



Iraq Pushes Back Against Iranian Influence

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Suddenly, Iran's clerical regime doesn't seem quite so powerful. In recent weeks, Iran's increasingly aggressive regional behavior (including its involvement in the September 14th attack on Saudi oil facilities), and the tepid response to this activity from the United States and its allies, has conveyed the unmistakable impression that Tehran is on the march. But now, Iranian leaders are experiencing some unexpected problems closer to home, in neighboring Iraq.

Over the past week, mass protests have spread throughout Iraq, with thousands of citizens taking to the streets in a widening – and increasingly bloody – grassroots revolt. The fury of the protestors is directed at a lot of things. It is a response to the notorious mismanagement and disfunction of the Iraqi government, which current Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has failed to tackle resolutely. It is likewise about the country's endemic corruption and graft, which watchdog groups like Transparency International have ranked as among the worst in the world. But the protests are about something else as well: Iran's pervasive political interference on the territory of its western neighbor.

The spark that ignited the current ferment was the Iraqi government's decision, in late September, to sack the country's deputy counterterrorism chief, Lt. Gen. Abdul Wahab al-Saadi. A decorated military commander, al-Saadi had become a folk hero of sorts for his leading role in the Iraqi fight against the Islamic State terrorist group. But his growing grassroots popularity made al-Saadi a political threat to the country's established political elites, who successfully agitated for his ouster.

So, too, did Iran. Tehran is rumored to have weighed in privately in favor of the general's firing, which it saw as a challenge to its preferred political candidates in Baghdad. That move was seen by Iraqis as an escalation of Iran's political meddling, and an unacceptable erosion of their sovereignty. This, in turn, has helped fuel a wider grassroots backlash directed at least partly against Iran's extensive political and strategic footprint on Iraqi soil.

Iran's response to the Iraqi unrest has been defensive to date. The Islamic Republic has shut down multiple border crossings, further complicating the annual Shi'a pilgrimage to the southern Iraqi city of Karbala this month. But Tehran hasn't yet done much else of substance.

This paralysis underscores a larger problem now facing the Iranian regime: in a very real sense, Iran is losing Iraq. A survey of Iraqi public opinion carried out last year by the Alustakilla Group, a private research firm, found that the Islamic Republic's favorability rating among Iraqi Shiites had plummeted from 88 percent in 2015 to 47 percent last fall. During the same period, the study found, unfavorable attitudes toward Iran among this constituency rose from six percent to 51 percent. This means, according to Alustakilla's president, Mungith al-Dagher, that "the majority of Iraqi Shiites currently have negative attitudes toward Iran."

That represents a real change. Following the start of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran stepped into the vacuum created by Saddam Hussein's ouster to create an extensive network of proxies, political clients and subservient politicians. And although it was actively opposed by the country's Sunnis and Kurds, this state of affairs prevailed for more than a decade. But in recent years, more and more Iraqis – including Iraqi Shia – have come to view Iran not as a reliable partner but a threat to their sovereignty. The firing of al-Saadi has thus catalyzed a trend that has been emerging for some time: that of Iraq's body politic rejecting the foreign organism of Iranian influence.

For Washington, Iraq's ferment presents an important opportunity. Today, the Trump administration remains committed to a "maximum pressure" campaign against the Islamic Republic. Yet, at least so far, it has not made much headway in rolling back Iran's extensive regional influence.

The protests now underway in Iraq provide an opening for Washington to start to do so. By officially pressing Baghdad for the same things the protestors are now demanding – namely, greater governmental accountability, meaningful political reform, and more economic opportunity – the U.S. can help encourage real change in Iraq. In the process, it might also be able to begin pulling Iraq out of Iran's orbit.

That, it is clear, is an outcome both the U.S. and the Iraqi people desire.

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President at the American Foreign Policy Council