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IRAN IN IRAQ

THE LIMITS OF 'SMART POWER'
AMIDST PUBLIC PROTEST

Jessica Watkins

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Iran in Iraq: The Limits of 'Smart Power' Amidst Public Protest

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Abstract

Post 2003, Iran has shown greater aptitude than Western states for penetrating Iraqi politics and society, producing 'smart power' by manipulating the combination of identity politics, patronage networks, and coercion which have become prevalent in both. But Iranian interference has been a major source of grievance for Iraqis since the outbreak of the October 2019 popular protests, undermining the Islamic Republic's non-coercive influence. This paper situates Iran's influence-gaining strategies in Iraq within its broader regional foreign policy objectives. Focusing on heritage, religious authority, charitable activities and media broadcasting, the paper draws on Arabic and Farsi language social and traditional media sources to argue that while the Islamic Republic has invested in potential sources of 'soft power' to broadly appeal to Iraqis, it has prioritised core support groups whose activities are increasingly unpalatable to the public. The paper reflects on how international actors should respond to current expressions of anti-Iran sentiment in Iraq.

About the Conflict Research Programme



The Conflict Research Programme (CRP) is a three-year programme designed to address the drivers and dynamics of violent conflict in the Middle East and Africa, and to inform the measures being used to tackle armed conflict and its impacts. The programme focuses on Iraq, Syria, DRC, Somalia and South Sudan, as well as the wider Horn of Africa/Red Sea and Middle East regions.

The Middle East Centre is leading the research on drivers of conflict in Iraq and the wider Middle East. Our partners in Iraq are the Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, as well as Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Al-Amal Association, Public Aid Organisation and Iraqi Women Network in Baghdad.

For more information about the Centre's work on the CRP, please contact Sandra Sfeir (s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk).



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Executive Summary

- Iran's core strengths in Iraq lie in its influence over the political elite and predominantly Shi'a militias, but also in its ability to work at a grassroots level. The regime relies on patronage networks to work through both formal and informal institutions which will not easily be dislodged by military operations against Iranian interests and actors in Iraq (**p. 11–12**).
- Pro-Iranian Iraqi public sentiment has been falling since 2017. Where it exists, it does not necessarily suggest approval of Iran's theocratic system of government, but rather appreciation for Iran's role in defeating ISIL and standing up to the US. Iran's Iraqi allies are consequently emphasising the continued dangers posed by both (**p. 12**).
- Sanctions increase Tehran's incentives to rely on pro-Iranian militias in Iraq to counter US interests there, particularly as they represent an economical alternative to wholesale military deployment (**p. 12**).
- Iran's doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* lacks a substantive following amongst senior Iraqi Shi'a scholars. But while Iranian allies in Iraq have publicly deferred to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, several have capitalised on his name to raise funds and popularity. Sistani's eventual death will create a vacuum in religious authority which Tehran will likely seek to exploit (**p. 14–15, p. 17**).
- However, Iranian 'soft power' in Iraq has been overemphasised. Tehran's vulnerability is apparent in the strategies of its Iraqi client groups, who have sought to associate themselves with the protest movement, even as some of their militias have repressed it (**p. 18**).
- The deaths of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis have produced a 'charisma deficit' in Iraq's Shi'a paramilitary leadership. Whilst polarising figures, both held strong appeal for many Shi'a youth, and the ability of their replacements to command equal loyalty is doubtful (**p. 19**).

Introduction

Iran is often identified as ‘the big winner’ of the 2003 Iraq War. The toppling of the Ba‘ath Party removed the Iranian regime’s longstanding enemy and the new Government of Iraq (GoI) established by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) accorded key positions to Shi‘a activist figures who were closely connected to the Iranian regime and Revolutionary Guard Corps. Over the past 17 years, the Islamic Republic has gained extensive leverage over Iraq’s national security and political decision-making at both local and national levels. Perhaps more decisive, Iran has permeated grassroots institutions and the informal economy in ways that Western allies have neither the ability nor the inclination to do. But within Iraq, Iran’s public image has suffered enormously since mass public protests broke out across the country in October 2019. Political and security actors backed by Iran have been amongst the principal targets of popular allegations of high-level corruption and the promulgation of sectarian agendas. Anti-Iranian sentiment has effectively undermined the Islamic Republic’s claim that its activities in Iraq are at the behest of the people. Violent suppression of protests by Iranian-sponsored militias has laid bare the coercive core of Iranian foreign policy, even with respect to its closest regional ally.

In this light, the extent of Iran’s appeal to Iraqis, often ambiguously referred to as its ‘soft power’, is questionable. Yet, its control over patronage networks across Iraq appears sufficient to ensure its ongoing influence over both formal and informal institutions of state and society.

This paper focuses on Iranian cultural initiatives in Iraq relating to heritage, religious authority, charitable networks and the media. It argues that they are integrally connected to the coercive and economic dimensions of Iranian intervention, through which Iran has sought to amass ‘smart power’: a shrewd, if opportunistic, source of pervasive Iranian influence. Prominent anti-Iran sentiment in many of Iraq’s recent anti-government protests suggests that there are limits to what this type of power can achieve once its core components (resisting both perceived US agendas in Iraq and Islamic State’s militancy) are spent. For Iran’s geopolitical rivals, its fall in popularity in Iraq poses questions about how this could be exploited; but here it is argued that a military offensive on Iranian interests is unlikely to achieve the desired results.

The paper proceeds with an initial discussion of the Islamic Republic’s regional foreign policy objectives and the means at its disposal to achieve them. The fact that Iran’s means have been chronically circumscribed has fundamentally influenced its behaviour in the region, leading the regime to devote fewer resources to ‘soft’ power and more to ‘smart’ power. The second part of the paper argues that this approach has paid dividends in Iraq post-2003, where identity politics and patronage networks prevail in both formal and informal spheres. Tehran’s investment into political, militant and religious groups has given it hefty leverage over Iraq’s societal and political fields, increasing its freedom of action and reducing that of its rivals. Yet, Tehran’s association with particular militant groups restricts any leeway to increase its overall popularity. The third part analyses Iran’s role in four spheres of non-coercive influence: cultural heritage, religious authority, char-

itable activities and media messaging. Section four reflects on how the US assassinations of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis have affected Iran's policies in Iraq amidst popular protests. The conclusion reflects on how international actors, including the UK, should respond to Iranian influence in Iraq. The paper's empirical findings draw on analysis of Arabic and Farsi open-source material including public broadcasting, newspapers and social media websites.

Iran's Regional Foreign Policy: Hard, Soft and Smart Power

Iran's pursuit of cultural initiatives in Iraq since 2003 comes within the broader context of its regional foreign policy. The oft-debated question of whether the Islamic Republic pursues an offensive or defensive foreign policy is essentially moot. While Ayatollah Khomeini advocated 'exporting the Revolution' in the first decade of the Republic (1979–89), the regime and its economy have been perpetually vulnerable within the international system due to hostility from regional and Western governments towards Iran's model of Shi'a Islamist governance, and the intermittent sanctions placed on it. As a result, since Khomeini's death in 1989, the regime's primary objective has been to preserve its own survival. Many senior figures view the US as an existential threat and hence resisting US regional hegemony through both moral and military means supports regime preservation.

Iran has adopted a flexible approach towards promoting its interests in the Middle East. This has involved pursuing bilateral diplomatic and economic relations with some regional governments; particularly the Assad regime in Syria since the 1980s, the post-Ba'athist Iraqi government since 2005, and the Lebanese government (especially since Hezbollah assumed a leading role within it in 2019). However, the deep suspicion with which US-allied governments have treated Iran has led the regime to focus on developing support amongst certain sectors of Arab populations; a process with varying cultural, economic and military components.

Sanctions and economic woes have prevented Iran from matching the conventional military might of its rivals.¹ The regime has consequently avoided direct military confrontation beyond the Iran-Iraq War (1980–8), focusing instead on asymmetric, quasi-'guerrilla' warfare, designed to resist and disrupt military operations by technologically superior enemy forces.² Over the past 40 years, the IRGC's Quds Force has trained, equipped, and occasionally fought alongside militant factions across the region. Post-2011, the Arab uprisings in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen have created a new series of challenges for Iran. The regime's decision to bolster Bashar al-Assad in Syria has cost it deeply in terms of

¹ See Pieter Wezeman and Alexandra Kuimova, 'Military Spending On Arms Imports by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE', *SIPRI* (2019); although it is worth noting that Iran's spending on defence is difficult to delineate in the official budget. See Jennifer Chandler, 'Decoding Iran's Defence Spending, Pitfalls and New Pointers', *IISS Blog*, 13 November 2018. Available at <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/11/decode-iran-defence-spending>

² Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

domestic criticism, money, and also manpower. At the same time, the emergence of ISIL as a major fighting force in Iraq, Syria and Yemen has presented Iran with a different type of guerrilla warfare, as well as reinforcing a sectarian perception of the conflicts, in which Iran is cast as the Shi'a force confronting Sunni Islamist extremism.

Conversely, Iran's efforts to project non-coercive popular influence in the region are often discussed in terms of 'soft power', via culture, broadly comprising literature, the arts, religion; public diplomacy and foreign policy.³

Iranian state diplomacy is officially conducted by the Foreign Affairs Ministry (under the watchful eye of the Supreme Leader's foreign affairs advisor), while public diplomacy is coordinated by the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance, whose ruling council is appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Ministry's responsibilities include managing the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA); religious endowments and charitable institutions; pilgrimages; the cultural heritage organisation; informing the world about the aspirations of the Islamic revolution, and expanding cultural ties 'with various nations and Muslims and the oppressed people in particular.'⁴ The Ministry of Intelligence and IRGC also implement and monitor strategically oriented cultural initiatives; whilst former IRGC officers direct and/or sit on the oversight boards of numerous cultural and charitable organisations.

Despite its efforts, Iran has only ever enjoyed qualified success in promoting its national 'brand' through persuasive means. In the predominantly Sunni Arab world, public opinion of the Islamic Republic has proven volatile.⁵ Approval ratings of the leadership rose markedly after Hezbollah took on Israel in the 2006 War, but Iranian sponsorship of predominantly Shi'a militant groups in the region since 2011 has stirred broad distrust of their geopolitical intentions, lending credibility to the theory that Iran is seeking to create a 'Shi'a crescent' of influence across the Middle East. Analysis emanating from the GCC states (particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) has inflated this impression, insisting that Iran is attempting to convert client populations to the Khomeinist doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent).⁶

In reality, while Iran has sought to capitalise on commonalities with Arab Shi'a commu-

³ Joseph Nye, 'Soft Power', *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): pp. 153–71: 167; Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, Public Affairs, 2004), p. 5.

⁴ For a summary of the ministry's main functions, see: 'Responsibilities and Organizational Structure of Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance'. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20080803173726/http://www.iranculture.org/en/nahad/ershad.php>

⁵ See polling pertaining to Iran in six Arab states for 2008 and 2011 commissioned by the Anwar Sadat Chair: Shibley Telhami, '2008 Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll', *Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland*, 2008. Available at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/0414_middle_east_telhami.pdf; see also the Pew Research Center's findings in 2014 that public opinion of Iran was negative and deteriorating: 'Iran's Global Image Largely Negative', Pew Research Center, 18 June 2014. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/06/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Iran-Report-FINAL-June-18-2014.pdf>

⁶ E.g. Abdulatif al-Hassan, 'Alaqa siyasiya bayn Iran wa'l-'Arab: Jadhurha wa marahilha wa-atwarha', *Al-Ubikan li-l-Nashr*, 2018.

nities, it has enjoyed greater success in leveraging support based on anti-US sentiment, even amongst predominantly Shi'a populations. The regime's pragmatic attitude towards regional relations is expressed in the concept of 'strategic depth', which senior regime figures describe as Iran's capabilities, support groups and sources of influence in the wider region (Islam, Shi'ism, language). The Supreme Leader maintains that 'Iran must use all of the capabilities at its disposal'.⁷

The perceived need to 'do whatever it can' underscores the fact that many of Iran's cultural initiatives have been firmly integrated into other forms of economic and militarised interventions abroad. Rather than projecting a distinct form of 'soft power', Iran is more adept at pursuing 'smart power', which Joseph Nye describes as 'the ability to combine the hard power of coercion or payment with the soft power of attraction into a successful strategy'.⁸ This type of power, whereby Iran makes the most of the limited means at its disposal to increase its freedom of action, has found particularly fertile ground in Iraq post-2003.

Navigating Iraqi Politics and Society Post-2003

Iran and Iraq share a 1,458km border and Tehran clearly stands to benefit from strong relations with Iraq, which comprises a buffer to Saudi Arabia (a longstanding rival), and a bridge to Syria (a longstanding ally) as well as Lebanon (where its greatest ally, Hezbollah, is based). Culturally, Iran shares most in common with Iraq. Both countries are predominantly Shi'a (around 90 percent in Iran, 65 percent in Iraq), and share over five centuries of transnational links as a result, including pilgrimages to shrines and exchanges between seminaries in Najaf and Qom, where senior Shi'a *'ulema* are trained.

From the 1960s, Iran became a refuge for Iraqi Shi'a dissidents fleeing Ba'ath Party rule and exiles associated with the Islamic Da'wa Party and the religious seminary (the Hawza), as well as several hundred thousand Iraqis of Iranian origin and Shi'a Fayli Kurds. More Iraqi Shi'a went to Iran after the Islamic Revolution, during the Iran-Iraq War, and after the 1991 popular uprising.⁹ From 1982, after the establishment of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in exile, the Quds Force undertook the training of its paramilitary wing, the Badr Corps.

The toppling of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 presented immediate threats but also longer-term opportunities for Tehran. The scale of the US-led military intervention alarmed the regime; but the system that subsequently emerged enabled Iranian allies to thrive. Iraq's political system is a product of de-Baathification policies endorsed by the CPA, and a governance system based on allocation or *muhasasa*, whereby political posts and public sector jobs are divided amongst Iraq's dominant political parties and their followers.

⁷ Ali Khamenei's speech to Assembly of Experts, 'Bayanat dar didar ba a'za-ye majles khebregan-e rahbari', 4 September 2014. Available at <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=27356>

⁸ Joseph Nye Jr, 'Get Smart: Combining hard and soft power', *Foreign Affairs* (2009): pp. 160–3.

⁹ Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 83.

While patronage politics was widespread under Saddam, the CPA established a consociational division of power, consolidating patronage networks along sectarian lines, and establishing the Shi'a majority as dominant within them. Survival of the post-2003 Iraqi system has rested, in varying degrees, on identity politics (or sectarianism), patronage (or corruption), and coercion.¹⁰ These are currencies with which the Iranian regime, in which religious, economic and military hierarchies intermingle, is well-acquainted.

Iran has pursued three core policies in Iraq post-2003, broadly designed to increase its own influence whilst reducing that of the US. First, it has nurtured relations with long-standing political allies: principally members of the Da'wa Party, Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) and Badr, which established itself as an independent political party in 2012.¹¹ Iran has used connections with these parties, many of whose members secured key positions in the GoI and, in Badr's case, the new Iraqi state security forces, to promote its own diplomatic, trading, and security interests through 'official channels'.

Secondly, Iran has nurtured new paramilitary groups with anti-US and anti-Sunni Islamist militant agendas, and currently supports over a dozen well-known militias (which are predominantly, though not exclusively Shi'a). Beyond promoting military capabilities, support has involved providing models for their political, welfare and propaganda wings to make them eventually self-sustaining. Some of these groups emerged to fight the Coalition and subsequently Sunni groups during the sectarian violence from 2005–8; others were established as part of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), or 'Hashd', in 2013–14 to fight ISIL.¹²

Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa in 2014 encouraging millions of Iraqis to join the PMF legitimised militias connected to Iran, and until his death in January 2020, Qassem Soleimani was a regular visitor to Baghdad, initially assisting in the anti-ISIL campaign, and latterly coordinating the security forces' response to the popular protests. Post-ISIL, the formal incorporation of the PMF into the Iraqi state security sector under the functional control of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (a pro-Iranian figure whom the US designated a terrorist in 2009) further normalised Iran-backed militias. Some of these have asserted control over large areas of western and northern Iraq. This has improved their ability to generate income by eliciting protection money from local populations, implementing road tariffs, securing positions for followers and demanding cuts from business contracts. It has also reduced their need for Iranian material support to sustain welfare programmes for supporters. At

¹⁰ Toby Dodge, 'The Contradictions of Systemic Sectarianism in Iraq', *SEPAD*, 26 November 2019. Available at <https://www.sepad.org.uk/announcement/the-contradictions-of-systemic-sectarianism-in-iraq>

¹¹ Prior to 2007, ISCI was known as 'Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, but it dropped 'Revolution' in a bid to adopt a more Iraqi nationalist image. Following Abdel 'Aziz al-Hakim's death in 2009, his son Ammar continued to 'Iraqify' the party. This was unpopular with Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri, who retains close links with the Quds Force, and with some of the ISCI old guard. In 2017, Ammar left the ISCI to establish the Hikma (Wisdom) Party ahead of the 2018 elections. Iran has continued to back Badr and ISCI.

¹² For a detailed analysis of the Hashd groups, see Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar, 'The Popular Mobilisation Forces and Iraq's Future', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2018. Available at <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>

the same time, the success of Fatah, a political alliance of militia leaders including Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the Imam Ali Brigades, in the May 2018 elections has reinforced Iranian influence in government.

The third policy has been to promote Iran's image in Iraq more generally through a variety of policies on an ad hoc basis, including providing mediatory services to disputing parties, restoring shrines in the holy cities, and funding charitable activities and media broadcasting.

Iran has pursued these policies fairly consistently. Nonetheless, several domestic and geopolitical events in recent years, including US sanctions since 2018, have reframed the conditions of interventions. Iran has weathered international sanctions over the years, but those imposed by the Trump Administration have been increasingly relentless.¹³ Sanctions arguably encourage the regime to rely more on pro-Iranian PMF since the latter comprise an economical alternative to deploying Iranian forces. While an Iranian military deployment to Iraq would elicit a decisive US counteroffensive, Iran can deny responsibility for attacks by pro-Iranian PMF units on US interests in Iraq. Sanctions increase IRGC influence within Iran by forcing greater recourse to the black market, which senior and former officers control.¹⁴ Moreover, they reduce Iran's capacity to invest in 'good will' projects in Iraq, and increase Iranian public criticism of the regime for doing so. This has not prevented Tehran from investing in cultural diplomacy, but it has changed how it markets such activities.

While Iran has not invested in Iraq as a 'nation-state', it has excelled at building close-knit relationships with individual Iraqis based on financial patronage, military expertise and identity politics. But while Tehran's leverage in Iraq is pervasive, it is insufficient to mitigate the threat posed by the US, which still enjoys the support of some Iraqi politicians, and is heavily vested in the Iraqi economy and military. Tehran is obliged to hedge its bets by supporting and at times mediating between factions whose agendas are not necessarily in line with its own, but who can disrupt other anti-Iranian agendas.

Iraqi public opinion of Iran has fluctuated. Periodic polling by Al-Mustakella between 2005 and 2019 suggests that, amongst Iraqi Shi'a, views on whether Iran is a reliable partner roughly correspond to the prevalence of Sunni militant violence, and potentially the presence of US and allied forces. Approval ratings shifted from 61% in 2005–6, to 26% in 2009–10, to an all-time high of 86% during the ISIS liberation period in 2014–15, to 49% in 2018–early 2019.¹⁵ Polling in late 2019 amongst pro-reform protesters in Baghdad and the southern provinces indicated that only 1% trusted Iran (compared with 7% who trusted the US, and 30% who trusted the UN).¹⁶ This inauspicious record poses questions about Iran's approach to wielding non-coercive influence.

¹³ Sanctions pushed domestic inflation to over 50 percent in June 2019.

¹⁴ E.g. Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, 'Tougher US sanctions will enrich Iran's Revolutionary Guards', *Foreign Policy*, 4 October 2018. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/04/irans-revolutionary-guard-corps-wont-suffer-from-stronger-u-s-sanctions-theyll-benefit-irgc-trump-sanctions/>

¹⁵ Munqith Dagher, 'Iraq, 16 Years after the Invasion', Presentation to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Al-Mustakella for Research*, April 2019. See also David Pollock and Ahmed Ali, 'Iran gets negative reviews in Iraq, even from Shiites', *Washington Institute*, 4 May 2010.

¹⁶ Munqith Dagher, 'Iraq's protests haven't yet changed the system — but they're transforming Iraqis' belief in themselves', *Monkey Cage Analysis*, 10 December 2019. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/10/iraqs-protests-havent-yet-changed-system-theyre-transforming-iraqis-belief-themselves/>

Iranian Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq

Iran channels cultural initiatives through Iraqi state and non-state institutions, sometimes in tandem, sometimes in competition. The elements of Iran's cultural outreach discussed here suggest that Iran has sought to promote broad-based appeal through generally inclusive activities, but also that its main focus has been to consolidate core 'resistance' groups that possess the necessary welfare and propaganda capabilities to survive public censure.

Religious Heritage

Pilgrimages between Iran and Iraq post-2003 have formed a core component of formal, government-driven cultural exchange. Up to nine million Iranian pilgrims have visited Iraq annually since 2003. The most significant event in the Iraqi Shi'a calendar is the Arba'een festival, forty days after the anniversary of the death of Imam Hussein, which regularly attracts up to two million Iranians to Karbala. The festival has become a large cultural event where Farsi music and books are sold and Iranian charity collection boxes circulated.

To promote pilgrimages, Iranian charities fund nationals to undertake pilgrimages to Iraq; while Iranian government agencies accord employees perks in form of Hajj trips.¹⁷ The government grants pilgrims favourable currency exchange rates, and in April 2019, the Iranian Organisation of Pilgrimage and the Hajj in Iraq negotiated a reciprocal visa waiver for Iranian and Iraqi pilgrims. However, even before the COVID-19 crisis, blows to the Iranian economy over the past two years have substantially reduced numbers visiting Iraq.

Iran has been actively refurbishing shrines and facilities in Iraq's holy cities. Since 2006, Iran's Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy Shrines and Support for Iraq (HRHS) has initiated over 200 restoration projects in Najaf, Karbala, Kadhemiya, Samarra, Musayeb and Balad. HRHS is headed by an ex-Quds Force officer and several of its projects are conducted with the Quds Force construction firm, Khatem al-Anbiya, which the US designated a terrorist organisation in 2010.¹⁸ HRHS coordinates with the GoI, local governorate officials, the Shi'a Awqaf and Iraqi Shi'a clerics who manage the shrines. According to Iraq's state news agency in 2018, over 4000 Iranians were employed in restoring shrines across Iraq.¹⁹ While the organisation has not publicised its budget, its website indicates that it is funded by governmental, non-governmental and charitable donations, and operates on a voluntary non-profit basis.²⁰

Religious Authority

A perennial worry for Western policy-makers has been the prospect of Iran importing Aya-

¹⁷ 'Iran turns Arbaeen ceremony into a political event', *Radio Farda*. Available at <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-truns-arbaeen-ceremony-into-a-political-event/29563642.html>; 'IKRA sends 500 pilgrims to Iraq', *IKRA*, November 2018. Available at <http://portal.emdad.ir/fa/newsagency/165117/-اعزام-500-مددجوی-ایلام-به-مراسم-پیاده-روی-اربیعین-در-عراق>

¹⁸ Amir Toumaj, 'Quds Force front develops shrine in Iraq', *Long War Journal*, 23 September 2016.

¹⁹ 'The Ambassador receives, at the embassy building, the president and members of the Committee for the Reconstruction of Holy Shrines', *Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 15 May 2019. Available at <http://www.mofa.gov.iq/tehran/?p=995>

²⁰ See HRHS website. Available at <http://atabat.org/>

tollah Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih* model into Iraq. This would entail persuading Iraqis to support the pre-eminence of a Shi'a religious authority in political decision-making, and moreover recognising the authority of Iran's current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (or whoever succeeds him).

Tehran has offered sizeable material incentives to promote Khomeini's teaching in Iraq, but with limited success. Amongst Iraqi Shi'a, the process of choosing the highest source of emulation (*marja' al-taqlid*) is largely determined by how successful high-ranking clerics are at developing networks of followers.²¹ Since 1992, Iraq's highest source of authority has been Grand Ayatollah Sistani, an Iranian by birth who came to Najaf in 1951 and remained through Ba'athist rule. Now 88, he is commonly described as a political quietist and opponent of *wilayat al-faqih* who believes that a *marja'*'s legal opinions should be understood as advisory. Consequently, speculation over Sistani's successor often focusses on which clerics favour *wilayat al-faqih* (broadly construed as 'pro-Khamenei') and which do not ('anti-Khamenei').²²

In reality, the boundaries between activism and quietism are not clear-cut. Sistani has decisively intervened on a handful of occasions into political matters, as have the other top three *marja'ji* in the Najafi Hawza.²³ Two of them, Grand Ayatollahs Bashir al-Najafi and Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh, have rejected Khomeini's principle that the highest source of religious authority should be the head of state, but do believe that a *marja'* should possess legal authority. Moreover, Shi'a clerical networks are complex, interwoven and transnational in nature.²⁴ A *marja'*, his deputies, or institutions to which he offers his blessings may be more or less well disposed to cordial relations with the Iranian regime, even if they ultimately reject the Supreme Leader's application of *wilayat al-faqih*.

Over the past ten years, two Iraqi Shi'a clerics who subscribe to Khamenei's vision of *wilayat al-faqih* have been mooted as potential candidates to replace Sistani. One was Ayatollah Muhammad Mahdi al-Asafi, an Iraqi educated former Da'wa Party spokesperson who spent years in exile in Iran. He returned to Iraq to represent Khamenei, but died in 2015. Another was Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, an Iraqi of Iranian origins, educated in Najaf but resident in Iran since the revolution and Chief of Iran's judiciary from 1999–2009. In 2011, Shahroudi established an office in Najaf and he was frequently mentioned as a replacement for Sistani (and also Khamenei) until he died in December 2018. A number of minor Shi'a clerics are also loyal to Khamenei and mooted to receive Iranian financial support. They include Shahroudi's supporters and clerics associated with pro-Iranian PMF, such as Aladdin Jazari from Harakat al-Nujaba, and Muhammad al-Tabatabai from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.²⁵ Nonetheless, these figures lack significant public stature beyond their immediate followers.

²¹ Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism*, p. 6.

²² For a more nuanced assessment of succession, see: Elvire Corboz, 'The Najafi Marja'iyya in the Age of Iran's Vali-ye Faqih (Guardian Jurist): Can it Resist?' in *Islam in a Changing Middle East: New Analysis of Shia Politics* (Washington DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, 2017), pp. 10–14.

²³ Grand Ayatollahs Bashir al-Najafi, Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh, and Muhammad Saeed al-Hakim.

²⁴ Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism*.

²⁵ Hamdi Malik, 'Clues to the Identity of Iran's Next Supreme leader in the back alleys of a holy city', *The Washington Post*, 2 June 2019; Reidar Visser, 'Religious allegiances among pro-Iranian special groups in Iraq', *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 9 (2011): pp. 5–8.

Sistani has frequently criticised US and Iranian interference into Iraq and rejected the use of the country as a surrogate battleground. Since the popular protests began in October 2019, however, Iran has been the more obvious offender. Sistani has repeatedly supported the right of Iraqis to demand government reform and an end to corruption, and condemned the repression of peaceful protestors by elements within the Iraqi security forces. Even so, his statements have not directly named Iran, leaving scope for Iran-aligned PMFs to associate themselves with protestors.

Lack of enthusiasm for Khomeini-style governance amongst senior Iraqi clerics and the broader population does not remove the prospect of the Islamic Republic intervening into the issue of Sistani's successor. Sistani's influence in Iraq is unparalleled, and as noted by al-Qarawee, a likely scenario after his death is a long period of uncertainty, and further factionalism of the religious establishment, during which Iran will have more opportunity to influence Iraqi intra-Shi'a dynamics, primarily through financial incentives.²⁶

Charitable Diplomacy

Iran has played a complex role in religious charities across Iraq since 2003. Transnational religious charity differs from international funding for secular civil society in that faith-based organisations generally possess better grassroots networks, enabling them to respond faster and more economically in crisis situations.²⁷ Religious networks are more familiar to most Iraqis than other types of civil society, having operated, albeit circumspectly, during Saddam's rule. In addition to raising funds for crises, they commonly fund religious instruction, marriage expenses, and welfare for the sick, unemployed, widows and orphans.

Iran's regional relief model is to provide health assistance to those injured in battle as well as the infirm, welfare aid to widows and orphans, religious education and vocational training, with the aim of making beneficiaries self-sufficient. The principle arm of this model has been the Imam Khomeini Relief Agency (IKRA). Established by Khomeini in 1979 as a domestic charity, it expanded to become Iran's primary relief agency abroad. IKRA has been active in Iraq since 2006 and has main offices in Karbala, Basra, Najaf and Kadhimiya, with smaller branches in 'Amara, Kut, Hala, Diwaniyah and Naseriyah. According to IKRA-Iraq, the agency was supporting 11,000 people in 2014, including 7000 orphans. It offers technical and vocational training in the form of agriculture, sewing and weaving. It also has agreements with the Iraqi Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Sport and Youth to run vocational courses.²⁸

In addition to organisations such as IKRA which are ultimately controlled by the Supreme Leader's office, religious charities associated with Iran can be nominally subdivided

²⁶ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, 'Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq', *Middle East Brief* 105, Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, (2017), pp. 5–7.

²⁷ Nagham El-Karhili & Mohammed Jassem, 'Muslim NGOs and Sectarianisation', *Al-Maydan*, November 2018. Available at <https://themaydan.com/2018/11/muslim-ngos-sectarianization/>

²⁸ 'More than 200 million tomans of charity fund income in Iraq during the first 5 months of this year', *Golestan Agency*, 18 August 2014. Available at <http://golestan.emdad.ir/fa/newsagency/95098/> بیش از ۲۰۰ میلیون تومان درآمد صندوق صدقات در کشور عراق طی ۵ ماهه نخست امسال - کمیته امداد امام ره - عراق - از طریق کمکهای محلی به درجه خودکفایی می رسد

into three further categories: those pertaining to members of the Iranian religious establishment which are not directly connected to the regime (for instance, the Basra-based Sadeghiyeh Charity, and the Esfahan-based Imam Hussein Charity linked to Sayyid Sadegh Shirazi, a prominent Iraqi-Iranian *marja'* with a transnational network who has strongly criticised the Supreme Leader's interpretation of *wilayat al-faqih*²⁹); those controlled by Iraqis but with Iranian government guidance and/or financial assistance (like those connected to Badr and more recently-created PMFs); and those that are Iraqi, but receive religious donations (*khoms* and *sadaqat*) from Iranian citizens. Al-Sistani's charities fall into this category since many Iranians view Sistani as their source of emulation.

In practice, lines between charitable categories are often opaque. Few charities seem ready to advertise Iranian funding. Even IKRA's Iraq representatives stress that it is independent from the 'mother organisation', and, in recent years, they have also stressed that all funds spent in Iraq are raised within the country. In April 2019, the organisation in Iraq appealed to Iraqis to donate funds to send relief to areas affected by flooding in Iran, indicating that it envisages making Iraq a source of support for Iran as well as vice versa. Several Iraqi charities which were set up by Iranian-backed PMFs and/or have provided support to such PMFs, claim to have letters of approval from Sistani, allowing them to collect *khoms* in his name.

Since 2014, Shi'a charities in Iraq have assumed increased prominence after actively raising funds for the PMF, their families and displaced populations during the campaign against ISIL.³⁰ While some of these charities were already established, others were set up specifically in response to the crisis, answering in some cases to Iraqi *maraja'a*, and in others to particular PMFs, including some of those affiliated to Iran.

Several Gulf-sponsored reports have sought to expose Iranian charitable endeavours in Iraq as fronts for terrorist funding, intelligence monitoring and ideological indoctrination.³¹ These cite a 2015 list issued by 'the Coalition of Sunni Forces' (an Iraqi tribal association) containing 36 Shi'a organisations which the reports claim are supervised by the IRGC.³² Whether this is accurate is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the 'Sunni Forces' reports coincide with the counter-ISIL military campaign, and since several of the PMF formed at that time have established links with the IRGC, it is logical that their charitable wings would also.

One allegedly Iranian intelligence-backed charity is the Karbala-based Fatima Zahra insti-

²⁹ 'The Office of the Eminent Grand Islamic Authority and Jurist, Ayatollah Sayyid Sadiq Shirazi'. Available at <http://www.english.shirazi.ir/> and <http://shiawaves.com/persian/persian/islam/10560-2017-05-29-17-11-13>

³⁰ See the IKRA Iraq Facebook page. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/emdadiraq/>

³¹ For instance, Abdullatif Abdurahman al-Hassan, *The Political Relationship between Iran and the Arabs: Its Roots, Stages and Forms* (Riyadh: Obeikan Publishing, 2018).

³² See, for instance, '36 Iranian intelligence institutions operating in Iraq', *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, 25 July 2016. Available at <http://akhbar-alkhaleej.com/news/article/1030093>; 'By name... 36 Iranian intelligence institutions in Iraq', *Al-Ain*, 25 July 2016. Available at <https://al-ain.com/article/213396>. Another 2017 article by an Emirati outlet features a similar list of Iranian institutions in *Iraq Al-Ain News*: 'Tabara'at aytam al-Iraq... Idaa Iraniya jadida li-Tamwil al-Irhab', 16 November 2017. Available at <https://al-ain.com/article/iraq-iran-donations>; and a 2010 article lists 20 other organisations. Available at www.albasrah.net/ar_articles_2010/0810/30n_040810.htm

tute, established in 2016, with branches in Najaf and other southern provinces.³³ The institute's Facebook page states its mission as 'helping the poor and orphans', and pictures members of the Imam Ali Brigades, a PMF known to receive Iranian arms, thanking the institute for providing 'logistical support'.³⁴ In a 2018 interview, the organisation's director noted that during the anti-ISIL campaign the charity raised well over 1 million USD.³⁵ He maintained that no funding came from religious or political bodies, but noted that the charity benefits from a fatwa by Sistani allowing it to receive *khoms*, again demonstrating the difficulties of categorically distinguishing entities that are 'pro-Iran' from those that are 'pro-Sistani'.

Tehran has struggled to derive widespread recognition for its charitable endeavours in Iraq. Economic hardships have made Iranian investment into causes abroad extremely unpopular domestically and the regime has minimised advertising its activities in the national media. Even in comments to the Iraqi media, Iranian officials emphasise that funds are sourced from Iraqi donations, and that Iran's main contribution is leadership, technical expertise, and its relief model.³⁶ The same is true with regard to Iran's role in reconstructing Shi'a shrines. HRHS officials emphasise that its projects do not drain Iran's resources: according to the director, 80 percent of Iranian donations return to Iran in the form of buying materials for use on Iraqi mosques.³⁷ Nonetheless, even where some obfuscation of funding is required, Iran has been able to use sympathetic Iraqi media channels to advertise its activities.

Iran's Media Strategy

Since 2003, Iran has made multiple forays into Arabic language television broadcasting, some of which have been directed specifically towards Iraq. *Al-Alam* news channel, launched during the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq by the state broadcaster IRIB, now has bureaus in Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Tehran. While clearly pro-Iranian, *al-Alam* markets itself as mainstream and non-sectarian. During and immediately after the invasion it had widespread viewership due to having greater access to Iraq than other satellite channels, but has subsequently declined in popularity. The Beirut-based channel *al-Mayadeen*, launched in 2012, which is widely believed to be funded by the Iranian gov-

³³ 'Mu'assassat Khayriya Wajha li-Muhimat Istikhbariyya', *Al-Arab*, 14 November 2019. Available at <https://alarab.co.uk/مؤسسات-إيران-الخيرية-واجهة-لمهمات-استخباراتية/>

³⁴ Available at <https://www.facebook.com/FatimaZahraFoundation>; one of the institute's stated services was to bury unidentified bodies after the anti-ISIL campaign. In mid-2019, critics of GoI implicated the institute in an alleged attempt by Babel Health Directorate to hide evidence of sectarian crimes in Jurf al-Sakhr by concealing the identity of Sunni victims of the PMF. Available at <https://ultrairaq.ultrasawt.com/جث-مقطعة-تدفن-سراً-وثائق-وصور-جديدة-عن-جرف-الصخر-والمغيبين/الترا-عراق/سياسة>

³⁵ 'Barzani meets with Sadr in Najaf', *al-Moharer al-Jadeed*, 23 November 2018. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190103093824/http://www.almohareraljadeed.net/2018/11/Mohrr.html> (original version has been removed, archived version accessed 15 July 2020).

³⁶ 'Chairman of the Relief Committee: People's aid to Hazrat Abbas does not go abroad', *Khabar Online*, 25 May 2016. Available at <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/540853-رئيس-كميته-امداد-به-حضرت-عباس-كمكهاى-مردم-به-خارج-نمی-رود>

³⁷ 'The Ambassador receives, at the embassy building, the president and members of the Committee for the Reconstruction of Holy Shrines', *Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 15 May 2019. Available at <http://www.mofa.gov.iq/tehran/?p=995>

ernment, also covers Iraqi affairs in depth and appears to have drawn some of *Al-Alam*'s Iraqi viewership. *Al-Kawthar* is the state's own religious channel, launched in 2006 by IRIB and based in Tehran.

The Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has also fostered links with privately owned Iraqi Shi'a channels which have sprung up, and which typically combine news with religious programming.³⁸ In July 2019, *al-Kawthar* signed an MoU to cooperate with the private Iraqi Shi'a satellite channel, *al-Na'eem*.³⁹ *Al-Na'eem* promulgates the teaching of Muhammad al-Yaqubi, a cleric followed by the Shi'a Islamic Virtue Party, which has previously criticised Iran's role in Iraq. Nonetheless, it is feasible that economic practicalities trumped ideological quibbles.

There are few public indications of the degree of financial support that Iraqi channels may receive from Iran, although several of the owners and directors are linked to Iran. The most popular channels include *al-Ghadeer*, overseen by Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri; *al-Ebaa* and *al-Itijah*, both of which are associated with Kata'ib Hezbollah, whose leader was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis; *al-Ahad*, which is owned by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khaza'li; and *Beladi*, owned by former foreign minister and Da'wa member Ibrahim al-Ja'afari; and the *Afaq* channel affiliated with Nouri al-Maliki.⁴⁰ Their viewership numbers are debated: Facebook 'likes' (admittedly a dubious marker, but there is a lack of more reliable figures) suggest that the most popular channels have 2–5 million viewers.⁴¹

The channels listed pursue varied editorial lines, some more obviously pro-Iranian than others. However, there are similarities in their presentation of popular protests against the Iraqi government. A comparison of media coverage of the protests by *al-Ghadeer*, *al-Ebaa*, and *al-Ahad* in December 2019 indicated that they continued to emphasise the threat posed by ISIL remnants in liberated parts of the country, and the role of their associated PMFs in combatting it. *Al-Ebaa* and *al-Ahad* made several references to the ongoing 'Zionist-American' regional conspiracy, and the threat posed by US forces in Iraq. Conversely, all three channels appeared broadly supportive of protests, but highlighted statements by Sistani urging protestors not to engage in violence, and statements by al-Muhandis and al-Khaza'li amongst others which suggested that protests in Najaf in particular represented security threats to Sistani.

³⁸ In an unconfirmed report in July 2015, the Saudi-funded *Al-Arab* reported that in July 2017, Khamenei's office allegedly earmarked \$750,000 for any Iraqi loyal to the principle of *wilayat al-faqih* who established a terrestrial TV station, and \$2 million anyone who established a new satellite channel. See: *Al-Arab*, 'Qanawat fada'iya Iraqiya bi-khitaab Irani li-Da'am Marja'iya Khamenei' ('Iraqi Satellite Channels delivering Iranian messaging to support Khamenei'), July 2015. Available at <https://alarab.co.uk/قنوات فضائية عراقية بخطاب إيراني لدعم مرجعية خامنئي>

³⁹ *Al-Na'eem* website. Available at <http://www.alnaeem.tv/>

⁴⁰ The same *Al-Arab* article claims that *al-Masar al-Awla*, *Ahl al-Bayt*, *Imam Hussein*, *al-Mahdi*, *al-'Uqila*, *al-Najba*, *al-Najaf*, *al-Karbala*, *al-Basra*, *al-Ma'arif*, *al-Wilaya*, *Abrar*, *al-Sadiq*, *Qamr Bani Hashim*, *al-Mu'ad*, and *al-Awhad* receive Iranian funding, and that *al-Hujja*, *al-Hadaya 4*, *al-Abas*, *al-Marja'iyya*, *al-Baqiya*, and *al-Zahra*, are owned by Iranians in Najaf and Baghdad.

⁴¹ Analysis of *al-Ahad* by *America Abroad Media* estimates that the channel has 5–7 million viewers. Available at <http://www.americaabroadmedia.org/screen-buzz-workshops/al-%E2%80%9998ahd-radical-shi%E2%80%9999ite-islamist-channel-iraq-controlled-iran-backed-militia>

Iran in Iraq Post-Soleimani: Assessing the Fallout

The assassinations of the Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and his longstanding Iraqi associate, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, by US forces in January 2020 has shifted popular perceptions of Iran's role in Iraq in several key respects. Within the fractured Shi'a political elite, the assassinations produced a degree of consensus around the undesirability of a US military presence in the country. The Iraqi parliament, minus some Kurdish and Sunni MPs, voted to expel US troops from Iraq. While this was not legally binding, more significant has been the shift in Muqtada al-Sadr's position.

In the 2003–6 period, Sadr's Mahdi Army received Iranian training and expertise. Sadr subsequently developed a more nationalist image, criticising Iranian interference in Iraq and attempting to shed his group's reputation for anti-Sunni sectarian violence. During the anti-ISIL campaign, Sadr's PMF, the Peace Brigades (*Sarayat al-Salam*) operated largely independently from Iran-allied PMF units, and in the 2018 parliamentary election campaign, the Sadrist allied with the Iraqi Communist Party on a nationalist platform for political reform. His bloc, *Sa'irun*, won the largest number of seats and has been a leading component of the Iraqi government since. Even so, Sadr has attempted to champion popular demands for political reform and reduced Iranian involvement in Iraq over recent years, and until the assassinations, many of his supporters participated in protests in Baghdad, Najaf, and the southern provinces.

After the assassinations, Sadr came down on the Iranian side and called for a 'million man march' in Baghdad to demand an immediate US withdrawal (though closer to 250,000 attended). After protestors rejected the Sadrist candidate to succeed Abdul Mahdi as prime minister, Sadr withdrew support for the protest movement. The Iraqi press subsequently reported that Sadrists in Najaf, Baghdad, Karbala, Diwaniyah, Dhi Qar and Baghdad had attacked protestors.

Consequently, even before coronavirus restrictions on public movement, the assassinations fractured the protest movement. While many demonstrators continued to denounce Iranian interference, fears of reprisals by Iranian allies led some to abandon the cause. At the same time, amongst Iran's core support groups in Iraq, the assassinations triggered a leadership crisis. Both Soleimani and Muhandis were charismatic figures who, while deeply controversial, commanded the admiration of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shi'a youth. In a system dominated by patronage politics, the importance of individual personalities in commanding loyalty cannot be underestimated, and neither of their replacements appear to command the same respect. The designated new PMF Chief of Staff, Abu Fadak Abid al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi, a founding member of Kata'ib Hezbollah, lacks the mass following enjoyed by Muhandis, and has proven unacceptable to four of the PMFs loyal to Sistani.⁴²

⁴² 'Iraq: Four Brigades Break Away from PMF Command', *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 23 April 2020. Available at <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2248386/iraq-four-brigades-break-away-pmf-command>

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since 2003, Tehran's approach to smart power in Iraq has been aimed at the population at large, and also to consolidate more restricted support bases. The refurbishment of shrines and promotion of relatively mainstream Arabic news channels are examples of broad public outreach. To some extent, so too are charitable endeavours. However, the potential social capital that these activities might accrue for Iran has been reduced: partly by Iranian public pressure on its government to cease funding causes abroad at a time of severe domestic economic hardship; partly by media campaigns against Iranian 'soft power' by political opponents, and partly by the fact that in the aftermath of victory over ISIL, Iraqi paramilitary groups allied to Iran have been increasingly viewed as predators rather than liberators. The regime's limited success in using public diplomacy to enamour itself to Iraqis, coupled with the financial pressures it faces, has led it to prioritise activities that target core support groups. The problem, from a Western policy-maker perspective, is that these groups now dominate important aspects of Iraqi politics and society.

The idea of countering Iranian influence in Iraq presupposes that this influence is nefarious. In fact, courting public approval based on bilateral religious ties and charitable diplomacy is broadly recognised by Western liberal democracies as a 'legitimate' form of soft power, and it is intuitive that Iran and Iraq should share close relations on this basis. What the US and its allies primarily object to, however, is Iran's disregard for 'proper' interstate protocol: Tehran has treated public and private office as virtually coterminous, frequently intervening via informal actors or government officials who can circumvent official procedures in order to achieve favourable outcomes. But for its part, the US appears to have concluded that short of taking direct military action against Iranian operatives and their paramilitary Iraqi allies in Iraq, it can do little to confront Iranian smart power, and has significantly downgraded its diplomatic relations with the GoI.

The GoI has proven a willing partner in Iran's cultural expansion, at least in certain spheres, whilst the US strike on Soleimani and Muhandis has been highly damaging to the US position vis-à-vis the Iraqi government. Clearly, within the fractured GoI there is some pushback against Iranian encroachment, and the appointment of Mustafa al-Kadhimi as Prime Minister in May 2020 as the Iran/US 'compromise candidate' after six months of paralysis indicates that even parliamentary condemnation of American conduct has not negated US influence over domestic affairs.

Moreover, SCIRI's fragmentation and the cleavages within Da'wa are damaging for Iran. Rather than being able to act primarily through two powerful political blocs who could together rule Iraq, the regime has cooperated with a proliferation of militia groups who possess varying degrees of political clout but who ultimately contribute to instability.

Iranian influence within the GoI, along with the politicised allocation of public sector jobs has been a core source of grievance motivating the Iraqi youth protest movement. Protestors have displayed different political inclinations, particularly after the assassinations of Soleimani and Muhandis, but the majority appear to favour an end to cronyism

and corruption within public office, as well as objecting to unemployment and inadequate public services. In this respect, they favour the same type of transparency and accountability within government that Western states seek to promote. However, the US and its allies are also widely distrusted within the protest movement and the broader public, and the assassinations have created additional dangers for protestors, as pro-Iran groups have violently suppressed them in some parts of the country.

This dynamic creates dilemmas regarding how the UK can support the principles championed by protesters without undermining or endangering them by association. Promoting an ongoing international media spotlight on pro-reform activists in Baghdad and the southern provinces (even at a time when protests have subsided due to COVID-19) as well as giving media platforms to potential emerging leaders within the movement is an obvious way of supporting their cause, while also deferring to Iraqi solutions rather than attempting to impose grand political bargains at the national level. While the protest movement lacks national coordination, activists indicate a clear desire to develop greater political agency, and even to contest future elections. These aspirations can be supported through the provision of leadership training provided by multilateral agencies such as the UN (which does appear to enjoy greater trust), but only if they are grounded in a sober assessment of the political environment.

Iraq's pro-reform protestors are overwhelmingly youthful. Indeed, over 60 percent of Iraq's population is under 25. The public sector accounts for almost half of total employment, and posts are broadly allocated according to political allegiances. Supporting private sector growth beyond the oil industry and providing sustainable jobs (and, crucially, benefits packages including pensions) within it based on competitive entry should be a priority for Western partners including the UK. At present, the security environment and regulatory barriers are hindering the realisation of that goal, and the UK government could consider offering incentives and regulatory support to British firms to operate in Iraq.

While these policies do not directly address Iranian influence in Iraq, they do address some of the underlying reasons for it. The UK's positioning vis-à-vis the GoI and indeed Iran is bound up with questions over how it intends to deliver aid and carve out foreign policy in a post-Brexit era, and particularly the extent to which it is willing to distinguish itself from US policy. The UK has been heavily vested in the post-Ba'athist Iraqi political process and although public confidence in the GoI is currently low, the government is the product of competitive elections. Unwilling to abandon what purchase it has at the national level, the UK will likely continue to support the GoI and avoid putting it under intense pressure to distance itself from Tehran. Even within these parameters, there are areas in which Iraqi ministries can be encouraged to take beneficial action, for instance by improving public access to details on funding and management of religious charities, some of which are associated with Iran, and further reforming social security and public health insurance mechanisms, the inefficiency of which sustains a need for charities to provide ad hoc services to the poor.

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Cover Image



Anti-government demonstrators pass by a defaced painting of the Iranian flag, during a demonstration in Tahrir square, against the breach of Iraqi sovereignty by the US and Iran. Credit: Ameer Al Mohammedaw/dpa/Alamy Live News

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