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PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Iran's Threat to Iraq Is a Threat to the US

by Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood and Erfan Fard

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence recently [released](#) its annual threat assessment, in which Iran is mentioned no fewer than 60 times as part of a “diverse array of threats” facing the US. Iran is moving toward its goal of full domination of Iraq and the expulsion of the last remaining US forces from that country, a result that would represent a great success for the Islamic Republic.

The annual threat assessment released in April by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence states that “Iran will remain a regional menace with broader malign influence activities.” The Islamic Republic is expected to continue those malign activities all over the globe, but its focus will likely remain its immediate regional surroundings—particularly Iraq. Tehran views Iraq as a key country over which it must establish and maintain complete supremacy.

Iran has been a highly troublesome actor in the Middle East ever since it was taken over by a religious dictatorship in 1979. Through its proxies as well as through other means, it has destabilized an already volatile region. Saudi Arabia and Israel have spent years expressing concern over Iran's hegemonic ambitions, which also threaten the US and its allies.

Iran's hateful anti-Israel rhetoric will continue for as long as the regime is in power. Tehran will maintain support for its proxies, like Hezbollah and Hamas, in order to threaten Israel and Israeli interests in the region. At the same time, the Islamic cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran over dominance and power in the Middle East will also go on, leading to continued insecurity and instability in the region. The two countries are unlikely to engage in a full-blown war, but will rather fight one another in other parts of the Middle East.

The Saudi-Iranian conflict will see an increasingly aggressive Riyadh and a willingness in Tehran to pour more and more of its energies and resources into sectarianism, radicalism, and terrorism. Iraq will likely be the unfortunate victim of these geopolitical and political-security conflicts.

Ever since the fall of the Baathists, Iraq has been victimized by Iran. The Islamic regime is highly [active](#) in that country. The Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF) and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) monitor and manipulate Iraq's internal affairs. Iraqi sovereignty is assaulted by Iran on a daily basis.

Iraq has great political and religious significance for Iran, not least with respect to the axis of Qom-Najaf, the two main Shiite centers of the world. For Iran, controlling Iraq means controlling a large Shiite-majority country. Iraq is not only of geopolitical interest to Iran but fits its ambitions of exporting the revolution and sending Shiism throughout the world.

Ever since the US invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iran's main objective in Iraq has been to expel the Americans from Iraqi soil. The IRGC-QF, which plays an [instrumental](#) role in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, has been given this critical mission. By supporting different factions, militias, and politicians, as well as by conducting covert operations inside Iraq, Iran aims to destabilize the country to such a degree that the people's faith in the American forces will be diminished.

If it succeeds at expelling all remaining US forces from Iraq, Iran will be in full control of the country, which would represent a major political and security victory for the Islamic regime. Iran has shown itself to have the upper hand in Iraq. This was apparent as long ago as 2005, when American troops lost control over the country. The CIA has said that most terrorist groups and militias in Iraq are under the control of the IRGC-QF.

While Iran-backed groups fomented chaos in Iraq, the CIA established closer contacts with the Kurdish authorities and intelligence apparatus. The Islamic regime in Iran also has close contacts among the Kurds, however, specifically the [Barzani](#) clan. The Iranian MOI in Iraq is believed to be based in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.

As Tehran's support for Iraqi Shiites grew, Iraqi Sunnis were increasingly sidelined. Both Ankara and Riyadh tried, at least initially, to support the Sunnis of Iraq, but neither could compete with Tehran's dominance over the country. This is especially true of Ankara, as Iran has occasionally [backed](#) the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK against Turkey.

It is essential for Tehran that Iraq remain unstable and chaotic. A stable Iraq would mean Iranian operatives could no longer conduct operations in and through Iraq, as they do today. Iraq is a safe haven for Iranian intelligence and a base from which Iran conducts covert operations.

Control over the Iraqi government would also mean Iran can fulfill its dream of exporting the Shiite revolution. At the same time, the regime can use Iraqi territory for the training of Shiite militias as well as to create a buffer zone for its own security.

The Iranian embassy in Baghdad is instrumental to the regime's objectives. The embassy, which is led by Brig. Gen. Iraj Masjedi, a high-ranking member of the IRGC-QF, is the main center of Iranian covert operations in Iraq. For as long as US forces remain in Iraq, the IRGC-QF's and the embassy's main objective will be to conduct operations against them.

The future of the JCPOA will be highly significant in terms of Iran's behavior in Iraq. As soon as the US rejoins the deal, Iran will likely intensify its operations there. Iraq will be used by the Islamic regime in Iran as a base from which to conduct operations all over the Middle East, as well as a means of blackmailing both the US and arch enemy Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Republic's attempts to acquire military nuclear capability, use of terrorist proxies to destabilize the region, and grave human rights violations make it the greatest threat to peace and security in the region.

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