



# **Iraq After the War: A Bleak Prognosis**

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## Executive Summary

*The diagnosis in Iraq is bleak. Iran has infiltrated the weak Iraqi security and intelligence apparatus and are exerting cultural, political and covert influence across the country. It also has an extremely sympathetic government in place in Baghdad. Iraq may not yet be a fully-fledged Iranian proxy, but they will certainly be in a position to exert greater influence than the United States.*

- ◇ Iran aims to exacerbate sectarian tensions in Iraq, uniting Iraqi Shiites behind it as a political bloc and reducing national cohesion. To complement these aims, it aspires to shape a weak, fragmented Iraqi government using key figures sympathetic to Iran. The March 2010 national elections further enabled Tehran to unify its political allies in Iraq.
- ◇ When traditional statecraft fails, Iran can rely on waging terrorist campaigns within Iraq. Iranian soft power and political campaign dovetails with the arming, training and funding a variety of militias within Iraq – primarily Shiite, but occasionally Sunni – with a history of undertaking terrorist attacks. After fuelling the insurgency and exacerbating sectarian tensions, Iran then offers to mediate in disputes which it has helped create.
- ◇ The removal of US forces was an integral step in achieving Iranian strategic objectives. This objective has now been achieved.
- ◇ Iraq remains riven by sectarianism, and US troop withdrawal removes an important broker between Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds.
- ◇ The Shiite dominated government in Baghdad has become increasingly repressive against Sunnis. This

can only increase the chances of a dramatic upswing in sectarian violence in Iraq, and will likely work to the advantage of the Iranian government.

- ◇ A resurgent Iraqi nationalism could reduce sectarian strife – but Iraqi national politics are dominated by a small corrupt elite hardly animated by the domestic demands of the general population.
- ◇ By withdrawing all troops, the US also risks emboldening al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which remains a larger franchise than al-Qaeda central in Pakistan, carries out over 30 attacks a week (with a large strike every four to six weeks) and is expanding efforts to recruit Iraqi suicide bombers. AQI is still more active than any other al-Qaeda franchise.
- ◇ At present, AQI continues to be to foment sectarian violence in Iraq. While it may have the desire to attack the West, it does not appear, thus far, to have the infrastructure to support a sustained campaign abroad.
- ◇ The current Shiite repression of the Sunnis will likely be exploited by AQI to further its own agenda. AQI only operates in the political space that the Sunni political groups allow it, and the more that Baghdad represses Sunnis, the more scope the Sunnis will allow AQI.
- ◇ The withdrawal in Iraq also entails the removal of bases of operation for US Special Forces and its

drone network. As a consequence, the strategies that have been used so effectively against al-Qaeda in other parts of the world will be diluted in Iraq. With AQI already such an operationally active node, and with American withdrawal giving a freer hand to the group there, AQI could develop into an even greater threat.

- ◇ Troop withdrawal also reduces American political leverage. The US will cease to be a significant political player in Iraq, and will be factored out of important deliberations.
- ◇ In theory, Iran should be able to advance its strategic objectives via Iraq; however, this will depend on Iran's success in uniting Iraq's numerous Shiite factions into a cohesive whole. In a country riven by factionalism, this is not easy.
- ◇ With America's withdrawal, its combat troops cannot be targeted by AQI. It is therefore possible that AQ – given the tacit backing by disenfranchised Sunni tribes angry at Shiite repression – will target the Shiite-dominated, Iran-backed government in Baghdad. Iranian funded militias would fight back, introducing the potential for Iraq to spiral back into critical levels of terrorism and sectarian violence.



# Introduction

The United States has withdrawn all combat forces from Iraq, bringing to an end one of the most divisive and controversial foreign interventions in American history. At its October 2007 peak, 171,000 American soldiers served in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Now, the US retains only a diplomatic presence in the country, including security contractors working at the Baghdad embassy. Approximately 200 American military personnel will train the Iraqi armed forces in the use of F-16 fighter jets, tanks and other military equipment Iraq has purchased from the US.<sup>2</sup>

The speed of the American drawdown is partly due to President Obama's election pledge to withdraw all combat troops (although Obama had been somewhat flexible in his definition of what the withdrawal would entail and how quickly it would proceed). However, the primary reason for this dramatic and rapid drawdown was the US' failure to renegotiate a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), with talks breaking down over the issue of providing legal immunity to American troops that would have remained in the country. Leaving American troops without legal protections in a country with a developing judicial system was not an option the government was willing to accept, and left little choice but to commence a full withdrawal.<sup>3</sup>

This was an unexpected development – during lengthy negotiations over the summer, both Baghdad and

Washington had expected US troops to remain in the Anbar and Kurdish provinces in northern Iraq beyond 2011.<sup>4</sup> Some observers have characterised the breakdown of the SOFA negotiations as a diplomatic failure by Obama.<sup>5</sup>

US withdrawal would ideally be cause for celebration, proof of the stability of the Iraqi government and its ability to cope with the remnants of the insurgency without assistance from the US. After expending much blood and treasure (4,473 combat deaths<sup>6</sup> and, according to the Congressional Research Service, almost \$802bn<sup>7</sup>), the very least the US should expect is a close strategic ally in Baghdad.

The reality today is significantly more troubling. There are fears that Iran has been strategically strengthened by the chaos caused by the US invasion and subsequent hasty withdrawal. The Islamic Republic has taken advantage of the diminished US presence to expand its ties with the Iraqi political class and militant groups to heighten its influence and undermine American interests. Furthermore, while al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) may not be the deadly force it was at the height of the Iraqi sectarian violence in 2006 – primarily because of the effectiveness of the US military's counterinsurgency strategy – it remains a grave threat domestically.

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1 'Iraq Index Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq', Brookings, 30 November 2011, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index.pdf>

2 'Sunnis and Shiites Head Toward a Showdown in Iraq', Daily Beast, 4 December 2011, available at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/12/04/sunnis-and-shiites-head-toward-a-showdown-in-iraq.html>

3 'Pentagon leaders defend withdrawal of US from Iraq', Associated Press, 15 November 2011, available at [http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gB3UyxvO9fNK3dwJnO\\_KQOeIP86g?docId=3bc4e6a5d89f45eb9a0b1c92aad14ad4](http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gB3UyxvO9fNK3dwJnO_KQOeIP86g?docId=3bc4e6a5d89f45eb9a0b1c92aad14ad4)

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4 'Sunnis and Shiites Head Toward a Showdown in Iraq', Daily Beast

5 For example, see Charles Krauthammer, 'Who lost Iraq?', Washington Post, 4 November 2011, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/who-lost-iraq/2011/11/03/gIQAUCUqjM\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/who-lost-iraq/2011/11/03/gIQAUCUqjM_story.html); and Frederick Kagan, 'Defeat in Iraq', Weekly Standard, 7 November 2011, available at [http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/defeat-iraq\\_604179.html?nopager=1](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/defeat-iraq_604179.html?nopager=1)

6 'Faces of the Fallen', Washington Post, available at <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/national/fallen/>

7 Amy Belasco, 'The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11', Congressional Research Service, 29 March 2011, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>

Now that the troops are being removed, finding ways to manage the response to these twin threats will pose a significant challenge for the Obama administration in 2012. Accordingly, this briefing assesses the impact of US withdrawal on:

- ◇ Iraqi politics, especially in terms of Iranian influence over the Iraqi government and Iranian-directed insurgency
- ◇ Iraqi security, in the context of the threat posed by al-Qaeda in Iraq

## Assessment A: Iranian influence is significant

Iran appears to pose the most pressing threat to Iraqi security, sovereignty and US interests in Iraq. Iran has long pursued an interventionist policy, and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 presented it with a strategic opportunity to expand its influence. Under the guise of various charities and diplomats, the Qods Force – the paramilitary and espionage wing of the Iran’s Revolutionary Guard – quickly dispatched operatives into Iraq in the early years of the war.<sup>8</sup> They have been growing in influence since. An Iraqi deputy prime minister and critic of the US invasion, Saleh Mutlaq, has gone as far as to say that US withdrawal is ‘disastrous’ and ‘irresponsible... They are leaving Iraq completely occupied by Iran.’<sup>9</sup>

US cables from 2009 revealed that the government judged Iran’s goal to be the development of ‘an economically dependent and politically subservient Iraq’.<sup>10</sup> To achieve this, Iran aims to exacerbate sectarian tensions, unite Iraqi Shiites behind Iran and reduce national cohesion. To complement these aims, Iran aspires to shape a weak, fragmented Iraqi government using key figures sympathetic to Iran.

8 ‘In Iraq, A Very Busy Iran’, Wall Street Journal, 29 November 2010, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703994904575646911886138950.html>

9 ‘Sunnis and Shiites Head Toward a Showdown in Iraq’, Daily Beast

10 Ibid.

Iran will then work with Shiite and Kurdish parties, encouraging Shia parties to cooperate closely in a bid to consolidate its control. Iran’s closest allies are the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), ‘created at height of the Iranian revolution as a vehicle for its foreign policy’;<sup>11</sup> the Badr Organization (ISCI’s former militia); the Islamic Dawa Party; and groups associated with radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Iran also possesses a variety of soft power tools it can utilise in Iraq, including significant trade, business and economic links. For example, Iran supplies approximately 10% of Iraqi electricity<sup>12</sup> and Shiite shrines in Iraq have been renovated by companies owned by the Revolutionary Guard.<sup>13</sup> As of November 2009, financial assistance from Tehran to Baghdad stood at between \$100 - \$200 million a year, with some \$70 million going to the ISCI.<sup>14</sup>

When traditional statecraft fails, Iran can rely on waging terrorist campaigns within Iraq. Iranian soft power and political manipulation dovetails with the arming, training and funding of a variety of militias within Iraq – primarily Shiite, but occasionally Sunni – capable of undertaking terrorist attacks. By fuelling the insurgency and exacerbating sectarian tensions, Iran then offers to mediate in disputes it has helped create. Some analysts have suggested that this indicates that Iranian policy has been ‘poorly coordinated’ and ‘incoherent’, as its attempt to gain political influence has been contradicted by its support of domestic militant groups.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Toby Dodge, an expert on Iraq and reader in international relations at the London School of Economics, argues that Iran has actually ‘played a

11 Toby Dodge, interview, 23 November 2011

12 Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, ‘Iran’s Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran’s Whole-of-Government Approach’, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2011, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus111.pdf>

13 ‘In Iraq, A Very Busy Iran’, Wall Street Journal

14 Ibid.

15 Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, ‘Iran’s Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran’s Whole-of-Government Approach’

spectacularly astute strategic game, by encouraging anti-systemic forces – guerrillas, terrorists – and creating or buying influence from President Talibani down.<sup>16</sup> It is a strategy that the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point described as ‘two-faced: offering Iraq’s government moral support while arming militias that undermine governmental authority; funnelling advanced weapons to attack its enemies, providing humanitarian aid for the Iraqi people and encouraging free elections, but attempting to manipulate their results’.<sup>17</sup> According to Joel Rayburn, a fellow at the National Defense University and a US Army Lieutenant Colonel with 19 years of experience in intelligence and political-military affairs, ‘[Iran’s] relations with Iraqi groups are backed by the implied threat of force. The Iranians have shown they are willing to kill or intimidate, which makes their threat of force credible.’<sup>18</sup> Dodge believes that ‘Iraqi security and intelligence services are weak and deeply penetrated by Iran, who still have cultural, political and covert influence across the country’.<sup>19</sup>

An integral step in achieving Iranian strategic objectives was the removal of US forces, a goal shared by both Iran and Sadr. As far back as October 2008 General Ray Odierno, then Commanding General of the US forces in Iraq, said that US intelligence reports showed that Iran was bribing politicians in a bid to prevent the extension of a SOFA.<sup>20</sup> This objective has now been achieved, and Sadr has stated that even America’s diplomatic presence is a legitimate target for attack – arguing that ‘they are all occupiers and resisting them after the end of the agreement is an obligation.’<sup>21</sup> The continued presence of US contractors

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16 Dodge, interview, 23 November 2011

17 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, ‘Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and “Other Means”’, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 13 October 2008, available at [http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/22704/Felter\\_Iranian\\_Strategy\\_in\\_Iraq.pdf](http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/22704/Felter_Iranian_Strategy_in_Iraq.pdf)

18 Joel Rayburn, interview, 1 December 2011

19 Dodge, interview, 23 November 2011

20 ‘Iran Interfering in U.S.-Iraq Security Pact, General Says’, Washington Post, 12 October 2008, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/12/AR2008101201871.html>

21 Frederick W. Kagan and Kimberly Kagan, ‘Iran’s win in Iraq’, Los Angeles Times, 27 October 2011, available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe->

and trainers in Iraq presents an opportunity for militants linked to both Sadr and Iran to initiate terrorist attacks in order to strain relations between the US and Iraq.

Another watershed event for Iran was the March 2010 national elections,<sup>22</sup> the fallout of which the Washington Institute for Near East Policy described as ‘a milestone in Tehran’s efforts to unify its Shiite political allies in Iraq’.<sup>23</sup>

The election gave the Ayad Allawi’s mainly Sunni Iraqiya a 91-89 victory over Nouri al-Maliki’s mainly Shia State of Law coalition. The Kurds and Sadrists were left with smaller shares, meaning that the only two parties capable of building a coalition to get the 163 seats needed to form a government were Iraqiya and State of Law. From the Iranian perspective, Maliki was regarded as ‘the lesser of two evils by Iran’, with the primary indigenous threat in Iraq coming from Allawi.<sup>24</sup>

Iran convinced both Sadr and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to back Maliki (Assad had previously supported Allawi). With the momentum behind Maliki, a government of national unity was eventually formed with al-Maliki as prime minister and Allawi as chairman of the newly created National Council for Strategic Policies. However, al-Maliki had to make concessions in order to get over the finishing line – the deal with the Sadrists being potentially the most significant, with their gaining an array of ministries and effectively ceding control to them in southern Iraq.<sup>25</sup> The new government was formed in November 2010 – although top posts – such as ministries of defense, interior and

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[kagan-iraq-pullout-20111027,0,4920995.story](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/10/27/AR2011102704920995.story)

22 For an excellent overview of this process, see Kenneth Pollack, ‘Something is Rotten in the State of Iraq’, The National Interest, 24 August 2011, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/print/article/something-rotten-the-state-iraq-5743>

23 Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, ‘Iran’s Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran’s Whole-of-Government Approach’

24 Dodge, interview, 23 November 2011

25 Pollack, ‘Something is Rotten in the State of Iraq’

national security – remained unfilled. At present, they are run by either Maliki or Shiite allies.<sup>26</sup>

As a consequence, Iran has achieved many of its strategic goals. It has amassed enormous influence in Iraq, and has helped remove the US presence. The question now is what Iran aims to do next. For example, Iran has contacts with Shia radicals in other countries with a significant US presence, such as Bahrain: if it can build a big enough coalition of Shiite radicals, it will perhaps aim to not only drive out US presence from Iraq, but the entire region.

## Assessment B: Iranian influence is overblown

The US administration – at least publicly – has argued that fears of excessive Iranian influence in Iraq are unfounded. It has been keen to stress that withdrawal from Iraq does not mean US commitment to Iraq is dwindling or that Iran will be strategically strengthened.

The White House has requested that the military and intelligence communities develop proposals to counter Iranian arming of militant groups, with the CIA expected to retain a presence after the US military has departed.<sup>27</sup> Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has stated that 'We have about 40,000 troops in that region ... along with the fact that we have 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. We will always have a force that will be present and that will deal with any threats from Iran.'<sup>28</sup> Panetta has also spoken of his confidence in the Iraqi government's ability to counter Iranian interference, stating that 'What we've seen in the past, when we've had concerns about what Iran was doing, was that

Iraq itself conducted operations against those Shiite extremist groups.'<sup>29</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that 'no one, most particularly Iran, should miscalculate about our continuing commitment to and with the Iraqis going forward.'<sup>30</sup> US diplomats in Baghdad assessed in 2009 that Iraq's fears of being portrayed as 'Iranian lackeys' would constrain Tehran's influence.<sup>31</sup> Brett McGurk – who has served on the national security staffs of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama – also recently accentuated the positives concerning US withdrawal, playing up the Iraqi – US military partnership (although also conceding that Iran retains great influence in Baghdad).<sup>32</sup>

During a December 2011 visit to Washington, Maliki was keen to stress the sovereignty of Iraq 'above all else' in the face of Iranian pressure. Conceding that Iran 'had some good positions and influence at certain junctures', he stated that American troop withdrawal 'ends all [Iranian] thinking, calculations and possibilities for interference in Iraqi affairs under any other banner...There will no longer be an argument for Iran to interfere in Iraqi affairs [directly] or through some [political] blocs and parties.'<sup>33</sup>

A number of academics also question the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq. Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations states that Tehran 'is on the margins' of the debate and its policy in Iraq a 'shambles'. He argues that Iran's 'governing template has no constituency among Iraqi Shiites', who 'understand that their country's divisions require a different governing structure and the assertion of autonomy from [Iran]'. Takeyh argues that sectarian conflict 'has

26 'Iraq Factions Spar Over Security Force', Wall Street Journal, 7 November 2011, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204621904577013192867907640.html>

27 'U.S. Eyes Covert Plan to Counter Iran in Iraq', Wall Street Journal, 6 September 2011, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903895904576547233284967482.html>

28 'After Iraq pullout, U.S. serves a reminder to Iran', Washington Post, 24 October 2011, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/after-iraq-pullout-us-serves-a-reminder-to-iran/2011/10/24/GIQAU7dGCM\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/after-iraq-pullout-us-serves-a-reminder-to-iran/2011/10/24/GIQAU7dGCM_blog.html)

29 'Pullout Raises Iran Concerns', Wall Street Journal, 24 October 2011, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203911804576649391607558796.html>

30 'After Iraq pullout, U.S. serves a reminder to Iran', Washington Post

31 'In Iraq, A Very Busy Iran', Wall Street Journal

32 Brett McGurk, 'Not an End, but a Beginning in Iraq', Washington Post, 3 November 2011, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/not-an-end-but-a-beginning-in-iraq/2011/11/03/GIQA1JBJM\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/not-an-end-but-a-beginning-in-iraq/2011/11/03/GIQA1JBJM_story.html)

33 'Excerpts: Nouri al-Maliki', Wall Street Journal, 12 December 2011, available at [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203430404577092512821791908.html?mod=googlenews\\_wsj](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203430404577092512821791908.html?mod=googlenews_wsj)

largely ceased', that Iranian policy of seeking good relations with Iraq while also supporting domestic militants is no longer sustainable, and Tehran's 'inability or unwillingness to resolve the fundamental contradictions in its approach have done much to alienate the Iraqi government and a populace eager to put the burdens of conflict behind it.<sup>34</sup> Michael Totten, the journalist and author, has also questioned the leverage that Iran possesses in Iraq, writing that 'if Iran tries to destabilize it with terror militias again, Iraq will fight back. And the Iraqis know how to fight back effectively now after so many years of American training.'<sup>35</sup>

Analysts have also cited some of the problems facing Iran thought to compromise its ability to exert influence – for example, the challenge of how to best handle Sadr and his Promised Day Brigade (the successor to the Mahdi Army). While Iran has supported Sadr, his militia's goals and desire for power has led to disagreements with both Iran and Iranian allies such as the ISCI. This has undermined efforts to enhance Shiite unity – a key policy aim of Tehran.<sup>36</sup> If Iran cannot forge this Shiite consensus, its strategy in Iraq may ultimately fail.

## **Sectarianism versus nationalism**

In order to understand which of these assessments is more accurate, the degree of Iraqi sectarianism in Iraq must be clarified.

Broadly, Sunnis reject the Shia dominance of the central government, as well as the creation of an autonomous Kurdistan that would control primarily Sunni Arab territory, including Kirkuk. Shiites are determined to keep the Sunnis – and the Baathism

with which they were associated under Saddam Hussein – out of power. Despite their dominance in government, they continue to view the Sunnis with suspicion. The Kurds – who are primarily Sunni – still aspire to achieve an independent state of Kurdistan, beyond the regional autonomy they currently enjoy. The US military has previously been able to contain these tensions to a certain extent, acting as a broker between the various interests. Yet according to Rayburn 'with the US military gone, it is more likely that each of the three major communal groups – Sunnis, Shias and Kurds – will overreach in trying to consolidate their positions.'<sup>37</sup>

One manifestation of sectarianism is the worrying trend of Shiite authoritarianism beginning to emerge in Baghdad, with Shiite factions consolidating control in Iraq by removing Sunnis from power. For example, Maliki has begun to purge Iraqi forces of Sunni officers – under the guise of either removing Baathist loyalists, 'early retirement', or accusations of terrorist activities. Army and police officers have also been arrested on charges of plotting to overthrow the government. Two pro-American Iraqi generals who rejected closer cooperation with Iran were removed from their posts. Sunni academics in Tikrit and Mosul universities have been fired.<sup>38</sup> These anti-Sunni arrests have been supported by the Sadrists.<sup>39</sup>

Such measures appear to be linked to the US withdrawal. In Kirkuk, Babel, Salahuddin and Basta, hundreds of arrests took place on 24 October, three days after President Obama's announcement of the US withdrawal.<sup>40</sup> In Diyala Province, Sunni officers were removed shortly after US soldiers departed.<sup>41</sup> (The Iraqi deputy interior minister has attributed this to an administrative matter unrelated to the US withdrawal.)

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34 Ray Takeyh, 'Iran's Waning Influence on Iraq', Washington Post, 3 November 2011, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/irans-waning-influence-on-iraq/2011/10/28/gJQA2O0mgM\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/irans-waning-influence-on-iraq/2011/10/28/gJQA2O0mgM_story.html)

35 Michael J. Totten, 'Did we Lose in Iraq? No, and Here's Why', The New Republic, 28 October 2011, available at <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/96703/iraq-withdrawal-victory-iran-surge?page=0,1>

36 Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 'Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach'

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37 Rayburn, interview, 1 December

38 Kagan, 'Defeat in Iraq', Weekly Standard

39 'Sunnis and Shiites Head Toward a Showdown in Iraq', Daily Beast

40 Kagan, 'Defeat in Iraq', Weekly Standard

41 'Iraq Factions Spar Over Security Force', Wall Street Journal



One of the dismissed Sunni officers has asserted that the arrests were aimed at gauging the Sunni reaction, and that 'if there's no reaction, then you'll see more marginalization of [Sunnis] until there are not even street sweepers from this sect'.<sup>42</sup> Sunni rivals in the Salahuddin Province have responded by refusing to hand over former army offices and Baathists.<sup>43</sup> They have claimed they are underrepresented and called for the creation of an autonomous region – legal under the Iraqi constitution – that could include the provinces of Salahuddin, Nineveh, and Anbar.<sup>44</sup>

Shiite-led repression of Sunnis emanating from Baghdad can only increase the chances of a dramatic upswing in sectarian violence in Iraq. It is now suspected that Saudi Arabia is beginning to increase its support for Sunnis in Iraq – with former Iraqi officials suggesting that Sunni calls for an autonomous region in Iraq are being made at the behest of the Saudis.<sup>45</sup> With Iranian influence in Baghdad well-established, Iraq risks becoming a proxy battleground between the regions' two major powers.

Perhaps the only force which could reduce Iraqi sectarianism is Iraqi nationalism. Gen. Ray Odierno, current Chief of Staff of the US Army who also served as Commanding General, United States Forces – Iraq, has said: 'I truly believe that Iraqis are nationalists. They want to choose on their own what's best for their country, and they don't want somebody else to decide what's in their best interest.'<sup>46</sup> Brian Fishman, Counterterrorism Research Fellow at the New America Foundation, points out that the Iraqi Shia fought against Iran during the Iraq-Iran war<sup>47</sup> and polling suggests that a significant numbers of Iraqis (including Shiites) regard Iran as a negative influence on Iraqi

politics.<sup>48</sup> This proves that Iran has not been entirely successful in unifying the Shiites as a political bloc.

Yet Dodge also raises the issue that 'nationalism is deeply damaged because of sectarianism', and that Iran 'encourages the sectarian split; it minimises popular mobilisation and maximises their influence.' Most significantly, the Iraqi ruling elite support and take advantage of this sectarian split. According to Dodge, '75% of the ruling elite came into Iraq after 2003, and most focus on sectarian politics.' However, he also points out that the vote for Allawi in the 2010 election was nationalist, 'coming mainly from Sunnis, but also fair representation of Shia.'<sup>49</sup> This is a somewhat encouraging development for a rise in Iraqi nationalism. However, Iraqi national politics remain dominated by a small corrupt elite hardly animated by the domestic demands of the general population. Nationalism is of little use if Iraqi political elites are apathetic to national causes. Ultimately, sectarianism continues to dominate Iraqi politics – a feature which plays into the hands of Iran.

## Al-Qaeda

The US does not just face the prospect of strengthening Iran's hand by withdrawing all troops: it also risks emboldening the Islamic State of Iraq – aka al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

AQI suffered a major military defeat at the hands of the US and Iraqi tribal groups following the Anbar Awakening of late 2006 and the US 'surge' of January 2007. Their defeat in 2007 and 2008 has forced the group to evolve.<sup>50</sup> At the peak of its powers in 2006, AQI controlled territory and established governing

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42 'Iraq Factions Spar Over Security Force', Wall Street Journal

43 Ibid.

44 'Sunnis and Shiites Head Toward a Showdown in Iraq', Daily Beast

45 Ibid.

46 'Iran Interfering in U.S.-Iraq Security Pact, General Says', Washington Post

47 Brian Fishman, interview, 11 November

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48 For example, see 'Iran Gets Negative Reviews in Iraq, Even from Shiites', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 May 2010, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3199>; Numerous other polls cited in Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali, 'Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach'

49 Dodge, interview, 23 November 2011

50 Brian Fishman, 'Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq', New America Foundation, August 2011, available at [http://security.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Fishman\\_AI\\_Qaeda\\_In\\_Iraq.pdf](http://security.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Fishman_AI_Qaeda_In_Iraq.pdf)

structures. It levied taxes, recruited insurgents, established safe houses and became a dominant political power on the local level. However, it also overreached its capacity, alienated domestic support through terrorist attacks in Iraq and left itself vulnerable to US counterinsurgency operations. Today, it follows the operating procedure of a more traditional al-Qaeda (AQ) franchise – acting as an underground organisation focused on launching intermittent large scale attacks.<sup>51</sup> In the last 18 months, several senior leaders have been killed,<sup>52</sup> and some analysts argue that AQI is no longer a factor in Iraq.<sup>53</sup> One chief difficulty in assessing the strength of AQI is the ambiguity surrounding the percentage of attacks carried out by the organisation itself, rather than various Sunni or Shia insurgent fronts. Collecting such data is clearly problematic, and while it may exist at a classified level it is not available in the public domain.

Given AQI's diminished strength, it is tempting to dismiss the group as relatively uninfluential. However, Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Buchanan, the American military's top spokesman in Iraq, recently stated that between 800 – 1,000 militants remain in AQI, 'from terrorists involved in operations to media to finance to fighters.' This makes it a larger franchise than AQ central in Pakistan<sup>54</sup> (with whom there remains interaction – although the US' August 2011 killing of Atiyah Abdul Rahman, the key link between the AQ core and all its regional franchises, will significantly hinder this). The group still carries out over 30 attacks a week (with a large strike every four to six weeks) and is expanding efforts to recruit Iraqi suicide bombers.<sup>55</sup> As of July 2010, the US military assessed that AQI

had approximately 200 'hard core' fighters operating in Iraq.<sup>56</sup> However, as Fishman states, 'AQI is largely forgotten in the general discourse' when discussing the threats posed by al-Qaeda,<sup>57</sup> with their franchise in areas such as Yemen increasingly more significant. However, Rayburn regards AQI remains 'more active than any other al-Qaeda franchise'.<sup>58</sup>

At present, AQI's priority is to foment sectarian violence in Iraq. AQI has generally not focused on attacking western targets – although following the US withdrawal, it is possible that they will take advantage of the diminished US military presence to strike American interests abroad.<sup>59</sup> However, even if AQI is broadening its horizons, there remains a large gap between its will and capacity. Rayburn points out that 'AQI has the will to carry out operations beyond Iraq, such as in Kuwait, Dubai or Abu Dhabi. However, it does not appear, thus far, to have the infrastructure to support attacking the West — though it has the desire.'<sup>60</sup>

Al-Qaeda (along with Iran), will claim credit for US withdrawal, which will practically impact AQI's potency in a variety of ways. It is possible that AQI will attempt an array of spectacular attacks to coincide with the departure of American troops. Intelligence sharing between the US and Iraq – a key factor in reducing terrorist attacks – will be reduced. One particular concern is the night time abilities of the Iraqi special forces, which are presently reliant on US intelligence for not only the location of militants but also helicopter transportation. As a US official put it, 'It won't be as clean as when we were helping them do it. You will probably have raids go wrong, wrong house, wrong target.'<sup>61</sup>

51 Fishman, 'Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq'

52 For example, see 'Al Qaeda's two top leaders killed in Iraq raid', Reuters, 19 April 2010, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2010/04/19/uk-iraq-violence-alqaeda-idUKTRE6313KS20100419>; 'Third Iraqi al-Qaeda leader killed: Iraq military', BBC News, 20 April 2010, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8632239.stm>; 'Al-Qaeda "military leader Abu Suleiman killed in Iraq', BBC News, 25 February 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12581313>

53 Totten, 'Did we Lose in Iraq? No, and Here's Why'

54 'How many al Qaeda can you live with?', Reuters, 15 September 2010, available at <http://blogs.reuters.com/afghanistan/2010/09/16/how-many-al-qaeda-can-you-live-with/>

55 'Leaving Iraq, U.S. Fears New Surge of Qaeda Terror', New York Times, 5 November 2011, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/world/middleeast/leaving-iraq-us-fears-new-surge-of-qaeda-terror.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/world/middleeast/leaving-iraq-us-fears-new-surge-of-qaeda-terror.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

56 'Leaving Iraq, U.S. Fears New Surge of Qaeda Terror', New York Times

57 Fishman, interview, 11 November

58 Rayburn, interview, 1 December

59 Fishman, 'Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq'

60 Rayburn, interview, 1 December

61 'Leaving Iraq, U.S. Fears New Surge of Qaeda Terror', New York Times

The American departure will also increase the likelihood of an uptick in sectarian violence. The current Shiite repression of Sunnis, seemingly politically directed from Baghdad, is an ominous development, as it is precisely this that AQI will look to exploit. According to Rayburn, 'in the past, AQI has operated in the political space that the Sunni political groups allow it. The further into corner Maliki and Kurds push the Sunnis, the more space in which AQI will be allowed to operate.'<sup>62</sup> If current Sunni repression continues, this political vacuum is exactly

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62 Rayburn, interview, 1 December

what will be created.<sup>63</sup> If AQI continue to operate in Iraq it is because they are allowed to do so by a Sunni population resentful at Shiite repression and unwilling to clamp down on the AQ insurgency. The possibility of this situation arising would have been greatly reduced had the US agreed a new SOFA and continued to act as a mediator in Iraqi internal affairs.

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63 Ibid.

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## Conclusion

US cables from 2009 revealed the government's assessment that Iran's goal was to create 'an economically dependent and politically subservient Iraq'.<sup>64</sup> This appears to be a likely outcome. Iraq may not be an Iranian proxy, but the Islamic Republic will certainly carry greater political weight than America.<sup>65</sup> Iraq also remains a highly divided country with a strong AQ franchise and the potential to slide back into sectarian bloodletting. Except now, there is no American military presence to dampen the violence. The prospects for Iraq are bleak.

The US has attempted to argue that it can promote its interests in Iraq from various bases in the region. Perhaps President Obama believes this to be the case – but ultimately the evidence suggests that this is a highly unrealistic assessment. For example, while the US may be able to carry out limited intelligence collection and precision strikes, the Iraqi military would not be provided with advanced counter-IED

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64 'In Iraq, A Very Busy Iran', Wall Street Journal

65 Fishman, interview, 11 November

capabilities.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, the US cannot significantly affect political calculations or safeguard its interests in Baghdad from its base in Kuwait. The withdrawal in Iraq also means there are no bases in Iraq for US Special Forces and its drone network – and that the strategies that have been employed so effectively against al-Qaeda in other parts of the world will be diluted in Iraq.<sup>67</sup>

Troop withdrawal reduces political leverage. The US will cease being a significant political player in Iraq, and ultimately will be factored out of deliberations. This decline in America's political influence began even prior to withdrawal – the formation of the current Iraqi government did not serve American or democratic interests, as America did not push hard enough for the electoral victor, Allawi, to be given chance to govern or attempt to form a coalition. This showed a lack of US interest that also diminished its ability to negotiate

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66 Frederick Kagan, 'The Dangers to the United States, Iraq, and Mideast Stability of Abandoning Iraq at the End of 2011', Critical Threats Project, May 2011, available at [http://www.criticalthreats.org/sites/default/files/pdf\\_upload/analysis/FKagan\\_Iraq\\_Threat\\_Assessment\\_Dangers\\_of\\_Abandoning\\_Iraq.pdf](http://www.criticalthreats.org/sites/default/files/pdf_upload/analysis/FKagan_Iraq_Threat_Assessment_Dangers_of_Abandoning_Iraq.pdf)

67 Ibid.

a SOFA that allowed for even the smallest of residual forces. As a result, US influence is on the wane, and Iran's on the rise.

Furthermore, American withdrawal means it cannot help quell sectarianism – the key variable which allows AQ to flourish. AQI may not pose a threat to the US homeland as of yet, but it clearly poses a threat to the future security of Iraq. Perversely, the US is reducing its pressure on AQI as it continues its aggressive war against AQ networks in Pakistan, Yemen and the loosely affiliated Imaarah Islamiya (f/k/a al-Shabaab) network in Somalia. With AQI already such an operationally active node, and with American withdrawal giving a freer hand to the group, it could once again develop into a significant threat.

The undemocratic and often brutal nature of the Iranian government means that their influence in Iraq – a nation that thousands of Western troops have fought and died to liberate – is deeply unfortunate. However, a degree of Iranian influence is, as Fishman says, the 'natural order of politics'.<sup>68</sup> Iran is Iraq's immediate neighbour, has long pursued an interventionist policy there, is a regional power and thus will inevitably influence Iraq to a certain degree. Not all of this influence needs to be necessarily negative – for example, if a more equal trade

relationship between the two were to develop it would be a clearly positive step.

Yet the US has essentially conceded defeat in the fight for influence in Iraq. In theory, Iran will now be better placed to expand its global reach. However, its ability to do so may be dependent on whether Tehran can succeed in uniting its various Shiite factions into a cohesive whole. In a country riven by factionalism, this is not necessarily a *fait accompli*.

The other potential roadblock to Iranian ambitions may lie in the most unusual of places – AQ. With America's withdrawal, US combat troops cannot be targeted by AQI. It may become more ambitious, and try to strike Western interests, but it currently lacks the operational capacity. It is therefore possible that AQ – given the tacit backing by disenfranchised Sunni tribes angry at Shiite repression – will greatly increase its attention on the Shiite-dominated, Iran-backed government in Baghdad. If so, Iranian-funded militias would fight back. If this were to play out, there is the real potential for Iraq to spiral back into critical levels of terrorism and sectarian violence. The US may be leaving Iraq just when the troubles there are about to recommence.

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68 Fishman, interview, 11 November