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BY KATHERINE LAWLOR AND COLONEL KETTI DAVISON (US ARMY, RETIRED)

# IRAQ IS FRAGILE, NOT HOPELESS: HOW IRAQ'S FRAGILITY UNDERMINES REGIONAL STABILITY





The background of the entire page is a topographic map with brown contour lines. The map shows a large, irregularly shaped landmass, likely Iraq, with a complex network of contour lines indicating elevation changes. The lines are more densely packed in some areas, suggesting steeper terrain, and more widely spaced in others, suggesting flatter land. The overall color palette is a range of brown tones, from light tan to dark chocolate brown.

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Cover: Iraqis demonstrate outside the Basra Governorate's building in the southern city of Basra on November 11, 2019. (Photo by HUSSEIN FALEH/AFP via Getty Images)

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# IRAQ IS FRAGILE, NOT HOPELESS:

## How Iraq's Fragility Undermines Regional Stability

### Executive Summary

**The stabilization of the Iraqi state remains strategically important to the United States and worthy of a concerted US policy effort.** Iraq's endemic domestic fragility creates space for foreign actors to play out their proxy battles, exacerbating Iraqi and regional instability in a mutually reinforcing cycle. Depriving them of that arena through the establishment of a strong, stable, and sovereign Iraqi state is therefore a prerequisite for stability in the Middle East and the preservation of US interests in the region. Stabilizing Iraq, and with it, the region, will allow the United States to pivot to other foreign policy priorities without incurring excess risk in the Middle East.

**Iraq remains vital to a range of US national security efforts, including:**

- **Achieving regional stability:** Continued Iraqi instability provides a convenient proxy battleground in which regional and global conflicts intensify and escalate. The establishment of a representative, stable, and sovereign Iraq is a prerequisite for peace in the Middle East.
- **Maintaining counterterrorism victories:** A continued US military presence in Iraq to support Iraqi Security Forces and maintain supply lines and reinforcements into Syria is essential to preventing the re-emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Maintaining the enduring defeat of ISIS and preventing the rise of new Salafijihadi extremists is worth the comparatively small investment of a continued US force presence in Iraq and stabilization aid to the Iraqi state.
- **Competing with emerging great power rivals:** Both Russia and China are beginning to threaten US interests in the Iraqi theater. Maintaining and improving the US-Iraqi strategic partnership will prevent these great power competitors from establishing another destabilizing foothold in the Middle East.
- **Constraining Iran:** The establishment of a weak, Shi'a-led Iraqi client state is a core aim of the Iranian regime's regional project. US support

to strengthen the Iraqi state denies not only this fundamental regime objective but also the Iranian regime's desires for a captive Iraqi market and an end to US regional influence.

**The Iraqi state of 2020 is fragile, but not hopeless.** The influence of its historically powerful political, religious, and security institutions is decaying as the interests of elites become divorced from the interests of the Iraqi people. The decay of those institutions creates space for new participants in and real changes to Iraq's political process. Iraqi elections scheduled for 2021 could be the last, best chance to re-establish the faith of the Iraqi people in their increasingly unrepresentative and fragmented political system. Increasing voter engagement and an expansion of nonsectarian political movements should be sources of optimism for the 2021 election cycle but require support from neutral international actors and secular civil society institutions.

The Government of Iraq lacks the capacity to strengthen and stabilize the Iraqi state, even when its leaders have the will. A renewed, whole-of-government US policy focus on capacity building is necessary to bolster the ability of those individuals and institutions who already have the will, but not the ability, to stabilize Iraq.

**Iraq's neighbors and other regional actors further destabilize the Iraqi state and exacerbate its weaknesses.**



- **Iran** is actively working toward a weak, Shi'a-led Iraqi client state; a fragmented Iraq could never again threaten Iran as it did under Saddam. Its endemic interference in Iraq's economy and security sector are destabilizing to the state as a whole.
- **Turkey** disregards Iraqi stability. Turkey treats Iraqi Kurdistan as a natural extension of its domestic counterterrorism area of operations with no regard for Iraqi sovereignty, regularly interferes in Iraqi politics, and is building increasing leverage over Iraq's precious water resources.
- **Saudi Arabia** has neglected Iraq for thirty years and is only now beginning to re-establish a productive bilateral relationship. Increasing Saudi involvement in Iraq risks increasing violent Iranian backlash in Iraq and the broader region but could also help Iraq to counter-balance against Iranian and Turkish domination.
- **China** is working to integrate Iraq into its predatory Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), economic investments that will not stabilize Iraq. Anti-US actors in Iraq increasingly and falsely frame Chinese Belt and Road investments as a potential alternative to US economic support.
- **Russia** views Iraq as another theater in which it can work to end the US-led world order and re-establish itself as a great power, but in doing so damages Iraqi stability. The Kremlin exploits and exacerbates tensions in the US-Iraqi partnership to accelerate a potential US departure from the region. Russia's increasing ties with Iran's proxy militia network in Iraq could threaten not only Iraqi stability but also US forces and interests in Iraq and Syria.

*Iraq's neighbors and other regional actors increasingly view Iraq not as a sovereign state in its own right but as a conveniently located stage on which they can play out their economic and military power struggles.*

**Consistent and appropriate US investments in the establishment of a stable Iraqi state must be a core component of a well-calibrated US approach to the Middle East.** US troop reductions throughout 2020, US withdrawals from over a dozen joint US-Iraqi bases, and US threats to close the Baghdad embassy each signal to anti-US actors in the Middle East that the United States is on its way out of the region. Neither Iraq's fragmented security forces nor its nascent civil society are able to take on the stabilization efforts that the country needs. The United States must consequently adopt a consistent and whole-of-government approach to Iraqi stability, stepping up its diplomatic support, stabilization assistance, and development aid to Iraq. US commitments to this approach and a small but sustainable US advisory force presence in Iraq can open doors to lasting domestic partnerships and allied support. Consistency is key; the United States must prove to its Iraqi allies that it can be a reliable partner in helping Iraqis to claim a better future.

The United States must also pressure regional allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia to respect Iraqi sovereignty and to avoid playing out their proxy conflicts in the Iraqi arena.

**The United States can still achieve an outcome worthy of 17 years of American and Iraqi sacrifice and investment.** US policymakers must understand Iraqi realities—meeting Iraq where it is, rather than where they wish it to be—to achieve that desired outcome. This paper describes those Iraqi realities; it is intended as a primer for US decisionmakers as they frame their policy approach.

## Introduction

**The domestic fragility of the Iraqi state threatens regional stability and US interests but provides opportunities for lasting change.** The domestic political, religious, and security institutions that once underpinned the foundation upon which the Iraqi state was built have each been worn away by decades of conflict, mismanagement, and rampant corruption. A looming youth bulge has the potential to shape a more representative and progressive Iraq or to be co-opted by the country's current ineffectual and corrupt political elites. Meanwhile, Iraq's neighbors and other regional actors increasingly view Iraq not as a sovereign state in its own right but as a conveniently located stage on which they can play out their economic and military power struggles.

**A strong, stable, and US-partnered Iraq would enable the United States to address other foreign policy priorities while also serving as a valuable counterweight to the United States' great power competitors in the region.** Despite public exhaustion with US involvement in Iraq's wicked problem set, now is not the time to set Iraq adrift. Problems ignored seldom improve organically over time. Instead, they tend to devolve into nearly intractable ones. Although the Kadhimi-led state is imperfect, it is in the best interest of the United States and its allies to support the current Iraqi government in setting conditions for a more sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq. The United States must recommit

to supporting Iraqi institutions, not relying on individuals, to accomplish these ends. There is no magic bullet to rapidly solve Iraq's endemic state fragility. A multilayered and whole-of-government US approach must therefore include development aid, stabilization assistance, economic investments, civil society support, and continued security cooperation. The establishment of a representative, stable, and sovereign Iraq is a prerequisite for peace in the Middle East. Iraq's instability creates a convenient proxy battleground in which layered regional competitions can intensify and escalate, compounding domestic crises. These competitions invariably spill across Iraq's porous borders, exacerbating the instability of the broader region. Mitigating the Iraqi fragility that enables those compounding regional crises would enable the United States to focus on other foreign policy priorities without assuming additional risk.

This paper is the first of a series in which the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) will explore Iraq's domestic and regional situation and offer recommendations for US policy. A clearer understanding of how Iraq's domestic instability exacerbates regional conflicts will lay the foundation for this analytic series. Subsequent papers will build upon this understanding to explore the range of potential outcomes for the Iraqi state and offer recommendations for US policy toward Iraq.

*Iraq's instability creates a convenient proxy battleground in which layered regional competitions can intensify and escalate, compounding domestic crises.*

## Part 1:

# Origins of a Fragile State

**Iraq is a fragile state; continued international engagement is required to ensure that its future is a stable one.** Iraq is unlikely to stabilize without concerted international support for its leaders, institutions, and burgeoning youth movement. Iraq's endemic fragility is being driven by two interrelated factors: domestic splintering and foreign interference. The more that Iraq splinters internally, the greater the opportunity for foreign meddling that in turn exacerbates domestic divisions. This section will cover the current domestic political, religious, and security splintering undermining the stability of the Iraqi state.

**Iraq's historically powerful political, religious, and security institutions are decaying, creating space for new players to participate in the political process.** Internal fractures have diminished the traditional influence exerted by political, religious, and security institutions. Each of Iraq's powerful parties and institutions is under immense stress from internal and external pressures. Iraq's political and religious elites, civil society activists, and international partners are currently unprepared to fill the void left by what could become an irreversible decline of institutional authority.

## Political Splintering

### Elections and Protests: The Lost Faith of the Iraqi Electorate

**The Iraqi people are increasingly disillusioned with their political choices and are demanding new options; they may lose faith in the political system entirely if they do not perceive the next election to be more free and fair than the 2018 elections.** Iraq's 2018 elections had only 44-percent turnout, demonstrating the dissatisfaction of the Iraqi people with their political options amid widespread allegations of fraud.<sup>1</sup> Boycotts called by activists and tribal leaders devastated Iraq's

voter participation, which had been as high as 79.6 percent in the first freely held Iraqi elections in 2005.<sup>2</sup> Many Iraqis have since lost faith in their corrupt and self-serving politicians; those same politicians simply took advantage of the low electoral turnout to further their own agendas and box out competitors. Allegations of massive voter fraud cast an additional shadow on the election's victors.<sup>3</sup> The resulting government under Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi took six months to form and had a popularity rating of just 36 percent as he came into office.<sup>4</sup> That popularity only decreased over the next year, leading to mass anti-government protests and eventually to Mehdi's resignation. The same politicians whom only 44 percent of voters selected will remain in Parliament until new elections occur. Parliament must pass electoral reforms and then voluntarily disband itself in order to hold early elections in 2021, one of the promises of its current government. However, Iraq's elites are unlikely to reform themselves out of power.

**The identity politics that have underpinned Iraq's post-2003 political order have lost their appeal among the masses, leading to popular, non-sectarian, and civically minded anti-government protests.** The protests are made up of predominantly young Shi'a men demanding better employment opportunities, increased essential services, accountability for state security forces responsible for killing protesters, and an end to a corrupt political system influenced by foreign powers, especially Iran.<sup>5</sup> The protesters denounce Iraq's sectarian divides and enjoy broad, pan-sectarian support across Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Many demonstrators are high school and university students seeking to shape the future of Iraq and the makeup of the next government.<sup>7</sup> These protesters represent larger trends that transcend state borders. They have proven difficult for Iraq's elites to contain and impossible for them to ignore. It is particularly significant that the unarmed protesters wave Iraqi flags and call for a united and nonsectarian Iraq while elements among

the Iraqi Security Forces exacerbate sectarian divides and fly the flags of poorly regulated and often Iran-linked militia groups.<sup>8</sup>

The protest movement has proven its resilience in its first year, weathering the abandonment of Sadrists, the brutality of state security forces, and the assassination campaigns of Iranian proxy militia groups. The movement forced the resignation of former Prime Minister Mehdi and allowed for the formation of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's more reform-minded government.<sup>9</sup> Electoral and economic realities will force the protest movement to redefine itself as it continues through the end of 2020 into 2021. Protesters will face an increasingly polarizing series of choices; among these are jobs or reform, political influence or political independence, and pursuing a messy revolution or accepting a slow evolution of the Iraqi state. Many would choose jobs rather than face what would inevitably be a long and painful process of public sector reforms and private sector stimulus.

**Iraq's pre-existing sectarian political elites are not incentivized to meet protester demands for a new, non-sectarian political system but have proven unable to appease or crush Iraq's resilient protest movement.** Iraq's political elites often buy off critics with the creation of new government sinecures, but the Government of Iraq cannot afford to appease the tens of thousands of geographically disparate protesters and their supporters. Electorally, protesters will need to choose between contesting elections themselves or joining pre-existing political blocs in an attempt to bolster their influence. Pre-existing political blocs are not incentivized to push for actual reform and would likely undermine protesters' objectives rather than elevate their voices. The toughest choice facing protesters may be whether or not to give new Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi the chance to make slow institutional changes or to call for his ouster. Kadhimi supports the goals of the protest movement but has a pragmatic and evolutionary, not revolutionary, approach to achieving its goals. His attempts to gradually meet their demands

may seem too little, too late to a movement hungry for immediate change.<sup>10</sup>

**Iraq's political elites will attempt to co-opt the protest movement in the lead-up to the 2021 elections, posing the largest threat to demonstrators' objectives and cohesion.** Protesters may try to form their own political coalitions to contest the next elections. However, the protesters will struggle to implement a unified policy platform and to avoid being co-opted by pre-existing political blocs. They lack cohesive political leadership, experience with Iraq's convoluted institutions, and protection from the armed wings of other political blocs. Already, multiple political parties are establishing new youth wings in an attempt to bring protesters under their banners in time for the next election planned for June 2021.<sup>11</sup> With the right electoral reforms, a united protester coalition could secure a plurality, if not a majority, in Iraq's parliament. Instead, protesters are likely to splinter into a combination of small new parties and facades for pre-existing political blocs.

## Fractured Political Blocs: The Declining Influence of Iraq's Political Elites

**None of Iraq's ethno-sectarian groups or political alliances have been able to unify under the combined pressures of plummeting oil revenues, mass anti-government demonstrations, the downfall of the previous government, and the collapse of the public-sector-dominated economy.** Parties and sects refuse to compromise or relinquish their control over government ministries and corresponding sinecures, limiting government effectiveness, inflating the already bloated federal budget, and worsening corrupt and blatantly sectarian political divides. As these divides have deepened, so too have intra-sect conflicts worsened. Nearly every political party, bloc, and alliance is splintered and unrepresentative, creating space for new coalitions to represent the interests of the Iraqi people.



**Iraq does not have and will not form unified political blocs along sectarian lines.** US policymakers and others eager to solve Iraq's difficult problem set periodically suggest trying to work along ethno-sectarian lines to establish a more stable political system. However, the ethno-sectarian quota system that underpins Iraq's post-2003 political institutions, the muhasasa system, has inspired mass protests against the endemic corruption and patronage networks of Iraq's entrenched and sectarian political elites. The failure of muhasasa to prevent corruption or sectarian divisions has led to a popular rejection of the system as a whole. Iraqis are increasingly disillusioned with their sectarian choices and are likely looking for new options. Iraq's Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish elites are pursuing the disjointed and self-interested preservation of their own authority at the expense of other sectarian groups, their own constituents, and the Iraqi state. An ethno-sectarian-centric approach to Iraq's fractured political system is therefore unlikely to prove effective in the coming decade.

Iraq's entrenched problems cannot be resolved by ethno-sectarian blocs or Iraq's current elites. Nevertheless, the United States and the Iraqi people should seize the opportunity presented by the Kadhim government and the protest movement to support compromise candidates who do not hold to traditional ethno-sectarian or party lines and can address legitimate protester demands in a representative manner.

### ***Shi'a Factions***

**Iraq's Shi'a elites have effectively sidelined minority groups since 2003 and have failed to form a pan-sectarian or even unified Shi'a political bloc; they represent their own interests rather than the interests of the Iraqi people.** Iraq's Shi'a elites are squandering a historic opportunity to

govern themselves and form pan-sectarian coalitions after generations of subjugation by the Sunni minority. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq ousted the ruling Sunni minority and the secular but repressive Ba'ath Party, instituted democratic elections, and propelled the previously suppressed Shi'a majority into power for the first time in Iraq's history. Shi'a elites failed to capitalize on their substantial demographic advantage to form a Shi'a-friendly government capable of serving all Iraqis. Instead, they fell in line with the brutal sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who further divided Iraq.<sup>12</sup> The sectarian divides that resulted from Maliki's tenure did not improve under the subsequent premierships of Haider al-Abadi and Adel Abdul Mehdi.

**The corruption of Shi'a political elites has increasingly alienated their political base and undermined their demographic advantage.** Shi'a

political elites are failing to address the mostly Shi'a protesters' demands and risk losing the consent of their governed masses. Shi'a elites have also maintained armed and fractious political wings, eroding the centralized power they seek to retain. Internal divisions undermine the single shared interest of Iraq's Shi'a elites: remaining in power. These elites will need to find ways to form more representative, pan-sectarian, and inclusive coalitions that can address the legitimate demands of the Iraqi people if they hope to retain their influence in the face of economic collapse and justifiable civil unrest. Each Shi'a political bloc faces unique challenges, but all of them contribute to a collective failure to effectively govern Iraq.

*Iraq's political elites are pursuing the disjointed and self-interested preservation of their own authority at the expense of other sectarian groups, their own constituents, and of the Iraqi state.*



Ammar al-Hakim | Photo Credit: Hamed Malekpour, Wikimedia Commons, October 21, 2016.

### Ammar al-Hakim's New Contenders: **The Iraqis Alliance:**

Shi'a cleric Ammar al-Hakim inherited his influence from his storied family at 38, too young an age to maintain the political clout built by his grandfather, Iraq's highest Shi'a religious authority, and by his father. Hakim lost many of his family's supporters, including their armed Badr Corps, following the death of his father in 2009. However, Hakim appears to be growing into his role as the heir to the Hakim dynasty. Hakim resigned from the leadership of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in 2017 and formed his own party, the Wisdom Trend, which gained a respectable 19 seats in the 2018 elections.<sup>13</sup> Hakim initially supported but later split from Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi's government. He successfully mobilized thousands of his followers to protest the government in July 2019.<sup>14</sup> Hakim's prime ministerial candidate of choice following Mehdi's resignation was summarily rejected in December 2019, but it was Hakim's initial nominee, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who eventually ascended to the office of prime minister in May 2020 after months of political deadlock.<sup>15</sup>

Hakim has since maximized the opportunity that Kadhimi represents to solidify his place in Iraqi politics. Hakim disbanded his Wisdom Trend bloc and formed the new pro-Kadhimi Iraqis Alliance to contest the next elections.<sup>16</sup> His new bloc reportedly commands at least 46 seats, placing it among the top three largest parliamentary blocs going into the next election.<sup>17</sup> It may be aligned with the remnants of Abadi's Victory Alliance and is likely courting elements of some pro-Kadhimi Sunni and Kurdish political blocs.<sup>18</sup> Hakim is capitalizing on this political momentum and on the initial popularity Kadhimi's government enjoyed. He is also likely attempting to co-opt protesters' political engagement through the coordination of a new youth party, the "Awareness Movement." This ostensibly independent youth movement is organized by Hakim's former private office director Salah al-Arabawi, who "resigned" from the Wisdom Trend in April 2020 due to "restrictions [on his] political freedom" but likely remains devoted to Hakim.<sup>19</sup>

Hakim may be the only Shi'a leader working to structurally reform Iraq's current political system with his calls for a "new social contract" and a move from ethno-sectarian to political rivalries.<sup>20</sup> He aims to turn his Iraqis Alliance into a large, pan-sectarian coalition to form the next Iraqi government. Hakim says that he envisages a less fractious parliamentary system with more formalized ruling and opposition parties based on coalitions formed before the election. His proposed system would attempt to lessen Iraq's post-election chaos and create more lasting political, rather than sectarian, alliances. Hakim may prove to be an exception to the bulk of Iraq's fractious political elite as he attempts to restructure Iraq's increasingly splintered political environment. He has doubled the size of his political bloc, influenced the choice of the premier, and attempted to align himself with the reformist protest movement. Hakim may be the current Shi'a leader most inclined to support reform, but his ultimate objective is to solidify his own power. He will support a reformist agenda as long as it serves his own political interests. Like Iraq's other Shi'a elites, Hakim will not reform himself out of power.



**Haider al-Abadi** | Photo Credit: UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Flickr, January 22, 2014.



**Hadi al-Ameri** | Photo Credit: Ahmed Saad, Reuters Pictures, January 25, 2016.

**Haider al-Abadi's Dwindling Coalition: The Victory Alliance:** Former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance bloc splintered following his surprising electoral defeat in 2018.<sup>21</sup> He may have as few as a dozen parliamentary seats remaining under his control. Abadi remained in opposition to the government of former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi, but has softened his stance toward new Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in a likely bid for continued relevance. Abadi brought Kadhimi into the Iraqi government as his intelligence chief in 2016 and likely maintains a close relationship with him.<sup>22</sup> Abadi was a reliable partner for the United States as prime minister; he was also the only Shi'a leader whose party actively boycotted the January 2020 vote to expel US forces from Iraq.<sup>23</sup> His political downfall and the simultaneous rise of the Iran-linked Conquest Alliance bloc was an unfortunate development for US interests in Iraq but one that is not set in stone.

**Hadi al-Ameri's Iran-aligned Bloc: The Conquest Alliance:** The Conquest Alliance bloc faces internal strife. The bloc is composed of the political wing of Hadi al-Ameri's Badr Organization, the political wing of US-designated terrorist organization Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and a number of other small, often Iran-linked political parties. The alliance is the second-largest parliamentary bloc after Sadr's Toward Reform with 47 seats following the 2018 election.<sup>24</sup> It is also the political bloc most closely linked to Iran's agenda in Iraq.

Ameri, the powerful leader of Conquest Alliance, is a polarizing figure who may be driving rifts in his own organization. Some members of Ameri's Badr Organization announced their split from Badr and subsequent establishment of an anti-Ameri Patriotic Badr Movement in 2019. This movement never announced its formal membership or numbers, but stated its express opposition to Ameri's "significant identification [and subordination] with Iranian decisions."<sup>25</sup> As the political representatives of many of Iran's proxy militias, Conquest Alliance members have also faced increasing rage from the Shi'a protesters calling for an end to foreign interference, the disbandment of poorly regulated militia groups, and the implementation of state control over all weapons and use of force. Protesters also accused

Iran-backed militia groups and state security forces affiliated with Badr, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Popular Mobilization Forces of being responsible for the killings of nearly 600 peaceful demonstrators in late 2019. These killings undermined the legitimacy of the militias and of their corresponding political representatives.



Moqtada al-Sadr | Photo Credit: Alaa Al-Marjani, Reuters Pictures, September 21, 2018.

**Moqtada al-Sadr's Wildcard: Toward Reform:** Iraqi nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Toward Reform appears to be stable and unified under Sadr but may have fissures in its foundations. His party's victory in the 2018 election likely came from swing voters yearning for change rather than from his religious devotees; those reformers may desert him in upcoming elections.<sup>26</sup> Sadr's mercurial and divisive decisionmaking may also have undermined the loyalty of his once-unassailable political base and of his militant followers, weakening him ahead of the next elections.<sup>27</sup> Sadr has long played the role of the outside agitator, raging against the system that suppressed his mostly impoverished followers without ever needing to offer or

implement concrete solutions. His electoral victory in 2018 and subsequent parliamentary plurality put him in an uncomfortable position of responsibility, and one in which he has not thrived. Sadr was the largest constituent piece of the Mehdi government but continued to criticize it as if he were an opposition party. He oscillated wildly between supporting Iraq's popular protest movement and later turning on the protesters, many of whom were Sadrists devastated by his betrayal. Sadr-affiliated militants have since repeatedly clashed with protesters across the Shi'a-majority south, risking Sadr's popular credibility ahead of the next elections and leading to defections among religious and political followers.<sup>28</sup> Sadr's betrayal of his typically impoverished, disenfranchised Shi'a base may have severed one of the few remaining links between Iraq's traditional Shi'a power brokers and the Shi'a people. Sadr's subsequent decision to condemn Iranian proxy attacks on US and Coalition facilities in September 2020 likely alienated some of his militant followers. At least one militia announced its existence with a claim that it had left Sadr's movement, citing his inconsistencies and failure to target the "[US] occupiers" as inconsistent with the teachings of his father, the revered Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr from whom Sadr derives much of his legitimacy.<sup>29</sup> The ramifications of Moqtada al-Sadr's regularly changing allegiances may not be fully felt until after the next elections; his political followers will have to contend with his flagrantly inconsistent decision making and his betrayal of the protesters when casting their votes.





Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki | Photo Credit: M.husseiny1, Wikimedia Commons, July 29, 2013.

**Nouri al-Maliki's Once-powerful Party: The State of Law Coalition:** Once a powerful, two-term prime minister who presided over and exacerbated sectarian conflict, Nouri al-Maliki is now substantially weakened. Maliki formally opposed the premiership of Prime Minister Kadhimi, whose anti-corruption agenda is an existential threat to the interests of the notoriously corrupt Maliki. Maliki then courted Hadi al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance to form a formal parliamentary opposition to Kadhimi's government, but those efforts failed. Maliki subsequently lost 6 of his 25 parliamentary seats as members of his coalition left to join Ammar al-Hakim's pro-Kadhimi Iraqis Alliance.<sup>30</sup> Maliki remains a player in Iraqi politics but has lost much of his once-formidable influence.

**The Shi'a People:** Iraq's Shi'a population is thoroughly disillusioned with its elites and supports the popular anti-corruption protest movement, the goals of which are antithetical to the goals of the Shi'a elite. Not even Sadr continues to represent the interests of the Shi'a public. It remains to be seen whether the Shi'a-majority protesters can form a sufficiently coherent political coalition to contest more-established political blocs in the 2021 early elections.

## Sunni Factions

The legacies of Ba'ath Party rule under Saddam Hussein, the sectarian civil war from 2006-2009, and the brutal reign of ISIS still fuel distrust within the Sunni population and between Iraq's Sunnis and other ethno-sectarian groups. This distrust weakens the national influence of Sunni elites and fuels intra-Sunni conflict in ISIS-ravaged parts of Iraq.

**The Sunni People:** Iraq's Sunni population can be divided into three major groups—those who fled ISIS, those who endured ISIS, and those who continue to support ISIS. Those who fled ISIS make up part of the 1.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq who may never return home. The IDPs' perceived ISIS affiliation makes them unwelcome both in their communities of origin and in potential communities of resettlement. Those who endured ISIS are now coping with rebuilding war-torn areas from which the Iraqi government is largely absent. Their connection to the federal government is tenuous at best. Iraqi Sunnis who continue to support ISIS face arrest and prosecution if identified. Once the undisputed rulers of Iraq, Iraq's Sunnis now hesitate to express political opinions for fear of uniting other ethno-sectarian groups against them.<sup>31</sup> This defensive hesitation is likely why Iraqi Sunnis primarily offered quiet support to Iraq's majority-Shi'a but non-sectarian popular protest movement, rather than participating themselves in Sunni-majority areas.<sup>32</sup> Protests have so far broken out in Sunni-majority areas only on the weekend of the so-called Nasiriyah Massacre in November 2019.<sup>33</sup> Even then, Sunni protesters demonstrated under the guise of solemn funeral marches for the predominantly Shi'a protesters who were killed by Iraqi Security Forces.

**Sunni Elites:** Iraqi Sunnis wield little power at the national level. What little authority they do possess is undermined by years of internal splintering and by the mass displacement of Iraq's Sunni population. Sunnis lost substantial parliamentary representation as they were forced out of once-diverse parts of the country. Prior to 2010, Iraqi Sunnis held approximately 90 parliamentary seats.<sup>34</sup> They now hold

approximately 70, and the largest Sunni party following the 2018 election held only 14. Iraq's Sunni representatives are splintered into opposing and ever-changing political alliances, ensuring that Sunni members of Parliament will be the minority in any pan-sectarian coalition they try to join. Even on issues like maintaining a US force presence in Iraq, for which there is broad Sunni support, Sunni parliamentarians are unable to present a united front.

Sunni elites continue to undermine one another, compromising their ability to deliver badly needed aid for reconstruction and internally displaced persons resettlement to the Sunni population. US-sanctioned and Iran-linked businessman Khamis al-Khanjar is actively attempting to undermine Parliamentary Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi's Alliance of Iraqi Forces. Khanjar's new Liberated Cities Coalition, formed in May 2020, boasts 20 seats and split from Halbousi's bloc, which previously held approximately 40 seats.<sup>35</sup> The ever-shifting membership of these alliances renders them unreliable and ineffective for their leaders, their allies, and their ostensible constituents. Halbousi, meanwhile, is attempting to reassert some Sunni authority, albeit for his own political benefit. He could be attempting to form a Sunni equivalent to Ammar al-Hakim's Iraqis Alliance to support the agenda of Prime Minister Kadhimi.<sup>36</sup> Halbousi is also setting conditions for longer-term influence through the new elections law currently under consideration in Parliament. Halbousi's efforts to implement a multi-district, first-past-the-post electoral system could restore some of the 20 parliamentary seats Iraqi Sunnis once held but faced fierce opposition from Shi'a powerbrokers who wish to maintain their status quo dominance.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Kurdish Factions***

**Popular dissatisfaction with the offerings of traditional elites is not limited to federal Iraq; the elite factions of Iraq's Kurdistan Region may soon face their own popular protests.** The once-formidable Kurdish alliance that ensured a united Kurdish front at the national level has been under unprecedented strain since the 2017

Kurdish territorial loss of Kirkuk. The two historically dominant Kurdish parties, the Talabani clan-led Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Barzani clan-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), have seen their influence wane both within the Kurdish region and within the Iraqi federal government. The Kurdish people are meanwhile increasingly disillusioned with their opposing but equally corrupt options in the face of increasing unemployment and endemic regional corruption.

#### **The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK):**

The PUK, which controls Iraqi Kurdistan's most populous province, devolved into familial power struggles after the 2017 death of PUK founder and former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani.<sup>38</sup> The recent election of PUK co-Presidents Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi Talabani, the son and nephew, respectively, of Jalal, reinforces a degree of Talabani clan dominance of the party that is increasingly opposed by the Kurdish population.<sup>39</sup>

#### **The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP):**

The KDP also experienced setbacks after Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani held an ill-advised and ultimately disastrous independence referendum in 2017, which passed with a resounding 93-percent support and near-universal international condemnation.<sup>40</sup> Then-Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi responded by sending Iraqi Army and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) units to occupy Kirkuk, internally displacing tens of thousands of Iraqi Kurds. President Barzani resigned while the KDP blamed the PUK for colluding with the PMF. Relations between the two parties remain uneasy. Kirkuk remains outside Kurdish control.

#### **The Kurdish People:**

The Kurdish people began to express disillusionment with the traditional, clan-based Kurdish party system as early as 2009 but have not yet made substantive changes to that system.<sup>41</sup> The Kurdish people increasingly recognize that the traditional party binary does not represent popular interests at the national level and limits their merit-based opportunities in the semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>42</sup> The leader of the minor New Generation party, Shaswar

Abdulwahid, found limited success with renewed calls for peaceful demonstrations against corruption and the lack of basic services in the Kurdish region of Iraq, demonstrating the party's increasing and disruptive influence.<sup>43</sup> The PUK and KDP have historically blamed one another for the region's woes. In recent months, however, the Kurdish people have blamed both parties for regional crises. The clans' increasingly authoritarian response will only inflame popular anger with elite domination of Iraqi Kurdistan's economy, politics, security, and media.<sup>44</sup>

The strong ties that once bound the Kurdish alliance to Shi'a political parties have also frayed.<sup>45</sup> Together, Kurdish and Shi'a Iraqis comprise approximately 80 percent of the population.<sup>46</sup> The Kurdish-Shi'a alliance previously ensured their dominance at the national level, allowing them to shape the Constitution and pass legislation consistent with their agendas.<sup>47</sup> Their relationship became strained over the sectarian policies of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and never recovered.

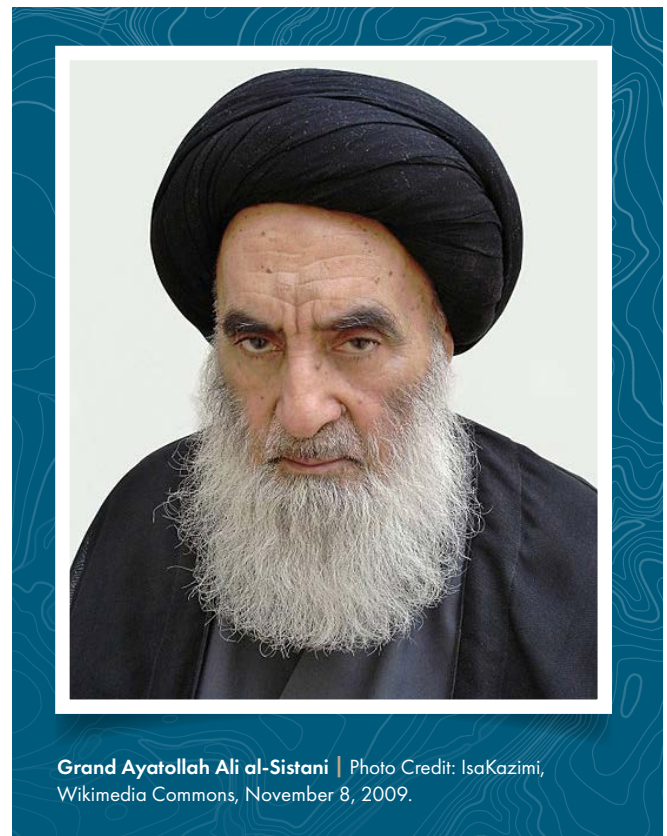
Kurdish parties failed to join a formal political coalition during Kadhim's May 2020 government formation process despite their broad support for his candidacy. Their inability to work with other political factions cost the Kurdish blocs their previous control over the influential Ministry of Finance and over some federal budget contributions.<sup>48</sup> The fracturing of elite Shi'a-Kurdish relations has rendered both groups less politically viable and reduced the capability of the Iraqi state to pass consensus legislation, or any legislation at all.

## Religious Splintering

### The Fading Influence of Iraq's Shi'a Religious Establishment

**The influence of Iraq's key religious figures and institutions is waning.** The most influential and revered religious figure in Iraq is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The 90-year-old Shi'a leader of the Najaf religious establishment is deeply respected across ethno-sectarian groups.<sup>49</sup> Sistani has actively endorsed the protesters' demands for government

reform and accountability despite his background in the Quietist tradition of Shi'a Islam. Quietism eschews religious involvement in politics and holds that the role of the clergy is to provide guidance to shape the personal lives of their religious adherents.<sup>50</sup> Sistani has historically only weighed in on Iraq's most pressing political issues and has avoided meetings with foreign leaders. His personal policy of limited interference has lent legitimacy to his role in Iraq and credence to his statements when he does decide to voice an opinion. He has also functioned as the guardian of conservative Quietism as an ideological alternative to Iran's velayat al-faqih brand of politicized, revolutionary, and transnational Shi'a Islam, which dictates that a senior Shi'a cleric like Iran's Supreme Leader has the final say in all government decisions. Regardless, Sistani does regularly advocate for political outcomes in certain areas. He has consistently advocated against sectarian violence, for free and fair elections, for peaceful protests, and against the governments' use of force to break up peaceful demonstrations.<sup>51</sup> Sistani has also called for Iran to cease intervening in Iraq's internal affairs.<sup>52</sup>



Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani | Photo Credit: IsaKazimi, Wikimedia Commons, November 8, 2009.



**The Iraqi people still regularly heed the principles expressed by Grand Ayatollah Sistani; Iraq's political and security elites do not.** Sistani demanded that Prime Minister Mehdi investigate the killings of unarmed protesters and bring those responsible to justice.<sup>53</sup> Mehdi's response was feeble, launching an investigation but holding no leaders accountable for the violence. Mehdi did eventually resign under pressure from Sistani after a weekend of horrific abuses against protesters led to 44 deaths in Nasiriyah and Najaf. Violence against the protesters continued. The protesters called on Sistani to intervene after followers of Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr raided their camps in Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad. Protesters hailed Sistani's February 2020 speech berating security forces for not protecting protesters from deadly attacks.<sup>54</sup> However, neither the government nor the armed and ostensibly devout Shi'a groups attacking the protesters feel compelled to abide by Sistani's decrees. Sistani's influence is increasingly undermined by Iranian infiltration of the Iraqi system, including through Iranian proxy militia promotion of Iran's revolutionary velayat al-faqih ideology in Iraq. The social influence of groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah threaten the predominance of Sistani's quietist ideology.<sup>55</sup> Sistani tolerates religious dissent and freedom of thought at the Najaf seminaries over which he presides.<sup>56</sup> His tolerance keeps Iranian religious influence at bay in that arena but does not prevent its spread through proxy social organizations across Iraq. Sistani's unwillingness to directly involve himself in politics also limits the protection that he could provide to protesters or politicians willing to speak out against powerful political and militia interests. Sistani's is increasingly a voice in the wind, heard but unheeded by Iraq's elites and security forces. His death and lack of an obvious successor could provide another opportunity for Iran to infiltrate Iraq, this time through Najaf's core.

**Sistani has thrown his influence behind the peaceful protests and the reformist campaign of Prime Minister Kadhimi, marking his most full-throated support for any government in modern Iraq.** In September 2020, Sistani vocally condemned corruption, electoral fraud,

and interference in the electoral process. Sistani also condemned the presence of "unauthorized weapons," an indirect censure on the unregulated militia groups that make up the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella organization led by Iran's proxy militias in Iraq.<sup>57</sup> Those militias have repeatedly clashed with Kadhimi's government as Kadhimi attempts to impose state control over use of force in Iraq. Sistani called on the Iraqi government to work with the United Nations to hold free and fair early elections. He called on the state to regain control of border revenues, a nod to Kadhimi's signature campaign to retake Iraq's border crossings from corrupt groups.<sup>58</sup> Sistani's unprecedented support for Kadhimi's agenda may lend some popular legitimacy to Kadhimi's attempts to rebalance Iraq's foreign relations, pass needed electoral reforms, and set conditions for a more just and representative system of government moving forward. Sistani's calls, which were enough to mobilize a generation of Iraqis to fight ISIS, continue to be heard by the public but go largely unheeded by Iraq's increasingly out of touch political and security elites.

## The Increasingly Incoherent Sadrism Trend

**Nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has undermined his own influence by betraying his most devout followers: the disenfranchised Shi'a street.** Sadr, who inherited the leadership of the populist Sadrism Trend after Saddam Hussein killed most of his family, is the second-most influential religious figure in Iraq after Sistani. Sadr comes from a long line of populist clerics known for their ability to mobilize the Shi'a street to support sectarian violence or a political agenda. His political identity has historically rested on three pillars: populism, nationalism, and an anti-corruption, pro-reform political agenda. Sadr was always more active in politics than Sistani and more mercurial by nature. However, where Sadr once seemed unpredictable, he now appears incoherent. He is a nationalist who often embraces Iranian proxies. He is a populist who has repeatedly turned on the Shi'a protesters.<sup>59</sup> He is a resistance fighter who



sometimes condemns attacks on the US “occupation.” He is a reformist who attempts to preserve the corrupt and ineffectual political elite. These dichotomies have caused numerous fractures in his movement.<sup>60</sup>

Instead of opposing foreign intervention, Sadr spends much of his time in Iran and worked closely with Iranian proxies to hold his so-called “Million Man March” against the continued US presence in Iraq in January 2020.<sup>61</sup> Rather than representing the interests of the Shi’a street, Sadr ordered a crack-down on the Shi’a protesters, many of whom were Sadrist.<sup>62</sup> Sadr then shifted again, launching a “humanitarian initiative” to support the protesters, who began to decry him as one of the corrupt elites they abhor.<sup>63</sup> Recently, Sadr chose not to abide by curfews aimed at halting the spread of COVID-19, urging his followers to congregate for Shi’a religious commemorations.<sup>64</sup> Hundreds of thousands of them did so in Baghdad and Karbala. Sadr’s reckless behavior and ideological inconsistencies have placed him on the verge of losing his nationalist, militant, and populist support base while spreading disease among his most devout followers.<sup>65</sup>

## The Feeble Sunni Religious Establishment

**While never as influential as Iraqi Shi’a institutions, Sunni institutions are further attenuated by infighting, extremism, and Shi’a domination.**<sup>66</sup> The fragmentation of the Sunni community following the US invasion, sectarian civil war, deliberate policies of Prime Minister Maliki, and the rise of ISIS is reflected in the internal division of Sunni religious institutions. The Office of Sunni Endowments (OSE) and the Iraqi Jurisprudential Congregation (IJC) rarely agree, while the Association of Muslim

Scholars has become defunct.<sup>67</sup> Salafism continues to appeal to Iraqi Sunni youth, some of whom prefer ISIS-like extremism over subordination to Shi’a domination. The Iraqi government under former Prime Minister Abadi appointed a loyalist to run the OSE and weakened the IJC. The Office of Sunni

Endowments is in the midst of legal battles with the Shi’a Endowment over the control of religious lands and sites in Mosul, which the Shi’a Endowment will almost certainly win, demonstrating the diminished stature of the Sunni Endowment over the last 20 years.<sup>68</sup>

## Security Splintering

**The constituent elements of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are as fragmented as Iraq’s political landscape and are unprepared to carry out their missions without Coalition and**

**NATO support.** The prestige of the ISF has diminished along with their cohesion. “Iraqi Security Forces” is an umbrella term that refers to armed forces including the largely sidelined Iraqi Army and the small but elite Counterterrorism Services (CTS) under the Ministry of Defense. The ISF also encompasses the irregular, Iranian-compromised Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) under the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC).

## The Diminished Iraqi Army

**The historically nationalist Iraqi Army now sits on the sidelines after years of combat attrition and politically motivated leadership changes; they have neither a monopoly over use of force nor the trust of the Iraqi people.** The Iraqi Army has evolved into a more effective anti-ISIS force over time but continues to have significant weaknesses. The Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) assessed in March 2020 that the Iraqi Security Forces, particularly the Iraqi Army and Counterterrorism Service, were

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conducting increasingly independent anti-ISIS operations, allowing the Coalition to transition to Phase IV stabilization operations and reduce tactical assistance in favor of institutional mentorship.<sup>69</sup> The United States has since announced substantive troop withdrawals due to improvements in the Iraqi Army's capacity.<sup>70</sup> The Iraqi Army nevertheless remains deficient in ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), leadership structure, and corruption. The US Department of Defense stated in September 2018 that the ISF was "years, if not decades" from being able to contain ISIS without Coalition support due to lack of ISR expertise, overlapping chains of command, micromanagement, and corruption in the form of "ghost soldiers," falsified service records whose salaries are pocketed by Army leadership.<sup>71</sup> The United States previously built and left behind an effective Iraqi Army, but it broke under the pressure of the ISIS insurgency. The current Iraqi Army is less capable than the one the United States left behind in 2011 and would be less able to counter a resurgent ISIS or other security threats.<sup>72</sup>

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**The Iraqi Army's mixed success against ISIS limited its ability to secure a monopoly on use of force in Iraq.** The Army now shares responsibility for providing security in many parts of Iraq with the constituent militias of the sometimes irregular and poorly trained—and predominantly Iran-linked—Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).<sup>73</sup> Successive Iraqi governments have ordered the Iraqi army to the sidelines of Iraqi security in favor of politically-linked, often less effective, and frequently criminal PMF groups.<sup>i</sup> PMF militias have set up checkpoints and engaged in extortion in areas like the Ninewa Plains and northern Diyala Province.<sup>74</sup> The impunity with which PMF groups run criminal enterprises in these areas demonstrates the weakness

of the Iraqi Army and undermines civilian confidence in the Army's capabilities. The Iraqi Army has historically been a source of national pride but no longer has the trust of the Iraqi people.

**The Iraqi Army's popular standing has likely suffered further after the Iraqi government used Army forces to violently suppress anti-government protests in 2018 and 2019.** The Army's ceding of authority to the PMF and the PMF's subsequent criminal activity in many parts of Iraq damaged the Army's reputation. The inability of the Army to protect the protest movement from militia crackdowns damaged its legitimacy. However, the Iraqi Army is also responsible for a number of government-ordered atrocities against the Iraqi people during the tenure of Prime Ministers Abadi and Mehdi. Basra Operations Command Commander Jamil al-Shammari was widely blamed for the violent crackdown on Basrawis protesting electricity

shortages and water contamination in September 2018.<sup>75</sup> Rather than holding Shammari accountable for his actions, then-Prime Minister Mehdi again appointed Shammari to suppress Dhi Qar protesters in November 2019. Shammari's command of the Dhi Qar Crisis Cell lasted for less than a day and resulted in at least 33 protester deaths, the condemnation of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, and Mehdi's resignation.<sup>76</sup> As of December 2020, Shammari was neither arrested nor fired. Prime Minister Kadhimi referred Shammari for an accelerated retirement.<sup>77</sup> Multiple Baghdad Operations commanders were also replaced for the violent repression of protests in Iraq starting in October 2019, though pro-Iranian militias, local and federal riot police, and the new, Iranian-aligned Iraqi Law Enforcement Forces were likely responsible for more protester deaths.<sup>78</sup> The public-facing responsibility of Iraqi Army officers for some of these atrocities further undermines the Army's legitimacy and underlines the disturbing

i. Some PMF militants, particularly those with ties to Iran's IRGC – Quds Force, are well-trained, well-funded, and elite.

pattern of the Iraqi government using the Army as a domestic political instrument that does not serve the Iraqi people.

## The Overwhelmed Counterterrorism Service

**The elite, US-trained Counterterrorism Service (CTS) remains Iraq's most competent and well-respected security force following its valiant anti-ISIS efforts and substantial casualties.**<sup>79</sup>

Prime Minister Kadhimi has further burnished CTS' public standing by restoring its immensely popular and effective deputy commander, General Abdul Wahhab al-Saadi, whose removal by Prime Minister Mehdi was widely credited with contributing to the outbreak of the October Revolution protest movement in October 2019. The Mehdi government allegedly removed Saadi in a purge of security leaders who opposed ever-increasing Iranian influence over the PMF.<sup>80</sup> Kadhimi restored Saadi to his position and promoted him to CTS commander. Kadhimi has since relied heavily on the CTS to carry out his governmental agenda, utilizing them well outside the scope of their original mission and far beyond the intended use of their small size. Kadhimi has used CTS forces to retake some border crossings from corrupt, Iran-linked militia groups, restoring government revenues and limiting militia profiteering. Kadhimi ordered CTS forces to protect protesters in Basra Province following anti-protester abuses by other ISF groups. Most controversially, Kadhimi used CTS forces to arrest 14 members of key Iranian proxy militia and US-designated terrorist organization Kata'ib Hezbollah on June 25, credibly accusing them of preparing attacks on US and Coalition forces at the Baghdad International Airport. This raid triggered a subsequent Kata'ib Hezbollah show of force near CTS headquarters and Kadhimi's residence.<sup>81</sup> The detained militants were quickly released and are unlikely to be prosecuted. The CTS remains loyal to the Iraqi government and excels at its given missions. However, its willingness to carry out operations against other, Iranian-infiltrated ISF

places it in direct opposition to the PMF, Iranian proxy militia groups, and elements of the Federal Police. CTS forces are realistically too small to defend the Iraqi government or the Iraqi people against the concerted efforts of those less effective but substantially larger armed groups should direct confrontation occur.

## The Unchecked Popular Mobilization Forces

**Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) originally formed to fight ISIS but has attempted to maintain and increase its stature following the territorial defeat of the Caliphate.** The PMF was formed following a 2014 fatwa of defensive jihad issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that called for all able-bodied Iraqi men to fight ISIS.<sup>82</sup> Many of the nationalist fighters who responded to Sistani's call joined pre-existing militias that had initially been formed to resist the US occupation of Iraq after the 2003 invasion. These militias were funded and trained by the Iranian regime. For a brief time, the other, nationalist elements of the ISF were eclipsed by the spectacular rise of the PMF groups, which gained prestige through combat successes against ISIS as they filled the gaps left by the thinning Iraqi Army.<sup>83</sup> PMF leaders such as Iranian proxies Qais al-Khazali and Hadi al-Ameri sought to translate this prestige into increased political power. In 2016, then-Prime Minister Abadi ordered the formal integration of the PMF into the ISF. This integration was never fully undertaken.<sup>84</sup>

**While PMF leaders draw government salaries, they remain predominantly outside Iraqi state control.** Many of the purported 150,000 government salaries paid to the PMF instead line the pockets of corrupt militia leaders; in a September 2020 interview, former Prime Minister Abadi claimed that as many as 60 percent of PMF fighters on the government payroll are ghost soldiers who do not exist.<sup>85</sup> Actual rank-and-file PMF fighters are paid less than their army counterparts and often do not receive the benefits to which government security forces are entitled, forcing them to rely on

militia leaders and crime to pay their bills.<sup>86</sup> Their leaders do not comply with state directives or Iraqi national security priorities; some PMF militants are currently fighting for the Assad Regime in the eastern Syrian province of Deir ez-Zour.<sup>87</sup>

**PMF unity continues to fray following the deaths of PMC Deputy Chairman Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis and Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Qassim Soleimani.**<sup>88</sup> Even before the United States killed Soleimani and Muhandis, Iran-linked PMF militias violently suppressed unarmed protesters, drawing condemnations from Grand Ayatollah Sistani and tarnishing the PMF's reputation and legitimacy.<sup>89</sup> Without the charismatic Soleimani and Muhandis to keep opposing PMF factions in check, the four militias closest to Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the religious establishment in Najaf, the Hawza militias, defected from the PMF and subordinated themselves directly to the Office of the Prime Minister.<sup>90</sup> This direct rebuke from Sistani's camp further undermines the legitimacy of the PMF and lays bare the foundational relationship that the PMF's remaining factions have with the Iranian regime. Hawza militia leaders continue to meet with CTS and Iraqi Army leaders to discuss integrating fully with the traditional Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>91</sup>

**The proliferation of armed groups outside state control is the greatest threat to Iraqi stability.** Iran-linked PMF factions operate with near-impunity. Their direct opposition to the Kadhimi government poses the greatest risk of civil conflict in Iraq and the greatest threat to US interests. PMF

*Iranian proxy domination of Iraqi security worsens sectarian divisions and enables Iranian proxy domination of the rest of the state.*

fighters are mostly poorly trained, equipped, and organized, but vastly outnumber more reliably loyal and competent organizations like the CTS.<sup>92</sup> Iran's proxies among the PMF gain profits through corruption and through blatant criminal activity like smuggling, kidnapping, and blackmail.<sup>93</sup> Some also receive direct support from Iran's IRGC. Key Iranian proxy and PMF militia Kata'ib Hezbollah has sworn that its weapons "will not be surrendered" to the state and described Kadhimi's constitutional ascension to the premiership as a "declaration of war on the Iraqi people."<sup>94</sup> Iranian proxies in the PMF, including US-designated terrorist organizations Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, have likely adopted pseudonyms to claim dozens of rocket attacks on US and Coalition forces and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on Coalition-affiliated Iraqi contractor convoys in Iraq.<sup>95</sup> These "shadow militia" attacks have jeopardized the success of the anti-ISIS fight and undermined US-Iraqi relations; the attacks likely forced the United States to accelerate its pre-planned consolidations within Iraq.<sup>96</sup>

**Without non-sectarian political reforms, the mitigation of foreign interference, and continued international support, Iraq's security forces will almost certainly remain fractured and ineffectual.** They will likely prove unable to maintain the enduring defeat of ISIS or to counter Iranian domination in Iraq's security sector. Iranian proxy domination of Iraqi security worsens sectarian divisions and enables Iranian proxy domination of the rest of the state.



**Part 2:****Manifestations of a Fragile Region**

**Iraq's neighbors and other regional actors are destabilizing an already fragile Iraq.** Foreign powers use Iraq as a proxy battleground to carry out their regional agendas, thereby increasing domestic and regional instability in a mutually worsening cycle. Iran's role in Iraq remains the greatest threat to Iraqi stability. Iran maintains a robust network of political and militia proxies and uses these proxies to carry out the regime's destabilizing activities in Iraq and the wider region. Less discussed by US decisionmakers are the roles of Iran's opponents, Iraq's other neighbors, and global great powers attempting to establish themselves in the Middle East through Iraq. This section will discuss the activities of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China, and Russia and their ramifications for Iraq's stability, sovereignty, and welfare.

**Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi is attempting to realign Iraq's regional partnerships, risking increasing destabilization in the short term to reclaim long-term Iraqi sovereignty.** Kadhimi is working to rebalance foreign influence in Iraq away from Iranian domination and toward alternative, less domineering regional partners. Iran currently uses its close relationship with Iraq to exploit critical vulnerabilities in Iraq's anemic economy, insufficient government services, and lack of infrastructure. In the first months of his administration, Kadhimi spoke of a "New Levant," a European-style cooperative approach to the Middle East, and broached the idea with the leaders of Jordan and Egypt. Kadhimi is courting these and other potential regional partners, hoping that they can help him mitigate Iraq's various vulnerabilities without using their increasing leverage to violate Iraqi sovereignty. Kadhimi's precarious attempts to balance regional powers against one another may be the best and only chance for Iraq to detach itself from the regional fray and reassert Iraqi autonomy and sovereignty. In the short term, however, Kadhimi's approach risks exacerbating regional conflicts as he increases the role of states

like France or Saudi Arabia in Iraq to the detriment of states like Turkey or Iran. That said, Kadhimi's efforts could ultimately produce a stronger Iraqi state if he can strike the right balance between the many regional actors trying to establish themselves in Iraq.

**Intentionally or not, regional actors are hurting, not helping, the fragile Iraqi state.** Iranian interference and anti-US activities continue to actively destabilize the Iraqi state and exacerbate sectarian tensions. Turkish disregard for Iraqi sovereignty is inherently destabilizing, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan. Saudi Arabia has neglected Iraq entirely since 2003 but may be starting to enter the arena, risking Iranian backlash. Saudi Arabia's tentative outreach to the new Iraqi government could be a positive development but falls well short of what Iraq requires and risks triggering a violent Iranian backlash. China is not providing the economic support that Iraq needs and Russia is reaching out to destabilizing Iraqi actors and attempting to supplant Western powers without replacing the support those powers offer. No regional power is making a concerted effort to stabilize the Iraqi state, and most are actively harming its prospects.

**Iran's Cooptation of the Iraqi State**

**Iran desires a non-threatening, Shi'a-led client state in Iraq; its efforts to achieve this end are immensely detrimental to Iraqi stability, sovereignty, and security.** Iran's current leadership was shaped by the devastation of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, which featured trench warfare, use of chemical weapons, and targeting of civilians. Iran's leaders want to ensure that Iraq remains a weak state that will never again pose a security threat to the Iranian regime the way it did during the Iran-Iraq War. To that end, Iran has worked to build a weak and non-threatening client state in Iraq since 2003,

one in which Iran-linked Iraqi politicians are dominant and Iran-backed Iraqi militias provide security assurances to Tehran, much like the political and security guarantees Hezbollah provides to Iran in Lebanon.<sup>97</sup> These political and militia proxies also help to contain the threats of Salafi-jihadism and of popular movements such as anti-government protests. Both pose significant national security threats to Iran and each have a precedent of spilling over the Iraqi border into Iran.<sup>98</sup> Iran also successfully uses its Iraqi proxy militias to shape domestic Iraqi political outcomes and to fight ISIS, the United States, and anti-regime forces over the border in Syria.

**The Iranian regime does not seek instability in Iraq, but its efforts to weaken and maintain a non-threatening Iraqi state inherently destabilize the fragile country.** Iran weakens Iraq in three primary and inter-related areas: its untenable economy, its Iranian-dominated security sector, and its fractious political arena.

## Economic Interference

**Iraq relies on Iranian electricity imports to meet southern Iraq's burgeoning electricity needs, granting Iran substantive leverage over the stability of Iraq's southern regions.** Iraq's chronic electricity shortfalls and scorching summers consistently lead to mass public unrest that could topple the fragile state. Iraq's reliance on Iranian energy imports to provide those basic services compels the United States to offer sanctions waivers on those energy imports, providing sanctions-free profits for Iran.<sup>99</sup> The United States uses shortened sanctions waivers to compel Iraqi energy diversification away from the country's reliance on Iran. However, Iraqi self-sufficiency in the energy sector remains a distant dream. Iraq's other opportunities for regional electricity imports, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, will take years to properly implement and will upset an Iranian regime that is

loath to lose its profits to regional competitors.<sup>100</sup> Iran has locked in Iraq's purchases through 2022 but may take action to prevent Iraqi diversification.<sup>101</sup> In summer 2018, Iran withheld electricity imports over a payment dispute, sparking one of the largest and deadliest anti-government protests in modern Iraqi history.<sup>102</sup> Tehran is unlikely to intentionally stoke unrest or anti-Iranian sentiments following the 2019 October Revolution protest movement. However, Tehran retains the ability to repeat this action, granting the Iranian regime additional leverage over the Iraqi state.

*Iran's leaders want to ensure that Iraq remains a weak state that will never again pose a security threat to the Iranian regime the way it did during the devastating Iran-Iraq War.*

**Iran aids and relies upon Iraqi corruption to mitigate US sanctions.** Iran successfully uses Iraq as a captive market to evade US sanctions and acquire international currency. The Iranian regime leverages its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and its deeply entrenched Iraqi proxy militia network to evade US sanctions in Iraq and raise funds for those organi-

zations. According to the US Department of the Treasury, Iranian criminal activity in Iraq includes smuggling, money laundering, weapons sales, propaganda efforts, political intimidation, and embezzling religious donations intended to maintain Shi'a shrines in order to fund the IRGC-QF and other US-designated terrorist organizations.<sup>103</sup> Iran's proxies also enrich themselves through "ghost soldier" schemes, registering nonexistent militia-men to pocket their Iraqi government salaries.

**Iranian criminal activity in Iraq renders Iraq's economy inhospitable to foreign investors and Iraqi entrepreneurs alike, curtailing economic growth and diversification and incentivizing protests.** Anyone hoping to start a business, get a government contract, or even find a public-sector job in Iraq must pay bribes, often to Iranian proxy militias like Kata'ib Hezbollah.<sup>104</sup> Minor border jobs must now be purchased for as much as \$100,000.<sup>105</sup> That rampant corruption, coupled with high youth

unemployment, increasingly destabilizes Iraq as young Iraqis protest corruption, a lack of economic opportunity, and endemic foreign interference.

## Infiltration of Iraqi Security Structures

**Iran uses Iraq as a proxy battlefield to carry out its regional agenda, worsening domestic fragility and regional conflicts.** Iran's multifaceted influence over Iraq's security sector is most obviously seen through the Iranian-dominated Popular Mobilization Forces. Iran uses its Iraqi proxy network and occasionally its own forces to make economic gains, attack US and Coalition forces, maintain control over Iraqi politicians, reshape Iraq's ethno-sectarian makeup, quash Iraqi protests, and threaten regional competitors through the Iraqi theater.

**Iran uses its proxy network in Iraq to strike at US and Coalition forces; these attacks are themselves destabilizing and trigger US retaliatory strikes.** Iran aims to expel US forces from and end US influence in Iraq through a combination of political pressure and kinetic campaigns undertaken by its Iraqi proxy militia network. Iran's proxies and allies in Iraq conducted a low-level rocket campaign on US facilities in Iraq in 2019 that escalated in October.<sup>106</sup> They led an attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad in December 2019.<sup>107</sup> Iran-aligned politicians led the parliamentary charge to expel US forces from Iraq in January 2020. Since the death of IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, Iran has built out a new generation of proxy "shadow militias" in Iraq, likely to establish plausible deniability for the anti-US attacks by Iran's traditional proxy militias in unclassified settings and to create a narrative of a popular and organic anti-US movement in Iraq.<sup>108</sup> The dozens of destabilizing attacks carried out by these semi-anonymous militias have primarily targeted Iraqi logistics companies, exacerbating domestic chaos and instability. Their often-poorly aimed rocket attacks on US facilities killed multiple Iraq civilians in Baghdad in 2020.<sup>109</sup> Iran is likely to continue intermittent and destabilizing attacks

on US facilities and on Iraqi contractors associated with the US-led Coalition so long as US forces remain in Iraq.

**Iran's proxies retain the ability to physically threaten even the most powerful Iraqi politicians.** Not even Iraq's prime minister can directly crack down on Iran's proxies without triggering threats from armed groups and assassinations of his advisors.<sup>110</sup> Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi instead has relied on indirect attempts to limit the proxy network's funding sources through a campaign to reclaim Iraq's border crossings from corrupt militias.<sup>111</sup> His efforts to reclaim revenues from these crossings, which are largely controlled by Iran's proxies, threaten the funding streams of Iran's Iraqi proxy network but also risk Iranian proxy backlash against Kadhimi.<sup>112</sup> If Kadhimi is able to regain Iraqi state control of its borders, he will remain unable to completely end the flow of Iranian smuggling, weapons, and troop movements through Iraq. Iraqi state control of the crossings could, however, inconvenience the Iranian regime and limit its ability to secretly convey troops, weapons, and resources from Iran to Syria and Lebanon—activities it has undertaken with complete impunity prior to Kadhimi's ascension.

**Human rights groups credibly accused Iranian proxy militias under the direct control of IRGC-QF Commander Soleimani of ethnic cleansing in Iraq's multiethnic Diyala Province during the counter-ISIS fight.** Iran-backed militants forcibly displaced thousands of Sunni Iraqi civilians from Diyala Province, killing hundreds.<sup>113</sup> Iran's proxies likely repopulated these areas with Shi'a residents. This targeted, Iran-sanctioned violence exacerbated Iraq's destabilizing sectarian tensions and contributed to the country's ongoing internally displaced persons (IDP) crisis.

**Iranian proxies enabled the brutal October 2019 crackdown on Iraq's popular protest movement that killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians and prompted the fall of the Iraqi government.** Protests in Iraq, which started as recent graduates calling for government employment, quickly spiraled into widespread but predominantly peaceful demonstrations against Iraq's endemic corruption,

ethno-sectarian quota filling system, insufficient jobs, and pervasive foreign—especially Iranian— influence. What started as a domestic Iraqi concern became a near-existential threat to the Iranian regime as similar anti-government protests broke out in Iranian proxy-dominated Lebanon and, eventually, in Iran itself.<sup>114</sup> Brutal government suppression, likely aided by deployments of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – Quds Force and Law Enforcement Forces to Iraq, failed to quell the popular Iraqi uprisings before Iraq’s protesters forced the resignation of the Iran-aligned Iraqi government.<sup>115</sup> Violent Iranian proxy crackdowns on the largely peaceful Iraqi movement eroded the once-popular reputation of the PMF, the umbrella organization under which most of Iran’s Iraqi proxies are organized. Instability resulting from the government’s resignation eventually forced Iran to compromise and allow the ascension of Prime Minister Kadhimi, whose campaign against militias outside state control poses another threat to Iran’s proxy project in Iraq.

**Iran uses Iraq to threaten its regional competitors, arming its proxies with missiles that could hit US bases, Saudi Arabia, or Israel and incentivizing preventative strikes on Iraq by Iran’s enemies.** Iran has transferred dozens of ballistic missiles to areas of Iraq dominated by its proxy groups and brought Iraqis to Iran to learn how to use the weapons in 2018. These missiles have the range to strike Riyadh and Tel Aviv from Iraq and triggered preventative Israeli airstrikes in summer 2019.<sup>116</sup> Iran also used its Iraqi proxies to launch drone attacks on a Saudi oil pipeline from Iraqi territory in the summer of 2019.<sup>117</sup> Iran may also have established factories to produce ballistic missiles in southern Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan, creating additional options for Iran to retaliate if Iran itself is attacked.<sup>118</sup> Iran has also tested its ballistic missiles with strikes fired from Iranian territory targeting Iranian Kurdish dissident groups in Iraq.<sup>119</sup> All of these activities incentivize retaliatory strikes against Iranian targets in Iraq, including Iran-linked security forces paid by the Iraqi government. Iranian adversaries can frame such strikes as less escalatory

measures than striking domestic Iranian targets. Iraq is regularly caught in the crossfire of Iran’s regional escalations.

**Iran’s destabilizing economic and security interference in Iraq is abetted by its entrenched political influence.** Iran’s relationships with senior Shi’a Iraqi elites date back to Saddam-era Shi’a dissidents seeking refuge in Iran. Many of those same elites profit from the corrupt system that Iran has shaped. Iran’s entrenched influence over Iraq’s Shi’a elites is one of many drivers behind the popular protest movement, which demands a homeland free from foreign interference. The mutually reinforcing fragility of Iraq’s unrepresentative political system, dangerous security environment, and kleptocratic and impenetrable economy is interwoven with Iranian interference in Iraq. Iran wants a non-threatening, Shi’a-dominated Iraq. Its attempts to achieve that objective have instead produced a destabilized, nonrepresentative, impoverished, and, above all else, fragile Iraqi state.

**The Iranian regime’s use of Iraq as a vehicle for mitigating sanctions and a launchpad for regional escalations is inherently destabilizing.** Iran will ensure that Iraq remains weak, Shi’a dominated, and useful to the regime for as long as it can. Those efforts can only weaken the already precarious Iraqi state and must be countered by Iraqi partners interested in the establishment of a strong, stable, and sovereign Iraq.

## Turkey’s Disregard for Iraqi Sovereignty

**Turkey’s routine violations of Iraqi sovereignty actively destabilize Iraq, pitting Iraqi political factions against one another and inflaming domestic conflicts.** The fragile Iraqi government lacks good options for responding to Turkish activities. Turkey primarily destabilizes Iraq in three areas: disruptive military operations in Iraqi territory, worsening political divisions in northern Iraq, and threatening the security of Iraq’s increasingly limited water resources.



## Military Operations in Iraqi Territory

**Turkey undertakes military operations and maintains bases in northern Iraq because of long-standing domestic Turkish security concerns but fails to consider the effects of those operations on Iraqi stability.** Turkey's concept of its counter-insurgency area of operations to combat the armed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) rebels extends well beyond Turkey's own borders into Syria and Iraq. The PKK directs much of its campaign against the Turkish government from the once-impenetrable mountain regions of northern Iraq.<sup>ii</sup> Turkey consequently established bases in Iraqi territory after a series of ground incursions in the mid-1990s and has maintained this basing through 2020.

A Saddam-era deal between Turkey and Iraq stipulated that Turkey could maintain basing up to 15 km into the Iraqi side of the Turkish-Iraqi border. As of summer 2020, Turkey's ground assaults in Iraq penetrated up to 40 km into Iraqi territory and led to the establishment of at least 37 "temporary bases," with no public plans to remove them.<sup>120</sup> Its 2019 and 2020 operations, enabled by new drone technology, likely aim to cut PKK supply lines between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria while setting conditions for future targeting of PKK basing in the Qandil Mountains on the Iraq-Iran border. In the meantime, Turkish operations continue to kill and displace Iraqi civilians.<sup>121</sup>

**Turkey's long-running conflict with the PKK prolongs the mass displacement of Iraqi Yazidis and Turkey's Kurds in Iraq.** Turkish airstrikes targeting the PKK in the disputed Iraqi territory of Sinjar, the homeland of Iraq's Yazidi minority,

contribute to the district's tenuous security and prevents the return of thousands of Yazidi refugees to Sinjar.<sup>122</sup> An October 2020 agreement between the federal Iraqi government and the KRG could lead to the removal of PKK militants and the consequential end of Turkish airstrikes in Sinjar—if the agreement is implemented and enforced.<sup>123</sup> Turkey's Kurds who fled the PKK conflict in southeastern Turkey in the 1990s continue to occupy Makhmour refugee camp in the KRG's Dohuk Province, draining resources Iraq could use to confront its own Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) crisis.

**Turkey argues that Iraq should take responsibility for combatting the PKK in northern Iraq and that the failure of the Iraqi government to do so justifies repeated Turkish incursions into Iraq.**

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Baghdad, meanwhile, has little recourse when Turkish airstrikes risk civilian lives or kill Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>124</sup> Given that Turkey has invaded and occupied parts of northern Syria three times since August 2016 and Turkey's demonstrated lack of respect for Iraqi sovereignty, Turkey likely plans to conduct additional destabilizing incursions into northern Iraq and will prioritize decisive military action against the PKK over Baghdad's opinions or Iraq's sovereignty.

## Worsening Political Divisions in Northern Iraq

**Turkish incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan drive additional rifts between the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK, and between political elites and the Iraqi people.** Ankara has restored much of its historically good relationship with the KDP, which controls Arbil Province, and

ii. The United States, European Union, and Turkish governments each view Turkey's armed Kurdish rebels, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as terrorists, although each describe PKK-affiliated groups like the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) differently. Since 2015, the Turkish government has been leading a political crackdown against the country's Kurdish population while pursuing renewed and intensified military operations against the PKK and its affiliates in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.



hyperbolically claims that areas controlled by the KDP's rival PUK party are actually ruled by the terrorist PKK.<sup>125</sup> While the PKK does control some villages and mountain areas in Iraqi Kurdistan, it does not exert provincial-level control. Kurdish civilians routinely protest Turkish incursions and airstrikes near population centers. Some of these protests have led to clashes between Kurdish civilians and Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) security forces under the control of the KDP.<sup>126</sup> These clashes, the failure of the KRG or the federal government in Baghdad to stop Turkish violations of Iraqi sovereignty, and other assorted KRG crackdowns on peaceful protesters demanding economic improvements, are widening the gap between the Kurdish people and their ruling parties.<sup>127</sup>

## Turkish-Iraqi Water Disputes

**Turkey will use increasing water scarcity to threaten Iraq's water security and secure Iraqi cooperation with or submission to Turkey's regional priorities, worsening domestic Iraqi fragility.** The headwaters of Iraq's two main water sources, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, originate in the mountains of Turkey. Turkey's massive Ilisu Dam project on the Tigris, as well as Iranian damming projects on tributaries feeding into the Euphrates, are already harming downstream Iraqi agriculture and fishing. Those effects breed anger, distrust, and despair among Iraqis who depend on the rivers for their livelihoods.<sup>128</sup> Iraq is contending with increasingly scarce and unsafe drinking water, which hospitalized 100,000 people in Basra in 2018. Iraq's current population requires approximately 71 billion cubic meters of water annually. By 2035, when upstream Turkish and Iranian damming projects are complete and the Iraqi population will have grown by a projected 25 percent, Iraq is expected to receive just 51 billion cubic meters per year.<sup>129</sup> Turkey and Iran will increasingly control the flow of clean, fresh water to Iraq, adding another pressure point to the

*Turkey retains the upper hand in Iraq's military, economic, and resource considerations.*

Ankara-Baghdad relationship and another destabilizing factor to the already precarious Iraqi state. Turkey is well aware of its position as the region's water superpower. As former Turkish President Turgut Özal opined, "Some countries sell oil. We will sell water."<sup>130</sup> Iraq may be unable to afford it.

**Turkish hoarding of water will destabilize domestic Iraqi dynamics.** Most water that enters Iraq from Turkey and Iran flows through Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) showed it is willing to close off dams and irrigation canals to block the flow to downstream districts administered by the central Iraqi government during a prior budget dispute.<sup>131</sup> As water becomes increasingly scarce and potentially hoarded by Turkey and Iran, the KRG may choose to keep the water for its own residents. Such actions would not only deprive and destabilize the heavily populated downstream provinces in Southern Iraq, but also worsen the already-fraught relationship between Baghdad and Arbil. Meanwhile, Turkey will continue to use its control over Iraq's water resources as a bargaining chip to exert greater influence in Iraqi politics, secure its access to Iraqi oil, and ensure Baghdad's long-term cooperation with, or submission to, Turkey's ongoing anti-PKK operations in northern Iraq.

**Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi aims to work with other Arab states to form an anti-Turkish coalition and deter continued Turkish violations of Iraqi sovereignty but has little clout.** Kadhimi has spoken of creating a "New Levant" with other Arab countries to expand trade—and potentially security cooperation—among Arab states.<sup>132</sup> Kadhimi proposed the project to Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, an enemy of Turkish President Erdogan, and Jordan's King Abdullah II during a tripartite summit in August 2020. A statement following the summit suggested that Egypt and Jordan would use their improving relationship with Iraq to counter Turkey in the region, vowing that they would "protect [Iraq's] sovereignty, security and stability and its efforts to consolidate security and stability."<sup>133</sup> Kadhimi could also leverage Iraq's

economic relationship with Turkey as Turkey's third largest export market.<sup>134</sup> With sufficient support from international allies, Kadhimi may be able to mitigate some of Turkey's destabilizing activities in Iraq through a combination of economic pressure and foreign partnerships. His foreign outreach could also backfire, worsening relations between Ankara and Baghdad and eliminating what little cooperation currently exists. Ultimately, Turkey retains the upper hand in Iraq's military, economic, and resource considerations.

## Saudi Arabia's Tentative Outreach

**Saudi Arabia historically has not helped to strengthen or stabilize Iraq; that could be changing with the efforts of new Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.** Kadhimi heavily prioritized improving the Saudi-Iraqi relationship early in his tenure and appears to have found a receptive audience in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia's tentative outreach to Iraq is not yet guaranteed to have a stabilizing effect but could provide a needed counterweight to Iranian domination of Iraq's economy and politics. Iran will not take kindly to its regional nemesis beginning to contest the Iraqi space. Potential Iranian proxy backlash to Saudi economic and political outreach, up to and including attacks on Saudi assets in Iraq, could derail the nascent relationship that Kadhimi is attempting to foster. However, Kadhimi rightfully views Saudi Arabia as Iraq's best hope among its neighbors for a regional realignment that could produce a more independent Iraq.

## Saudi-Iraqi Relations from 1990–2020

**Saudi Arabia did not have diplomatic relations with Iraq from 1990 to 2014 and showed little interest in improving its Iraqi relations prior to Prime Minister Kadhimi's ascension.** Saudi King Abdullah loathed Iraq's first leader following the transitional government, the aggressively sectarian Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Saudi Arabia only tentatively began to establish relations in 2014 under

the new, functionally non-sectarian Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Abadi worked to revitalize Iraqi-Saudi relations with the reestablishment of a Saudi embassy in Baghdad, the establishment of the Iraqi-Saudi Joint Coordination Council (ISJCC), and an increase of official visits. While rhetorically promising, the normalization of Iraqi-Saudi relations did not lead to an influx of Saudi investments in Iraq or cooperation with its government.<sup>135</sup> Following Abdullah's death in 2015, Saudi Arabia found that it had been out-manuevered in Iraq by its primary regional competitor, Iran.<sup>136</sup> A combination of systemic Iraqi entropy, Iranian opposition to the revitalization efforts, and residual Saudi suspicion of the Shi'a-led Iraqi state likely stalled the implementation of promised projects throughout the tenure of Abadi's successor, Prime Minister Mehdi.

## Limited Overtures

**Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi has said that Saudi Arabia is "the main key to the problems and solutions of the crises in the Middle East" and Iraq's best chance to extricate itself from Iranian dominance.** In an op-ed published in 2015, Kadhimi, then a journalist, wrote that a strong Iraqi-Saudi relationship "is a realistic necessity and a geographic and cultural fate that cannot be neglected." Kadhimi detailed Iraq and Saudi Arabia's shared interests in economics, trade, and countering extremist groups, particularly along their thousand-kilometer shared border.<sup>137</sup> Kadhimi's regional efforts to rebalance Iraqi foreign policy away from domination by Iran through outreach to other neighbors is most obviously bearing fruit in the Iraqi-Saudi relationship. Kadhimi is an excellent candidate to jump-start the stalled Iraqi-Saudi relationship as a non-sectarian and US-backed politician with a history of Saudi cooperation. As director of Iraq's National Intelligence Service (INIS), Kadhimi established a US-facilitated relationship with Saudi intelligence to support the candidacy of Prime Minister Abadi and counter Iranian electoral influence in 2018.<sup>138</sup> That effort failed but likely still caused the Saudis to view Kadhimi as a reliable Iraqi partner. His actions since taking office have likely reinforced that perception.

**Since taking office in May 2020, Kadhimi has prioritized Iraqi-Saudi diplomatic and economic partnerships.** The first foreign visits of Kadhimi's acting foreign minister were to Riyadh.<sup>139</sup> Kadhimi's own highly symbolic first foreign visit and that of his confirmed foreign minister were also scheduled for Riyadh and were derailed only by the hospitalization of King Salman. Kadhimi restructured the ISJCC, appointed key allies to the council, and presided over the resumption of its meetings. The council's refurbished membership has taken important steps to begin implementing energy and infrastructure deals stemming back to Abadi's tenure. Agreements that appear to be moving forward under Kadhimi include oil cooperation, new Saudi energy imports to Iraq, and the Saudi construction of a one billion USD "sports city" in Iraq. Kadhimi also oversaw the reopening of the Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia for the first time in 30 years.<sup>140</sup>

## Risk of Iranian Backlash

**Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi does not view good relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran as mutually exclusive, but Iran and Saudi Arabia might.** As he wrote in 2015, "a wise diplomatic discourse does not require joining one of the axes [of Iran or Saudi Arabia] as much as it requires opening up to dialogue and finding ways to cooperate despite the differences." However, as Kadhimi acknowledged, Saudi Arabia's hesitation toward rapprochement with Iraq largely derived from its perception of Iraq as an Iranian client state. Saudi Arabia and Iran may be unwilling to economically or politically coexist in Iraq.

**Iranian proxy reactions to improved Iraqi-Saudi relations have already manifested in violent protests and political backlash.** Iran views Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia as its foremost competitor for leadership of the Muslim world and views Shi'a-majority Iraq as Iran's rightful client state. Iran's economy relies heavily on energy exports to Iraq and

on using Iraqi markets to circumvent US sanctions and access international currency. Iraqi diversification of its energy sector away from Iranian imports and toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council threatens Iran's already fragile economy.<sup>141</sup>

**Iran's Iraqi proxies have taken direct measures to oppose improving Iraqi-Saudi relations since Kadhimi's tenure began.** A member of the political wing of Iranian proxy militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq condemned improving relations and accused Saudi Arabia of financing al Qaeda and ISIS in mid-May, 2020.<sup>142</sup> Later that month, a pro-PMF mob destroyed a Saudi-owned TV station in Baghdad after that station correctly insinuated that the now-deceased de facto PMF chief and Iranian proxy Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis was responsible for the 1981 bombing of the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut.<sup>143</sup> In June, former Prime Minister Maliki's State of Law Coalition and key Iranian proxy Hadi al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance blocs began drafting a law to prosecute Saudi Arabia for "dispatching suicide bombers to Iraq."<sup>144</sup> These political blocs have proposed neither a legal mechanism to carry out such prosecutions nor a public draft of the law, which was likely an unsuccessful publicity stunt intended to embarrass Kadhimi and derail the renewal of the Iraqi-Saudi relationship.

**The establishment of new anti-Saudi shadow militia groups suggests that Iran may be setting conditions for armed attacks on Saudi interests in Iraq.** Three new shadow militia groups declared their existence with anti-Ba'athist—usually coded language in Iraq for Sunni—or explicitly anti-Saudi mission statements between July and September 2020.<sup>145</sup> The establishment of these groups, whether they are real or merely propagandist covers for pre-existing Iranian proxies, is an inflection in Iran's shadow militia campaign. All other shadow militia groups have framed their struggle as organic resistance against the foreign occupiers—almost always a reference to the United States—and

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as avengers for Soleimani and Muhandis. Other shadow militias have claimed dozens of IED and rocket attacks on US and Coalition personnel and facilities and on Iraqi civilian contractors affiliated with the Coalition. These new, anti-Sunni militia groups are setting conditions for Iran to retaliate militarily against Saudi economic and diplomatic interests in Iraq as well as Iraq's Sunni population. Such attacks would risk yet another layered regional conflict erupting in the Iraqi arena, exacerbating domestic sectarian tensions and establishing a new theater in which the Saudi-Iranian regional competition may play out.

**Saudi Arabia has the potential to be a force for good in Iraq. Its tentative outreach is a positive development for Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi's attempts to rebalance Iraqi foreign relations and economic ties.** Iranian proxy backlash to Saudi investments in Iraq has thus far remained political. Kadhimi's efforts to bring Saudi Arabia into an alliance with Iraq could solicit additional stabilization assistance and development aid while providing Iraq with more leverage in its negotiations with domineering regional actors like Iran and Turkey, who also happen to be Saudi competitors. Iraq and its international allies must carefully encourage Saudi Arabia to expand its support for the stability and strength of the Iraqi state without adding another destabilizing player to Iraq's proxy battlefield.

## China's Creeping Economic Influence in Iraq

**China's increasing engagement with Iraq is not stabilizing the fragile Iraqi state.** China exploits its economic and political relationship with Iraq for its own political ends, as when Iraq signed a 50-nation joint letter to the UN Human Rights Council praising Chinese human rights abuses against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Province in order to appease the Chinese regime and maintain its economic partnership.<sup>146</sup> Iraqi leaders may be willing to accept exploitation of Iraq's resources and political capital in order to receive the economic stimulus that Iraq so desperately needs. China has not provided that stimulus. Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi elevated the Sino-Iraqi bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership in a

2015 Beijing visit, promoting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and energy cooperation."<sup>147</sup> Prime Minister Mehdi visited Beijing in September 2019 to seek support for Iraq's struggling economy.<sup>148</sup> Specific projects and investments do not appear to have been announced as a result of those meetings.<sup>149</sup> China has limited its participation in Iraq to furthering China's economic interests instead of strengthening Iraq's economy. Bad actors, particularly Iranian proxies in Iraq, hold up China as a possible replacement for the United States without any evidence of Chinese will or ability to fill a gap left by the United States.

## Belt and Road Initiative

**China is working to integrate Iraq into its often-predatory flagship foreign policy initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative, primarily through oil and infrastructure investments.**<sup>150</sup> The BRI has resulted in uneven development, worsened corruption, and environmental damage in participating countries. Nor does the BRI increase local employment; China brings its own workers instead of employing locals to work on infrastructure projects. China ultimately aims to reshape trade and commerce in Europe and Asia through the BRI. The Middle East is a key part of this project and Iraq, with its large oil reserves and geopolitically important location, is a key prospect.<sup>151</sup> However, China's approach to BRI projects will not provide the economic diversification or private sector stimulus that Iraq so desperately needs.

**China's hungry energy markets may demand increasing Chinese involvement in Iraq's energy sector, granting China increasing leverage over Iraq's fragile and oil-reliant economy.** Chinese investments in Iraq totaled 24.15 billion USD between 2005 and 2020. Approximately 90 percent of those investments have been in Iraq's energy sector.<sup>152</sup> Iraq is China's third-largest source of oil imports.<sup>153</sup> Iraq has a long history of trading oil for reconstruction aid and other investment; China may pursue this route as it deepens its relationships with the cash-strapped Iraqi state. China has also agreed to build out some Iraqi infrastructure, including airports and schools.<sup>154</sup>



In December 2020, Chinese state-run oil company China Zhen Hua Oil Co. emerged as a frontrunner in Iraq's latest attempt to prop up its failing economy, an oil pre-payment deal. If the Iraqi prime minister finalizes the deal, China will agree to purchase five years' worth of Iraqi oil and to pay up front for one year, injecting approximately two billion dollars into the Iraqi economy as an interest-free loan.<sup>155</sup> Zhen Hua is a subsidiary of the Chinese North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), one of China's largest state-owned defense companies.<sup>156</sup> Rather than helping Iraq diversify away from its destabilizing reliance on oil revenues, China is reinforcing the importance of oil for Iraq to solicit foreign investments and may also be setting the stage for increasing arms sales or other defense cooperation.

## Political Involvement

**Iraq's political elites, and particularly its Iran-aligned politicians and militias, frame China as an alternative power to replace the United States in Iraq.** Iranian proxies in Iraq frequently emphasize the purported viability of Chinese reconstruction aid and investments to replace the US economic presence.<sup>157</sup> Iranian proxy militias in Iraq made a flurry of statements calling for the implementation of Chinese economic deals and Chinese military support to replace the United States following the January 2020 US killing of Iran's IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq.<sup>158</sup> China's ambassador to Iraq met with then-caretaker Prime Minister Mehdi just three days after the January 3, 2020, US strike that killed Soleimani and Iraq's deputy PMF head. The ambassador expressed China's "condolences" while emphasizing China's intent to increase Sino-Iraqi "security and military cooperation."<sup>159</sup> The ambassador did not provide additional details. There is no evidence of Chinese military support to Iraq. China instead works to undermine US influence in Iraq and the Middle East even as its economic interests benefit from US-provided security that China is unwilling to replicate.<sup>160</sup>

**China could increase its involvement in Iraq to thwart the United States as great power competition becomes more entrenched in the Middle East.** Like the competitions of other regional powers, increased Sino-US competitions playing out in Iraq's proxy battleground could only further destabilize Iraq.

## Russia's Erosion of US Interests

**Russia is not attempting to destabilize Iraq, but its efforts to erode US interests are destabilizing to Iraq and the region as a whole.** The Kremlin's interests in Iraq are shaped by its desire to end the US-led world order and re-establish itself as a great power. The Kremlin aims to persuade the United States and its allies to withdraw from or limit operations within the Middle East, ending perceived US hegemony and framing Russia as a reliable partner and security guarantor for the region at the expense of US influence.<sup>161</sup> Russia primarily engages in these efforts in Iraq through highly publicized but low-cost energy investments, defense cooperation frameworks, and weapons sales. Russia may also be deepening its ties to Iran-backed, anti-US militia groups in Iraq.<sup>162</sup> However, Russia is neither willing nor able to replace the security support, stabilization efforts, development aid, and support to civil society provided by the United States and its allies in Iraq. The Kremlin also risks creating competing interest groups and adding new factions to Iraq's already fractious political scene. Russian attempts to compete with the United States in Iraq will therefore weaken the Iraqi state.

## Exploiting US-Iraqi Disagreements

**Russia exploits disagreements between the United States and its Iraqi partners to position itself as an alternative patron state.** Russia has successfully positioned itself as a potential alternate patron for traditional US allies in Iraq, particularly the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Iraqi power brokers turn to Russia when they wish to establish leverage over the United States.<sup>163</sup>

**The Kremlin used Kurdish dissatisfaction with the United States following the disastrous 2017 Kurdish independence referendum to exploit a fault line in US-Kurdish relations.** The United States opposed the destabilizing referendum, while Russia remained publicly neutral.<sup>164</sup> Iraqi Kurds viewed the inaction of the United States following the independence referendum as a betrayal and likely began to view Russia as an alternative global partner. The aftermath of the referendum proved disastrous for the Kurds and led to substantial Kurdish losses of territory and oil to the Iraqi government. Russia made substantial gains during this time, including a majority stake in the KRG's oil industry and major pipelines through the Kremlin-run energy giant Rosneft. That stake gives Russia not only a share of the KRG's oil profits but leverage over the KRG's key source of government revenues.<sup>165</sup> If the United States were to pull out of Iraq again, the KRG would likely increasingly rely on external partners like Russia to fill the resultant gap in foreign support. Russia has fewer interests in supporting Iraqi unity and could worsen tensions between the KRG and the central Iraqi government.

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**Russian efforts to establish closer relations with Iraqi Security Forces at the expense of the United States could introduce additional destabilizing factions.** The Kremlin exploited US-Iraqi tensions after the US killing of Iran's IRGC-QF commander in January 2020 to strengthen military cooperation and promote weapons sales. The US killing of Iran's IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and Iraq's de facto PMF leader Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis in Baghdad damaged the US-Iraqi relationship.<sup>166</sup> The Kremlin quickly took advantage of the rift, sending a defense attaché to

Baghdad to discuss increasing military cooperation and weapons sales in early February 2020.<sup>167</sup>

**Increasing Russian weapons sales and military cooperation with Iraq could further destabilize the US-Iraqi relationship.** Russia uses arms sales as "a geopolitical tool as well as a source of revenue" and has long provided alternate military hardware options to Iraq.<sup>168iii</sup> The Kremlin aims to expand the use of its own weapons systems in Middle Eastern states, including Iraq, to generate income and reduce interoperability with NATO forces, which are currently responsible for training and professionalizing the Iraqi Security Forces. Iraqi parliamentarians who oppose the US presence there frequently float Iraqi purchases of Russia's S-300 and S-400 missile defense systems as a way to secure Iraqi sovereignty and "secure its airspace from any external aggression."<sup>169</sup> Iraq is almost certainly unable to afford these systems, but Iraqi politicians understand the wedge that mere discussions of such a purchase drive between the United States and the Iraqi government.<sup>170</sup> Russia has successfully employed this approach to worsen Turkish-US relations and could attempt to do the same

in Iraq, particularly if it lowers the cost of its systems.<sup>171</sup> The Iraqi Army's Air Defense Command is historically a bastion of Russian influence in Iraq.<sup>172</sup> Air defense systems are therefore likely to remain a point of potential cooperation or conflict in Russo-Iraqi relations.

**Increasing Russian involvement could add another pole to the traditional US-Iranian competition for influence over the Iraqi Security Forces.** Iraq has already turned to Russia rather than the United States for its attack helicopters and some tank purchases and may be considering additional

iii. The United States avoids flying its F-35 aircraft in airspace covered by Russia's S-400 missile defense system in order to prevent Russian collection on US military secrets and potential vulnerabilities in the F-35's stealth capability. The United States also cannot sell its systems to friends, partners, and allies who also have the S-400 system without risking similar exposures of US military capabilities.

purchases of Russian aerial reconnaissance planes.<sup>173</sup> Iran is seeking to supplant Russian weapons sales to Iraq as a new and badly needed source of revenue for Iran following the lifted UN arms embargo.<sup>174</sup> That competition over weapons sales risks an expansion of Russo-Iranian competition into the Iraqi theater. Russian weapons sales also come with fewer restrictions than those provided by the United States, which provided its F-15s to Iraq's air force under the condition that the planes not be used to strike urban areas. Russia has no such qualms regarding the use of its equipment.<sup>175</sup> Adding another player to the foreign tug-of-war over Iraqi security services could only weaken and further divide Iraq's security sector.

## Empowering Malign Actors

**The greatest Russian threat to Iraqi stability is likely Russia's burgeoning connection to Iran's destabilizing proxy militia network.** Anti-US militias in Iraq, including the Iran-linked factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces and the militias of nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, have quietly deepened their relationship with Russia in recent years through a series of meetings in Baghdad and Moscow and potentially through logistical coordination in Syria.<sup>176</sup> Russia's relationship with Iran likely opened doors to these groups, which are directly responsible for dozens of attacks on US-led Coalition forces in Iraq. A recent proliferation of attacks claimed by previously unknown Shi'a extremist "shadow militia" groups in Iraq have been mostly attributed to Iran's traditional proxies like Kata'ib Hezbollah.<sup>177</sup> Previously unknown militias have also claimed unverifiable attacks on US partners in eastern Syria in recent months.

The cross-border activities of these ostensibly new groups may indicate some Russian cooperation with, if not direct funding of, the shadow militias. The proliferation of these new groups feeds into both Iranian and Russian information operations and propaganda claims of an organic and popular anti-US movement.<sup>178</sup> ISW will continue to track potential Russian connections with Iran's traditional and new proxy networks.

**Russia's low-cost approach to Iraq intends to disrupt and shape the regional environment to erode US influence while achieving Russian aims.** It is also eroding Iraqi stability. Russia continues to punch above its weight in terms of denying US policy objectives and positioning itself as a regional powerbroker in what has become Russia's secondary theater.<sup>179</sup> The failure of the United States to challenge Russia in the Middle East effectively means that the Kremlin risks very little by contesting US influence in Iraq and beyond and will likely continue to do so.<sup>180</sup> As the United States pulls away from Iraq, the Kremlin has positioned itself to fill some security gaps without the same US concern for human rights or long-term state stability. Russia's increasing involvement in Iraq could exacerbate domestic conflicts between Baghdad and Arbil while strengthening Iran-linked militia groups and, consequently, worsening corruption and sectarian violence. Opportunities for Iran to increase its influence in Iraq are usually unrecognized opportunities for Russia to do the same. The Kremlin will therefore likely increasingly threaten the strategic partnership between the United States and Iraq and will continue to destabilize the already fragile Iraqi state.

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## Implications

Iraq's endemic instability is neither easily diagnosed nor easily cured. The combination of domestic and regional conflicts is inextricable and mutually reinforcing. It will take years of concerted effort to reconcile Iraq's fractured political, religious, and security apparatuses with the desires of the Iraqi people, and the Iraqi state does not have the capacity to go at it alone.

However, there are signs of hope. Iraq's new prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, is a reform-minded pragmatist and a valuable partner worthy of US and international support. His calls for electoral reforms and early elections have the backing not only of the international community but also of Iraq's Shi'a religious authority and popular protest movement. The country's politically engaged youth are injecting new life and influences into Iraq's political environment and could drive necessary changes to its corrupt and stagnant political institutions.

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US policy in Iraq has previously been limited by a series of reductionist and simplistic takes on Iraq's incontrovertibly complex challenges.

- ***The United States will never get “the right guy” in office.*** The United States must instead work with figures like Prime Minister Kadhimi and any amenable Iraqis or international partners to build durable Iraqi institutions that are prerequisites for a stable, sovereign, and democratic state.
- ***The United States cannot separate the problem of defeating ISIS and countering Iran from the issues of Iraq's stability and sovereignty; Iraq's myriad concerns are inextricable and mutually reinforcing.*** The Iranian proxies that most threaten Iraqi stability derive much of their legitimacy from the counter-ISIS fight. Likewise, ISIS may gain sympathizers among Sunni populations abandoned by the state and harassed by Iranian proxy militias. The United States must combat both ISIS and the other contributing causes of Iraq's fragility to keep both problems from worsening in tandem.
- ***The United States cannot treat an institution as fragmented as the Iraqi state as a monolith.*** The United States retains vital interests in Iraq that it should pursue with the help of its Iraqi partners, even if some other Iraqi politicians are unwilling.
- ***The Government of Iraq lacks the capacity, to stabilize the Iraqi state, even when its leaders have the will.*** A renewed US policy focus on capacity building is necessary to bolster the ability of those individuals and institutions who already have the will, but not the ability, to stabilize Iraq.
- ***US policymakers cannot break Iraq's splintered political landscape into discrete ethno-sectarian blocs.*** No sect is unified. The non-sectarian popular protest movement; the push by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, Ammar al-Hakim, and others to create secular, pan-sectarian political coalitions; and the widening gulf between traditional, sectarian political elites and the populations they ostensibly represent each demonstrate the impossibility of applying a purely ethno-sectarian framework.



- *Stability does not achieve US national security interests if it is attained through authoritarianism or Iranian domination of the Iraqi state.*
- *Iraq may temporarily fall out of sight, but it must not fall out of the minds of US policymakers.* Destabilizing regional influences will continue to emanate from a destabilized Iraq so long as it remains a fragile state.

US policymakers cannot fall back on these and other simple tropes. They must instead embrace Iraq's complex reality to craft a whole-of-government response to Iraq's political, economic, and security woes.

The United States can make important and lasting institutional progress in areas like economic revitalization, the professionalization of Iraq's security forces, and support for democratic institutions. Those democratic institutions could sustain Iraq's burgeoning political movements and break the monopoly on power currently held by non-representative Iraqi elites. It remains unclear whether or not the United States can achieve this progress with its newly reduced force presence. The United States must ensure that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have the intelligence and logistical support they need to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS and to sustain Iraq's territorial integrity in the meantime. That outcome may require a redeployment of US forces to maintain a still small but sustainable support mission to counter ISIS and continue to professionalize the ISF. The United States must step up diplomatic support, stabilization assistance, and development aid to Iraq regardless of force presence. The United States

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must also support its NATO allies in continuing their ISF training mission and convince regional allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia to avoid playing out their regional conflicts in the Iraqi space.

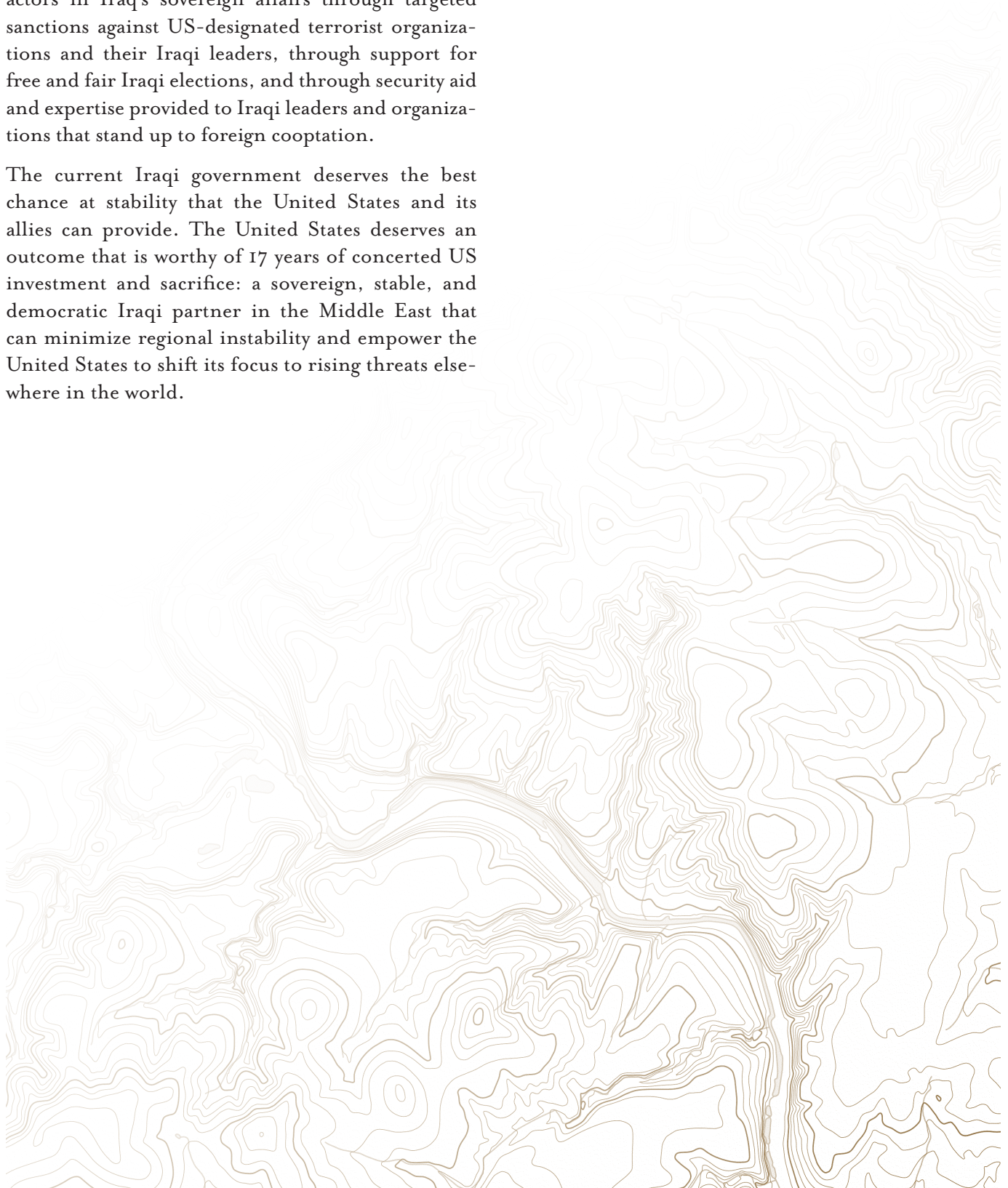
The United States must finish its advisory work to professionalize the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). A competent, professional, and uncompromised security sector is a prerequisite for the lasting political and institutional reforms the country so desperately needs. The Iraqi people are once more politically engaged, invigorated by the popular protest movement. They will be unable to fully translate that engagement into democratic reforms until they can trust their security forces to protect them from politically motivated intimidation and assassinations. The United States and its allies must therefore provide simultaneous support to Iraq's civil society and to the ISF in order to build toward durable institutional reforms. Attempting one without the other will enable compromised security forces or corrupt political elites who will further undermine Iraqi progress and stability.

A strong US-Iraqi partnership would limit the gaps provided for the United States' great power competitors to establish additional footholds in Iraq and the broader Middle East. A stronger

Iraqi state could more successfully resist predatory initiatives like China's Belt and Road that risk exacerbating Iraqi fragility. A more stable Iraq would allow less space for Russia to use it as a proxy battlefield to target the United States. With US support, a more sovereign Iraq could minimize Iranian infiltration and cooptation of the Iraqi state. Minimizing Iranian cooptation would serve a triple purpose: it would mitigate the most destabilizing element in Iraq's domestic

affairs, reduce the benefits that the Iranian regime draws from a weak and reliant Iraq, and limit threats to US forces and allies in the region. The United States can limit the interference of all three malign actors in Iraq's sovereign affairs through targeted sanctions against US-designated terrorist organizations and their Iraqi leaders, through support for free and fair Iraqi elections, and through security aid and expertise provided to Iraqi leaders and organizations that stand up to foreign cooptation.

The current Iraqi government deserves the best chance at stability that the United States and its allies can provide. The United States deserves an outcome that is worthy of 17 years of concerted US investment and sacrifice: a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraqi partner in the Middle East that can minimize regional instability and empower the United States to shift its focus to rising threats elsewhere in the world.



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