

Iraqis want Iran and the USA out of their country's affairs

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Despite extreme public antagonism between the two countries, the US and Iran have de facto collaborated in and over Iraq for decades. Iraqis are now protesting against both.

Choreographed sword fights, such as those traditionally performed in Gulf Arab countries, may look like clashes between deadly enemies but in fact require close coordination between the participants. Many Arabs believe the conflict between the US and Iran in Iraq is similar. Conspiracy theorists detect a secret pact between them; more realistic observers see a standoff that benefits both sides, who therefore have a mutual interest in perpetuating it.

The US ensures the allegiance of its protectorates in the region, and can continue to sell them billions of dollars' worth of arms: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were the world's second- and fourth-largest importers of arms between 2013 and 2017, and the largest and third-largest importers of US-made weaponry in 2018; Saudi Arabia had the world's third-highest military expenditure in 2018, after the US and China, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri). In Iran, the backbone of the regime's ideological hardliners is the military-economic complex of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or Pasdaran (Guards); perpetuating the conflict allows them to maintain their dominance.

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Arab suspicions are not entirely unfounded considering the history of relations between the US, especially under Republican administrations, and the Islamic Republic since it was created in 1979. Iran greeted Ronald Reagan's presidential inauguration in January 1981 by releasing the US embassy hostages. Journalist Seymour Hersh much later revealed that in 1980 Reagan campaign officials had negotiated arms deliveries to Iran with the collusion of Israel; the deliveries were made soon after the inauguration [1]. Then came the deliveries of 1985-86, revealed during the Iran-Contra scandal: the Reagan administration sold arms to Iran through Israel, and illegally used the profits to fund rightwing guerrillas in Nicaragua.

For the US and Israel, it made sense to spin out the war between Iran and Iraq, started by Iraq in 1980. Until the US crushed Iraq in the Gulf war of 1991, Israel saw Iraq as its principal enemy, and the Israeli air force took advantage of Iraq's mobilisation to destroy in 1981 the nuclear reactor that France was building for Saddam Hussein. When Iraq began to struggle in 1982, the US was glad that France supported Saddam's regime and lent him Super Étendard attack aircraft from its own naval inventory. As Iraq regained the upper hand, the arms deliveries of 1985-86 helped to restore the balance; the conflict ended in a draw between worn-out adversaries in 1988.

Dual containment policy

The George HW Bush administration cautiously did not overthrow Saddam's regime in 1991, for fear

that Iran would fill the political vacuum. The US pursued its strategy of strangling both countries in the 1990s (the 'dual containment' policy) through embargos and sanctions, but this balancing act ended under George W Bush. His invasion in 2003 allowed the return from exile of members of Iraq's two biggest Shia political parties with allegiance to Iran — the Islamic Dawa (propagation of religion) Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).

This was the start of a long, semi-direct collaboration between the US and Iran in Iraq. The two pro-Iranian Shia parties were installed in government by the US occupying authority. Both were represented on the Iraqi Governing Council, which the authority established in 2003, and were part of all interim governments until the creation of a 'permanent' government in 2006. Every Iraqi prime minister since 2005 has been a member of one of the two parties: Ibrahim al-Jaafari (2005-06), Nouri al-Maliki (2006-14) and Haider al-Abadi (2014-18), all from Dawa, were followed in October 2018 by Adel Abdul Mahdi, a former member of the ISCI who had been on all governing bodies established by the authority since 2003.

The authority's change of strategy after 2006, relying on Sunni Arab tribes in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq, the direct precursor of ISIS (Daesh), was not enough to balance the dominance of parties with allegiance to Iran, especially as this was legitimised by the sectarian political and electoral system on the Lebanese model that the authority had set up. Until then, Sunni Arabs in Iraq, along with former members of the Baath party and of Saddam Hussein's special forces, had provided recruits for groups fighting the US-led occupation; but they had come to fear the withdrawal of US troops, seeing no alternative to them as a counterweight to the dominance of Shia parties with links to Iran.

Major-General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds force (the external operations corps of the Pasdaran; Al-Quds means Jerusalem in Arabic and Persian), assassinated by the US on 3 January in Baghdad, was the principal architect of this subordination of Iraq by Iran's auxiliaries. He was often described as the proconsul of Iran in the Arab provinces of its regional empire. Iran's auxiliary troops in the Arab Middle East had long been limited to the Lebanon-based Hizbullah (officially founded in 1985) but grew considerably after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the civil wars in Syria from 2011 and Yemen from 2014. Through them, Iran has come to control a geopolitical axis that stretches from its western border to the Mediterranean, through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Soleimani's reputation as a strategist has been grossly exaggerated: he was victorious in none of the wars he supervised. Iran gained control of Iraq courtesy of the US; Iran's intervention in Syria from 2013, with Shia sectarian forces from Lebanon and Iraq and others recruited among Shia Afghan refugees in Iran, led by Soleimani, only saved Bashar al-Assad's government temporarily; by 2015 it was in trouble again, and Soleimani himself had to ask Russia for help [2].

Shia help for US against ISIS

After ISIS crossed the Iraqi-Syrian border again in summer 2014 and captured a large area of Iraqi territory, the Iraqi government armed forces were all but routed. Fearing that the jihadists would reach Baghdad, the Iraqi government, with Iran's approval, asked the US to send troops back to Iraq. The US fought ISIS on Iraqi soil with the help of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) — which bring together paramilitary forces linked to Shia Arab parties and intent on becoming Iraq's Pasdaran — and the forces of Iraqi Kurdistan, while cooperating in Syria with the joint Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces.

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never expressed a desire to end the US military presence in Iraq, for good reason

Iran directed the PMF through Soleimani's right-hand man in Iraq, known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, number two in the PMF but in fact more prominent than the official number one. Al-Muhandis was killed along with Soleimani on 3 January. His career is revealing. As a member of the Dawa party, Al-Muhandis took refuge in Iran soon after the Islamic Revolution and fought against his own country during the Iran-Iraq war. As a member of the Quds force, he organised bomb attacks on the French and US embassies in Kuwait in 1983, when those countries were supporting Iraq [3].

Al-Muhandis returned to Iraq in 2003 and served as a security advisor to Prime Minister Al-Jaafari before being elected to parliament in 2005. He created the Kataib Hizbullah (Brigades of the Party of God) with Iran's support. When the US setback in Iraq became obvious in 2006, the occupation authority noticed (or perhaps conveniently remembered) his part in organising the Kuwait bombings. He fled to Iran, only returning after US troops had left in 2011.

Collaboration between the US and Iran in Iraq, through Iraqis with allegiance to Iran, has continued without major incident under Donald Trump's presidency. Trump has never expressed a desire to end the US military presence in Iraq, for good reason. He sticks much more openly than his predecessors to the principle of engaging US forces only where there is a clear advantage in doing so, not in Syria alongside Kurdish forces, nor in Afghanistan, but certainly in the Gulf oil kingdoms, which very generously cover the cost of the US presence on their territory, and likewise in Iraq.

Trump asserted many times during his 2016 election campaign that the US should appropriate Iraq's oil resources as compensation for its military effort in that country. In the same way, he has told the present Iraqi government that US troops will only leave if Iraq pays a high price. Surely Iraq is much more entitled to demand damages for devastation caused by the US, not to mention the billions of dollars that vanished under the occupation [4]?

Two factors explain the deterioration of relations between the US and Iran in Iraq over the past few months. The first is the increased economic pressure the Trump administration has exerted on Iran since the US withdrew from the nuclear deal in May 2018. Iran responded by attacking the US's Saudi allies through the Houthis in Yemen; or allegedly so in the case of the drone and cruise missile attacks on Saudi oil installations on 14 September 2019 [5]. Trump's lukewarm reaction at the time alarmed the Saudi rulers.

A more direct threat

The second is a more direct threat. According to Reuters, PMF commanders and Iraqi security sources have reported that Soleimani had called a strategy meeting with Al-Muhandis and other Iraqi Shia militia leaders in Baghdad in mid-October [6]. The meeting took place against the backdrop of the massive protests initiated by Iraqi Shias on 1 October against Iran's domination of Iraq and against its shady allies in the Iraqi parliament and government [7]. These protests had shocked Tehran, and especially Soleimani, because they imperilled Iran's control of Iraq through sectarian allegiances.

The meeting was to agree on unclaimed attacks (for which Iran had already provided the weapons) on US military targets in Iraq. Soleimani aimed 'to provoke a military response that would redirect that rising anger toward the United States' [8]. Protests against the theocratic regime in Iran itself, from November, made it even more urgent to create a diversion.

The attacks on US military targets by pro-Iranian forces in Iraq reached a peak on 27 December, when 30 missiles struck an Iraqi military base in Kirkuk, killing one US civilian contractors and

wounding four others, as well as two Iraqis. Two days later, the US responded by bombing a Kataib Hezbollah base, killing 25 militia fighters and wounding many more. Trump's irritation must have peaked on 31 December when Kataib Hezbollah attacked the US embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone, though it was protected by Iraqi troops.

Memories of the siege of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979-81, and of the September 2012 attack on the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, which killed four US officials including the ambassador and was blamed by Trump among others on President Barack Obama and his secretary of state Hillary Clinton, prompted the White House to order the killing of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis.

Iran's response was quite measured indeed: it fired ballistic missiles at the Al-Assad military base and other installations. Nobody was killed, and it was soon revealed that US troops had been warned a strike was imminent [9]. The source of the warning is uncertain, but Iran must have known that the use of ballistic missiles, rather than cruise missiles or drones, would make it easier for the US troops to prepare. The operation seemed like a way for both sides to save face while avoiding escalation for the moment.

The killing of Soleimani has deprived Iran of a military leader of great prestige and precious experience. However, his funeral, organised on a bigger scale even than that of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, provided the opportunity for a huge campaign exalting Iranian nationalism. Political opposition leaders and even supporters of the monarchy ousted in 1979 joined this sacred union [10]. But Tehran's response to the accidental shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner by the Pasdaran on 8 January, killing all 176 on board, restarted protests against the regime; they have been far smaller than the crowds at Soleimani's funeral, but have taken place in the face of repression whereas the former were organised by the regime.

On the other hand, the anti-US mobilisation has not been enough to stifle Iraqi protests that lump the US and Iran together. Most Iraqis are increasingly outraged at the way their national sovereignty is constantly infringed by these two countries, which have chosen it as their battleground, both trying to dominate it. Their protests, bridging the sectarian divide between Shia and Sunni, may be the most important event for Iraq's future.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Seymour Hersh, '[US said to have allowed Israel to sell arms to Iran](#)', *The New York Times*, 8 December 1991.

[2] Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, '[How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow](#)', Reuters, 6 October 2015.

[3] In 1983 there were bomb attacks on French and US troops, and on the US embassy in Lebanon, also blamed on Iran.

[4] James Risen, '[Investigation into missing Iraqi cash ended in Lebanon bunker](#)', *The New York Times*, 12 October 2014.

[5] Michelle Nichols, '[Exclusive: UN investigators find Yemen's Houthis did not carry out Saudi oil attack](#)', Reuters, 8 January 2020.

[6] '[Inside the plot by Iran's Soleimani to attack US forces in Iraq](#)', Reuters, 4 January 2020.

[7] See Feurat Alani, '[Mobilising for a new political system in Iraq](#)', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, January 2020.

[8] 'Inside the plot by Iran's Soleimani to attack US forces in Iraq' op cit.

[9] Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Ali Abdul-Hassan, '[US troops in Iraq got warning hours before Iranian attack](#)', Associated Press, 13 January 2020.

[10] Rohollah Faghihi, '[Killing Suleimani has united Iranians like never before](#)', *Foreign Policy*, Washington DC, 6 January 2020.