

Avoiding Iranian-Backed Iraqi Militias' Political Takeover in the Shadow of a U.S. Withdrawal

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Apr 3, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Washington and allies should find ways to increase the cost to Iraqi politicians of normalizing the militias' role and the subordination of the Iraqi state to Tehran's rulers.

With last month marking the 21st anniversary of the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, relations between Baghdad and Washington are once again at an inflection point. The current tension is driven by the growing influence of Iran's political and paramilitary allies in Iraq—including designated terrorists—who are determined to benefit from popular opposition to U.S. support for Israel in its war on Gaza to realize their ambition of driving the United States out of Iraq.

The situation poses a dilemma for Washington, whose [declared strategy \(https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ICS_NEA_Iraq_Public.pdf\)](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ICS_NEA_Iraq_Public.pdf) aims to promote “a secure, stable, sovereign Iraq free from malign influence.” It's a strategy in which a security partnership is needed to “enhance Iraq's ability to counter both internal and external threats to its sovereignty.” Militia attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and elsewhere in the region have become a significant obstacle in the way of realizing this strategy. These attacks, numbering [around 170 \(https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/2024-01-28%20Iran%20Update_0.pdf\)](https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/2024-01-28%20Iran%20Update_0.pdf) between October and February, created a hostile environment and coincided with other security crises in Ukraine, Gaza/Israel, and the Red Sea, where Houthi missiles threaten maritime security. At the same time, the future of the U.S.-Iraqi security relationship is being called into question. Seven years after this partnership enabled the territorial defeat of ISIS, its utility appears to be diminishing in the minds of Iraq's leadership.

After months of consistent attacks from militias, a period of tense but relative calm has fallen over Iraq. Iran, through the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), persuaded the militias to halt attacks in February after the U.S. military delivered a series of potent retaliatory strikes, including the killing of key militia commanders involved in planning attacks on U.S. forces. Washington, meanwhile, agreed to Baghdad's demand to negotiate the withdrawal of the U.S.-led Coalition forces. Despite de-escalation, the future of the U.S.-Iraq security cooperation remains uncertain, and Washington's approach is in need of adjustment to account for shifting power dynamics and political realities in Baghdad.

The last significant attack by the militias, which killed three U.S. service members at the Tower 22 base in Jordan, exposed a troubling reality that many observers have struggled to acknowledge since the current government in Baghdad was formed in October 2022: Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani is not in charge of Iraq. The Iran-backed militias and allied factions that helped put Sudani in office are the ones calling the shots, while the prime minister serves at their pleasure. Operating from Iraqi soil, the militias illegally attacked and killed U.S. soldiers across international borders. Instead of condemning the militias' attacks, the Sudani government stood with the perpetrators—not with the United States whose citizens were killed, and not with Jordan, whose territory was violated.

As the talks on the future of U.S.-Iraqi security cooperation proceed, negotiators and decision makers need to keep several important considerations in mind.

Firstly, it is imperative that the United States maintains a tangible presence on the ground in Iraq. Should Iran and its proxies succeed in evicting all U.S. forces from Iraq and diminish U.S. diplomatic influence, the already powerful militias will be further emboldened and maximize their control over Iraq's economy and security apparatus. This takeover, which some argue is already underway, jeopardizes Iraq's ability to ever be independent from Iranian control and further raises the prospects of a Middle East dominated by Tehran and its “axis of resistance.”

In terms of immediate implications, Iraq's ability to stay on top of the ISIS threat will likely be seriously tested in the event of a U.S. withdrawal. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, led by the United States, was instrumental in the territorial defeat and continued repression of ISIS. Removing this stabilizing presence would undermine the hard-fought victories and endanger Iraqi civilians in regions where ISIS could reemerge. A U.S. withdrawal would remove a key mediator for the already deteriorating relationship between Baghdad and Erbil. The absence of the Coalition as a coordinating buffer between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) means that security coordination between federal and Peshmerga forces will likely deteriorate, especially along the gaps between their respective lines in the difficult provinces of Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Kirkuk, where ISIS remnants continue to operate.

It should be noted that relocating U.S. forces to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), as some Iraq experts have proposed, risks further breakdown in Baghdad-Erbil relations by turning Erbil into a magnet for militia attacks. The militias, Iran, and their allies in Iraq's parliament and the judiciary, have been keen on punishing the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and chipping away at its economic autonomy and political standing. Relocating to Erbil would give them fresh pretext for attacking and harassing it. And they would be able to do it since their reach and range has been extended by the addition of long-range drones and ballistic and cruise missiles.

Another point of worry is infighting between the KRG's leaders. Tensions and hostility between the KDP and their Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) rivals, who have aligned themselves with the Coordination Framework (CF), will likely also increase should Coalition forces leave, especially if the KDP boycotts the regional election in protest of interference by the Federal Supreme Court. As the security efforts of the Kurdish parties are redirected to meet rising Erbil-Sulaymaniyah and Erbil-Baghdad threats, attention and resources available to countering extremist threats, including ISIS, would be diminished.

But the Kurds are not the only group threatened by an emboldened Iran and its Iraqi allies. Feeling more secure in a post-Coalition Iraq, the militias will likely extend their reach and marginalize Sunni Arab communities, co-opting or neutralizing their leadership, as Sudani's mentor Nouri al-Maliki did during his tenure. Actions reminiscent of that period are already happening in Baghdad and the important, historically restive provinces of Anbar, Ninewa, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din.

Last November marked an important milestone in this campaign when Iraq's politicized judiciary moved to sack Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi. Since then, CF factions have blocked the election of a replacement nominated by the leading Sunni bloc. In Salah ad-Din, the CF has forced the elected governor to step down after its representatives threatened “new conflict” in the province. In Ninewa, the popular governor, former army commander Najm al-Jubouri, [resigned \(https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2023/11/30/nineveh-governor-iraq-elections/#:~:text=Najim%20al%20Jabouri%20was%20excluded,to%20Saddam%20Hussein's%20Baath%20Party&text=Residents%20of%20the%20northern%20Iraqi,weeks%20before\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2023/11/30/nineveh-governor-iraq-elections/#:~:text=Najim%20al%20Jabouri%20was%20excluded,to%20Saddam%20Hussein's%20Baath%20Party&text=Residents%20of%20the%20northern%20Iraqi,weeks%20before) in November ahead of the provincial elections after being disqualified on dubious de-Baathification charges. And in Diyala, although CF factions lack a majority (with 7 out of 15 seats on the provincial council), the Sunni Arab parties that occupy the other 7 seats have become spectators in the [ongoing fight \(https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Political-leaders-reach-compromise-on-governor-in-Diwaniyah-Diyala\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Political-leaders-reach-compromise-on-governor-in-Diwaniyah-Diyala) among CF factions over selecting a new governor.

To be clear, if Iraq had a modicum of rule of law, none of those parties and politicians subjected to CF's campaign of selective application of the law would be fit to rule or hold public office.

They suffer because they are weaker. And while this is not a fight between good politicians and bad politicians, it is a fight among bad actors in which the security, prosperity, and dignity of Iraq's people, and any prospect for rule of law stand to lose the most.

Perhaps more dangerous are mounting assaults on freedom of speech and civil rights across the country that have accelerated since February. This crackdown, in which the prime minister, president, judiciary, and parliamentary leaderships are taking part, has featured growing reliance on draconian Baath-era parts of the penal code that criminalize any person who says something deemed insulting to the government, parliament, military, or the courts.

Broken security cooperation, suppressed freedoms, marginalized political partners, exploited public funds, politicized courts, and pervasive militias are all the ingredients for another crisis, be it an ISIS resurgence or something else. To consider a response to this spiraling situation, stakeholders have to look back at how Iraq arrived here, and to recognize the problematic, practically illegitimate foundation on which Sudani's government was founded.

Sudani's [appointment \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/mohammed-shia-al-sudani-nominated-iraqi-premiership\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/mohammed-shia-al-sudani-nominated-iraqi-premiership) in October of 2022 marked the hijacking of Iraq's government by an alliance of Nouri al-Maliki and Iran-backed factions that won a mere 50 seats in parliament—just 15% of the legislature's 329 seats. The resulting Coordination Framework (CF) weaponized the judiciary to frustrate the efforts of the winners of the election, the Sadrist, to form a majority government that would have marginalized them. Next, they employed coercive force to force the main Sunni and Kurdish seat-winners to cooperate and join a government in which CF has the lion's share.

With these factions entrenched and in control of parliament, the executive, judiciary, state media, and other institutions, the deck will be stacked and political competition will be snuffed out. The long-term implications are grave. If Iraq holds another election in the fall of 2025, the most likely outcome is a government in which Iran-backed violent extremists have uncontested control over the legislature, and consequently, all other branches of government.

The hijacking of Baghdad's decision making power by agents of Iran, exemplified by the Tower 22 attack and its aftermath, raises the risk that it is becoming a modern-day *satrapy* of Tehran. Strategically, the consolidation of this dynamic would usher in the transformation of the Islamic Republic of Iran into, effectively, the Middle East's new empire.

Reversing course and preventing an Iranian takeover of the Iraqi state will require immediate and forceful action. Ideally, negotiations between Baghdad and the Coalition will allow for the continued presence of the Coalition in Iraq. Even then, merely having a Coalition presence, necessary as it may be, should not be confused for a strategy in Iraq.

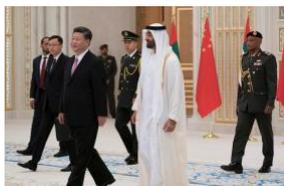
Drone strikes and other appropriate kinetic measures against the worst terrorists and human rights abusers need not stop because the IRGC called a ceasefire. Instead, making them regular events can force militia commanders underground, diminish their freedom of action, deny them the initiative, and give civil society and critics some reprieve. The threat and strikes should continue if negotiations lead to the Coalition leaving Iraq, as that would make them an even more valuable element of leverage.

Washington and allies should also find ways to increase the cost to Iraqi politicians of normalizing the militias' role and the subordination of the Iraqi state to Tehran's rulers. The Iraqi government under Sudani allows billions each year to flow from Iraq's budget to terrorist groups under the guise of the Popular Mobilization Forces. And with [1 in 4 Iraqis experiencing poverty \(https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/iraqi-pm-declares-a-decline-in-poverty/#:~:text=The%20spokesperson%20of%20the%20Iraqi,did%20not%20exceed%2020%20percent.\)](https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/iraqi-pm-declares-a-decline-in-poverty/#:~:text=The%20spokesperson%20of%20the%20Iraqi,did%20not%20exceed%2020%20percent.), this exploitation of funds that belong to the people of Iraq should not go unchecked. The scope and reach of sanctions should expand to target complicit actors who have so far been shielded from prosecution, including government institutions, accounts, and senior officials. No one involved in terrorism financing should feel immune from consequences of bad behavior.

At the same time, the international community should make a more concerted and thoughtful effort to protect Iraq's fragile democratic gains and ensure the integrity of the next general election. This should include more support for reformist and moderate political forces. Despite their shortcomings, such groups are the legitimate alternative that can bring about gradual change from within. Independents and reformists have shown their potential to challenge the traditional parties in elections, but they will need all the help they can get. This includes avoiding the legitimization of elections that are neither free nor fair. Twice in a row, in [2021 \(https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14673.doc.htm\)](https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14673.doc.htm) and [2023 \(https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15578.doc.htm\)](https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15578.doc.htm), Iraq held elections that were hailed by the international community as "technically sound." The governments they produced, national and local, have mostly failed to represent the people's will.

Critically, pressure is needed to demilitarize political life. Most of the parties in power, whether in Baghdad or Erbil, operate military or paramilitary organizations in clear violation of the law. None of them would be in parliament today if the constitution and the law were followed. The regular manipulation of pre-election day rules remains the biggest challenge to establishing a credible electoral process that Iraqis can embrace and use to affect change. ❖

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