

Iran Continues to Outmaneuver the United States in Iraq

Written by Zachary Keck

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ZACHARY KECK, JUL 23 2011

When U.S. troops marched triumphantly into Baghdad in April 2003, Iranian leaders watched on apprehensively, fearful they would be the next to meet the fate of their nemesis Saddam Hussein. Proof enough of this was Tehran's grand bargain proposal to the United States, which effectively ceded everything but the Islamic Republic's existence to Washington. With America's military power seemingly unchallengeable, however, the Bush administration felt little need to compromise with a founding member of its self-proclaimed "axis of evil."

Since then Iran has outmaneuvered the United States in Iraq at every turn. It has done this through its tremendous foresight as to the direction Iraq was heading at different moments, as well as its keen understanding of its American adversary. These past successes have, in turn, given Iran the upper-hand vis-à-vis the United States as Washington and Tehran battle to define the future of Iraq.

After their grand bargain was ignored by Washington, Iranian leaders began actively sabotaging U.S. efforts to pacify Iraq by unleashing their Shia Iraqi allies, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, against U.S. forces. Iranian leaders quite rightly calculated that Iraq's sectarian and ethnic divisions made it fertile ground for explosive instability.

This strategy proved enormously successful. In the first years of the war, for instance, U.S. officials and military leaders were convinced that Iran was facilitating much of the violence against U.S. and allied troops in Southern Iraq. Another mark of Iran's success was the Congressional-mandated Bipartisan Iraq Study Group's (ISG) recommendation that the United States needed to open a dialogue with Iran (and Syria) in order to withdraw responsibly from Iraq. It's worth noting that, although the Bush administration rejected much of the ISG's advice, and instead opted to surge troops, opening up a dialogue with Iran was one of the few of the ISG's recommendations it did heed.

While many Western critics charged that Iran's activities in Iraq demonstrated its aggressive designs, Tehran's motivations during this time were almost certainly defensive in nature. Convinced that the Bush administration intended to overthrow the Islamic Republic by force, Tehran believed that the best way to stymie these efforts was to tie the U.S. down in Iraq. The more Iraq became a quagmire for the United States, Tehran rightly calculated, the more difficult it would be for the Bush administration to convince the American public to undertake another huge military operation. The best outcome for Tehran would be one in which Iraq so soured Americans on war that Iran would have enough breathing to develop its nuclear program to the point where it would never find itself as vulnerable to American power as it had been in 2003.

By 2006, with Iraq in civil war and American public discontent over the war at fever pitch, Iran had largely accomplished these ends. It therefore began focusing on the longer-term interests it had in a post-Saddam Iraq. These interests were, at the very least, an Iraq that couldn't threaten Iran to the degree Saddam had and preferably an Iraqi government that accommodated Iranian interests. An Iraq locked in a perpetual state of civil war, however, served neither of these ends. Although if Baghdad remained in disarray it couldn't threaten Iran conventionally as Saddam had, Iraq's instability could easily flow over to Iran. Moreover, such an Iraq could never serve as a reliable or useful ally of Tehran.

Thus, while initially skeptical, Iran largely came to welcome the United States and Iraqi efforts to stabilize the country.

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This was especially true after Washington and Baghdad signed the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in November 2008. SOFA reassured Iran in two fundamental ways. First, it set a deadline for U.S. troops to withdrawal, which presumably would leave a power vacuum that Iran would be in the best position to fill. Additionally, SOFA stipulated that the United States could not use Iraq as a base from which it launched attacks against other countries, a constant Iranian fear.

Iran therefore began reigning in the attacks of its Shia allies. It likely did so because it believed that keeping violence down was the best way to ensure that the United States abided by the withdrawal timetable established by SOFA. Meanwhile, Tehran also worked to shore up and strengthen its ties with important Iraqi Shia powerbrokers- most notably, Muqtada al-Sadr- in order to better position itself for a post-U.S. Iraq. This strategy met its objectives as the new Obama administration in Washington initially pledged to maintain the pace of withdrawal set by its predecessor.

Yet this strategy was always intended to be temporary. Thus, by the middle of 2010, using the political stalemate that followed Iraq's inconclusive March election, Iran began to reassert itself into Iraqi politics. Specifically, Iran was able to end the six-month post-election political deadlock by using its ally Sadr's influence to sway the election in Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's favor. That Iran played an intricate role in this move seems certain given the historical animosity between Sadr and al-Maliki. In any case, when Sadr returned to Baghdad from Iran in January 2011, he and his Iranian allies were essentially Iraq's kingmakers.

This development-along with the Obama administration's belief that Iran's regional influence was significantly enhanced as a result of the Arab Spring- convinced the administration to recalibrate its Iraq strategy. Consequentially, Washington began scrambling to get the Iraqi government to agree to allow some U.S. troops to remain in the country after the end of 2011, the date set by SOFA. It has since accelerated these efforts.

To counter the Obama administration's new initiative, Iran has pursued a multi-faceted approach. First, it's unleashed its Shia allies against the U.S. military again; subsequently, June became the deadliest month for U.S. troops in Iraq since May 2009. This violence is most likely targeted at two audiences: first, the increasingly war-weary American public, who wants Washington to focus its attention on domestic problems such as the government's fiscal imbalance and the economy; second, ordinary Iraqis who fear a return to the chaos of 2005-2006. To placate these Iraqis, Iran has also been portraying itself as capable of replacing the United States as the ultimate guarantor of Iraq's stability. This has coincided with Iran pledging greater economic and technological cooperation if the U.S. leaves the country. Most important of all, however, is the leverage Iran has no doubt been wielding behind the scenes to pressure Iraqi lawmakers to acquiesce to its demands. Iran's influence over Iraqi lawmakers is certainly great given the decisive role it played in bringing the current government in Baghdad to power.

Still, there's no way to know what Iraqi lawmakers will ultimately decide. Most likely, Baghdad will try to steer a middle course in order to continue reaping the benefits of its relationship with both Washington and Tehran. In practical terms, this would probably translate into the United States being allowed to leave some, but not all, of the 10,000 troops it wants to keep in Iraq. Still, in the short term at least, this outcome favors Tehran who would have little trouble working around such a small number of troops in exercising influence in Iraq.

In short, Iran's past successes in Iraq has given it the upper-hand in its latest battle with the United States over Iraq's future. It is therefore poised to continue its success.

Zachary Keck writes on U.S. foreign policy for *Examiner.com*. His commentary has appeared on the websites of *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *the Diplomat*, and *Small Wars Journal*, among others. You can follow him on Twitter @ZacharyKeck.

About the author:

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Zachary Keck is assistant editor of *The Diplomat*. He Tweets from @ZacharyKeck and can be contacted through his website.