuters, 5 January 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (Press announcement, 5 January 2020)

<sup>85</sup> Rudaw, 8 January 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Washington Post, 10 January 2020, 'Trump administration refuses to heed Iraq's call for troop withdrawal'.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Iraqis, January-February 2020.

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## 5 Military: Iran-backed forces prevail

Since 2003, Iran has steadily extended its influence in Iraq, to the detriment of the United States.<sup>88</sup> In 2007, Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force (QF), the extraterritorial branch of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, sent a text message to his U.S. counterpart in Iraq, General David Petraeus, via Iraq's president at that time, Jalal Talabani. Soleimani stated that he controls "the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan". Soleimani also declared that Iran's ambassador to Baghdad is a QF member, and that his successor will be one as well.<sup>89</sup> One of Iran's strategic goals is to have U.S. forces leave the Middle East.<sup>90</sup> Soleimani both masterminded and executed this policy for years.<sup>91</sup> While seeking to reinforce its strategic depth in the Arab world, Iran under Soleimani's QF command, has built on its so called "Axis of Resistance", comprising of allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza. Iraq has played a key role in this strategy since 2003. A vital interest, on the other hand, from the United States, Israel, and the monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula in preventing Baghdad from falling into Iran's orbit has proven hard to reach.

During the battle against IS in Iraq in 2014–2017, the United States was able to wield some leverage on Iraq via its links to the Counter-Terrorism Service, CTS, a U.S.-trained Iraqi elite force. After its commander, General Abdel Wahhab al-Saadi, was dismissed in October 2019, Washington lost influence over CTS, which is a capable force with legal autonomy and close connections to Iraq's Army.<sup>92</sup> Saadi, who had a reputation of being both anti-sectarian and anti-corrupt, was nevertheless widely popular.

### The PMF have many subgroups

The Popular Mobilisation Forces, PMF, or, in Arabic, *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, an umbrella organisation for approximately 50 different armed factions, with around 122,000 fighters, have become potent armed forces in Iraq.<sup>93</sup> They are usually divided into three sub-groups, according to their loyalties to three distinctive Shiite leaders: Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Muqtada Sadr, and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.<sup>94</sup> In military means, the pro-Iranian bloc is the strongest and most capable.<sup>95</sup>

The largest and oldest group within the pro-Iranian bloc is the Badr Organisation, led by Hadi al-Ameri, an influential parliamentarian, as described above. In January 2020 he reportedly assumed the position as the military leader of the PMF umbrella organisation and is expected to be appointed as its new chief of staff.<sup>96</sup>

In both parliament and military operations, his partner is Qais al-Khazali, a Shia cleric, who leads the Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, League of the Righteous), one of the most important pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. Khazali has repeatedly challenged the United States presence in Iraq. In early 2019, in response to President Trump's desire to "watch Iran" from U.S. military bases in Iraq, Khazali stated that Iraq could either use legislation to reduce the American troops in the country or let the paramilitary groups do the job.<sup>97</sup> In December 2019, the U.S. outed him on sanctions, accusing him of killings, abductions,

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<sup>88</sup> Chipman (2019).

<sup>89</sup> Filkins, Dexter (2013), 'The shadow commander'

<sup>90</sup> Fars News (2019).

<sup>91</sup> Sveriges Radio, Konflikt i P1, 'I Qassem Soleimanis spår', 11 januari 2020.

<sup>92</sup> International Crisis Group (2018).

<sup>93</sup> Cambanis et al. (2019). The Pentagon has a higher estimate.

<sup>94</sup> Mansour & Jaber (2017).

<sup>95</sup> Cambanis et al. (2019) p . 35.

<sup>96</sup> Al-Sumaria TV, 3 January 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Washington Post (4 February 2019).

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and the torture of protesters.<sup>98</sup> After the U.S-Iran escalations, Khazali called for revenge of the deaths of Qassem Soleimani and his Iraqi partner, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>99</sup>

Foremost of Tehran's proxies among the PMF has been Kataeb Hezbollah,<sup>100</sup> previously led by Muhandis.<sup>101</sup> In 2009, the United States designated this group as a foreign terrorist organisation, blaming it for "numerous terrorist acts against Iraqi, U.S. and other targets in Iraq since 2007".<sup>102</sup> According to the U.S. State Department, in 2007 Muhandis started to employ instructors from Hezbollah in Lebanon to prepare special groups "for attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq".<sup>103</sup> The paramilitary units of Muhandis and Khazali have also sent fighters to Syria, backing the Iran-supported President Bashar al-Assad against his Sunni Arab opponents.<sup>104</sup> Such military engagements have fuelled sectarian tensions in the Middle East.

As the founder and de facto leader of the PMF's umbrella organisation in 2014, Muhandis was engaged in having these units recognised as autonomous state institutions, independent from the central government and Iraq's army.<sup>105</sup> Muhandis depicted himself as a mere soldier of Iran, pledging allegiance in Farsi to the QF commander Soleimani.<sup>106</sup> Iran's connections to Iraqi paramilitary units were facilitated through Soleimani's meetings with Muhandis and other PMF leaders.<sup>107</sup> Soleimani also supervised "the military operations of several Shiite militias on the ground in Syria and Iraq in their fight against IS."<sup>108</sup>

In July 2019, an Iraqi government decree stated that the PMF should be fully integrated in Iraq's Security Forces. However, as of today the decree has not been implemented. The pro-Iranian bloc wants to maintain the PMF separate from the army. This is underpinned by the PMF's mistrust of Iraq's multi-ethnic army, and claims that it would be unable to protect Shia areas from a resurgence of IS/Daesh.<sup>109</sup> Various PMF groups have reportedly taken part in the violent crackdown on protesters, but regular security forces are also accused of having used live ammunition against medics and ambulances.<sup>110</sup>

Among the smaller sub-groups of the PMF, some follow Grand Ayatollah Sistani and receive funding, arms, and training from Iraq's Security Forces. These are multi-confessional and include between 15 to 20 per cent Sunni fighters, plus members of smaller minorities.<sup>111</sup> Muqtada al-Sadr has his own Peace Brigade (Saraya al-Salam), a remnant from his former Mahdi Army.<sup>112</sup> After the killings of Soleimani and Muhandis, Sadr called for the mobilisation of new "resistance groups" to support attacks against the U.S. troops in Iraq.<sup>113</sup> He encouraged his followers, labelled "soldiers of God" to join "a one million march", to condemn the American "occupation forces".<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury (2019).

<sup>99</sup> Al-Manar English, 5 January 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Kataeb can be translated as "brigades".

<sup>101</sup> Abu Mahdi Muhandis is a *nom de guerre*. His real name is Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi. See: Cambanis et al. (2019), p. 23.

<sup>102</sup> U.S. Department of State (2009).

<sup>103</sup> U. S. Department of State (2010).

<sup>104</sup> Reuters, 10 April 2013.

<sup>105</sup> International Crisis Group (2018).

<sup>106</sup> YouTube (2017).

<sup>107</sup> Mansour & Jaber (2017), p 3.

<sup>108</sup> Mercadier (2018).

<sup>109</sup> Mansour & Jaber (2017), p 11.

<sup>110</sup> Human Rights Watch (2019).

<sup>111</sup> Mercadier (2018).

<sup>112</sup> Mercadier (2018).

<sup>113</sup> Lawlor (2020).

<sup>114</sup> Reuters, 14 January 2020.

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Another Shiite politician, who lately distanced himself from Iran, is Ammar al-Hakim. After a split with the ISCI party and the Badr Organisation<sup>115</sup>, al-Hakim tried to form an armed unit with a more nationalistic tendency, but his endeavour was tarnished by corruption allegations.<sup>116</sup>

## The Hashd/PMF operating as hybrid forces

The drive to form the PMF came in June 2014, three days after the fall of Mosul, with a fatwa from Grand Ayatollah Sistani, where he urged volunteers to fight ISIS/Daesh. Tens of thousands of young volunteers signed up, most of whom were Shiites.<sup>117</sup> Sistani, revered by his Shiite followers similarly to how the Pope is regarded by pious Catholics,<sup>118</sup> wanted volunteers to join Iraq's regular armed forces.<sup>119</sup> However, as mentioned above, the militia leader Muhandis, together with Prime Minister Maliki, organised them as a hybrid form of militias.<sup>120</sup> In defiance of the constitution, Maliki ensured that the PMF were beyond the reach of the Ministries of Defence and the Interior. Instead, he placed PMF under the prime minister's National Security Council (NSC), and his national security advisor, which meant that the deputy director, Muhandis, was given a leeway to exert military influence over the militias.<sup>121</sup>

With this structure, the PMF largely appear to be modelled after the IRGC in Iran, an autonomous body, which is out of reach for Iran's parliament and government, and operates under the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's de facto head of state.

By virtue of Law No 40, from 2016, the paramilitary units were formally given the right to act as autonomous military formations under the NSC.<sup>122</sup> Iran, from the beginning, provided the PMF with advisors and training, opening its weapons depots.<sup>123</sup> The PMF were thus able to play a vital role in the long battle to defeat IS.<sup>124</sup> These units were the first to defend Baghdad from Sunni jihadists after the collapse of the Iraqi Army when the Iraqi state stood on the brink of collapse, in 2014.<sup>125</sup>

## The collapse of Iraq's Army – a loss for the United States

The Iraqi Army's lack of leadership and its ineptitude in defending its own citizens during the IS offensive in 2014 were hugely demoralising.<sup>126</sup> During the Islamic State's blitzkrieg, after taking Mosul, insurgents massacred at least 1,500 Iraqi Air Force cadets, most of them Shiites,<sup>127</sup> which left the Iraqi military discouraged and shattered. The jihadi offensive was also a setback for U.S. efforts in setting up a new Iraqi Army. Between 2004 and 2014, the U.S. reportedly spent USD 25 billion in training and equipping the new army, money that proved to be wasted when the jihadists occupied Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, along with about a third of Iraq's territory.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Al-Monitor (24 August 2017).

<sup>116</sup> Interviews with Iraqi sources, Autumn 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Chivers (2014).

<sup>118</sup> Sistani is considered to be the most prominent "source of reference", *marja al-taqlid*, for Twelver Shiites.

<sup>119</sup> Mansour (2019), p 12.

<sup>120</sup> Mansour (2019), p 12.

<sup>121</sup> Cambanis (2019), p. 23.

<sup>122</sup> Mansour (2019), p 12.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with an informed source, September 2019.

<sup>124</sup> International Crisis Group (2018).

<sup>125</sup> International Crisis Group (2018).

<sup>126</sup> Cockburn (2015), p 15.

<sup>127</sup> UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (2019).

<sup>128</sup> Kirkpatrick (2014).

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## The American reach in Iraq is waning

During the war to liberate Mosul and Anbar province from IS, the United States and Iran fought the same enemy in Iraq, with Iraqis as intermediaries. However, when IS lost its last territory in Syria and Iraq, President Trump switched his focus, directing it against Iran and withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), concluded in 2015. Trump's abrupt removal of U.S. troops from northern Syria in October 2019 further hampered the U.S. means for counter-balancing Iran's influence in Syria and Iraq. Even when the U.S. still had a substantial number of troops in northern Syria, Iran managed to send cargo flights over Iraqi and northern Syrian airspace. Iran's air corridor to Damascus had been facilitated by Iraq's pro-Iranian transport minister.<sup>129</sup> As of December 2019, Iran had also managed to strengthen its land corridors to the Levant by opening up the border crossing to Syria at al-Qaim/Abu Kamal.<sup>130</sup> During the same period, U.S. officials stated that Iran had secretly moved short-

range missiles into Iraq. An Iranian missile arsenal in Iraq that could reach Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as U.S. military installations and naval forces in the region, would strengthen Iran's strategic depth as well as its deterrence.<sup>131</sup>

A number of events in 2019 at first pointed to Baghdad's uneasiness to deal with security matters on its own soil. In July 2019, alleged Israeli drone attacks against PMF weapons depots close to Baghdad – the first Israeli attacks against Iraqi targets since 1981 – appeared to jeopardise the U.S. military presence, as one of the most powerful blocs in the Iraqi parliament called for the removal of the U.S. troops from the country.<sup>132</sup> Under pressure, Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi refused to tell where the attacks had originated. Had he done so at that time, he could have opened the doors to PMF retaliation on U.S. troops in Iraq, whereby the gates for a new proxy war on Iraqi ground would be thrown wide open.<sup>133</sup> However, following an incident in October 2019, he held Israel responsible for an attempted drone attack.<sup>134</sup>

After rocket attacks against the United States Embassy, located in Baghdad's Green Zone, on 24 September 2019, the Pentagon asked the Iraqi government to demobilise the Iranian-backed militias.<sup>135</sup> The Iraqi government did not heed these calls. The attack against the U.S. Embassy happened shortly after a drone and cruise-missile attack on Saudi Aramco, on 14 September 2019, which temporarily incapacitated half of the Kingdom's oil production. At first, U.S. officials investigated the possibility that some of the launching sites were located on Iraqi soil.<sup>136</sup> Later, Saudi and U.S. investigators concluded that the attack had been launched, with "high probability", from an Iranian base close to Iraq.<sup>137</sup> Four months prior to that, U.S. officials had claimed that a drone attack on Saudi oil pipelines had been launched from Iraqi ground.<sup>138</sup> However, former Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi strongly denied such allegations.<sup>139</sup> The strength of his denial reflected his fears that Iraq would be turned into a battlefield for a regional conflict.<sup>140</sup> However, the escalation of violence between the United States and Iran, and the unsolved tension between these countries, poses a risk for Iraq of becoming a frontline in a new proxy war which could potentially spread in the region.

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<sup>129</sup> The Intercept (2019).

<sup>130</sup> Aldroubi (2019).

<sup>131</sup> New York Times (4 December 2019).

<sup>132</sup> New York Times (22 August 2019).

<sup>133</sup> Haaretz (17 December 2019).

<sup>134</sup> Albawaba, 1 October 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Al-Monitor (30 Sep 2019).

<sup>136</sup> Radio Farda (15 September 2019).

<sup>137</sup> CNN (17 September 2019).

<sup>138</sup> Wall Street Journal (2019).

<sup>139</sup> Hearst (2019).

<sup>140</sup> International Crisis Group (2019).

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## 6 Conclusion

To summarise, Iraq's instability makes it prone to foreign meddling. Iran has benefited from the situation by filling power vacuums for its strategic purposes. A weak government in Baghdad, underpinned by various pro-Iranian paramilitary forces, the PMF, who operate outside the control of the ministries, serve the interest of Tehran to increase its strategic depth in the Arab world.

In contrast, strengthening the independence of the Iraqi state would require that the paramilitary units were brought under proper state authority, or in some cases be disarmed. Also, the parliament and the government need to take action against corruption. Yet, such endeavours are unlikely to happen, since the political elite and the paramilitary groups have too much to lose if they were to give in to the demands for an overhaul of the political system voiced in the civil protests.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani time and again has emphasised Iraqi national interests through his calls for restraints on Iran's influence over Iraq and on the paramilitary groups. In one of his Friday sermons, in November 2019, he unequivocally supported the peaceful protests and called for anyone involved in violence to be held accountable.<sup>141</sup> He stated that the government derives its legitimacy from the people, demanded a new electoral law, and lashed out against corruption, favouritism, and embezzlement, while underlining that "the battle of reform waged by the Iraqi people is a national battle alone", thus excluding interference from external parties. Sistani's authority, based on his religious position, is difficult for Iraqi Shiite leaders to challenge directly. Yet his verbal support of a leaderless protest movement, which is decimated by arrests, kidnappings, and killings,<sup>142</sup> has difficulties in opening a clean page for Iraq.

Widespread among the pro-Iranian factions and their media outlets are claims that the protests are part of a foreign-orchestrated conspiracy, aiming to overthrow the government, and in the interest of the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the former Baathist party, nowadays forced underground.

In Tehran, Iranian leaders have similarly lambasted an alleged conspiracy against the "Axis of Resistance", in reference to Iran's partners in the Arab world.<sup>143</sup> However, a number of Iraqi Shiites interviewed for this report express their defiance to such conspiracy theories, seeing them as mere attempts to scare young Shiites from joining the street protests against both American and Iranian meddling in Iraq.<sup>144</sup>

Under better circumstances, Iraq could have been a bridge-builder between the United States and Iran. Yet, the inherent weakness and corruption of the Iraqi state rather increase the risks of the country becoming a battlefield time and again – both between Washington and Tehran, as well as a fertile soil for the next generation of Sunni jihadists.

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<sup>141</sup> Sistani, official website (2019).

<sup>142</sup> Human Rights Watch (December 2019).

<sup>143</sup> Stratfor (2019).

<sup>144</sup> Interview with an Iraqi civil society leader, in October 2019.

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U.S. think-tanks, October 2019

Analysts from Turkey and the Middle East, September–November 2019

Diplomatic sources from the Middle East, October 2019

Independent Iraqi researchers based in Europe and Iraq, August–October 2019

Iraqi non-officials, September 2019–January 2020

Observer from the non-jihadist Syrian opposition, October 2019

International aid worker, based in Baghdad, December 2019–January 2020.

Baghdad-based analyst, January 2020.