

How far can Baghdad become independent of Iranian influence?

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The overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 dramatically changed the Middle East's strategic landscape and redefined the regional distribution of power. Two years earlier, the United States had led the NATO invasion of Afghanistan in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks perpetrated by al-Qaeda. By 2004, the two pre-eminent regional counterweights to Iran had been removed inadvertently by American invasions.

While Iranian political ambition has yet to firmly establish itself in Afghanistan, its influence in Iraq has had a defining effect on the country's development. However, though Iraq's Shia resurgence continues, all indicators point to it assuming a fresh course, more independent of Tehran and more in step with the country's growing nationalism.

For Iran, the historical US military presence on its borders in Iraq and Afghanistan has taken skilful management, especially after its complicity in toppling both Saddam and the Taliban. Critically, Tehran needed to ensure the United States did not develop a strategic long-term presence in both countries but it also had to prevent former regime remnants from making a way back into power.

Iraq, with a Shia majority population liberated from the staunchly secular but also anti-Iranian, anti-Shia regime of Saddam, quickly became a key area of influence for Iran. The breakdown of security and social institutions following the US invasion made religious identity and association central to political affairs. Shia politicians, while welcoming of the invasion that toppled



Undercurrents. Iraqi Shia men carry a giant poster bearing the portrait of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during a demonstration in the capital Baghdad. (AFP)

Saddam, sought to take over as quickly as they could while conceding as little as possible to the Americans, influenced in large part, no doubt, by friends in Iran.

Using ties to Iraqi Shia opposition groups cultivated throughout the 1980s, Tehran pursued a multi-pronged strategy to pursue its objectives in Iraq. Iran successfully reached out to a broad collection of pro- and anti-US secular and religious Shia political groups, effectively positioning itself as kingmaker, a role it arguably enjoys to this day.

There are signs that the extent and depth of Iran's influence will soon be checked by a resurgent Iraqi nationalism among Shia political

forces. With general elections in Iraq next year, key players are presenting markedly independent narratives for their election campaigns and political future.

Iran's allies in Iraq, its critics declare, have delivered corrupt and

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elitist governments that have not been politically inclusive of the country's different ethnic and religious communities. They have created and used sectarian tensions for political gain, overseen the militarisation of Iraqi society and created dependence on militias to fight Iraq's wars, sought to effectively return Iraq to authoritarian rule and readily take orders from Tehran.

Ammar al-Hakim, a close ally of Iran during the US occupation, recently stepped down as leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, one of the country's main alliances of Shia religious parties, and established the National Wisdom Movement. Another past ally, Muqtada al-Sadr, who has been crit-

ical of successive governments in Baghdad, visited Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in August, surprising many observers. Al-Sadr has called for the Iranian-dominated al-Hashed al-Shaabi – a coalition of local militias that his Mahdi Army once worked closely with – to be disbanded and for Iraq to move towards a new democratic future and balanced foreign relationships with neighbours.

Iran's influence will remain deep for the foreseeable future, and its allies in Iraq will likely keep a fairly firm grip on political power. Ultimately, the traditional Shia clerical establishment has always been dismissive of the revolutionary Shia ideology of Iran, and its velayat-e faqih (rule by the clerical establishment) model – though not to the point of hostility – on theological grounds.

Iran has been aware of these undercurrents in Iraqi politics for some time. However, when Ayatollah Ali Khamenei dispatched Mahmoud Shahroudi to iron out differences between Tehran and its Iraqi allies, as well as attempt to reunify Iraq's Shia politicians, he was unable to meet with either al-Sadr or Iraqi cleric Ali al-Sistani.

The combined popular appeal of al-Sadr, especially, as well as Hakim, and their support together with Sistani for a new coalition government headed by incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi are becoming increasingly likely. As such, these developments do not signal an end to Iranian influence or its political excommunication from Iraqi politics. However, the future will be one in which Tehran will need to compromise. More immediately, Iran may find its preferred candidate, former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, might fail at the ballots yet again.

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Shahroudi goes to Iraq with Khamenei's succession in mind

The rise of Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi seemed over in 2015 when he withdrew from the election for chairman of the Assembly of Experts, the clerical body that chooses Iran's supreme leader. News that Shahroudi faced investigation for financial irregularities suggested a manoeuvre by the judiciary chief, Sadeq Larijani, a rival for the succession to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, then 75.

However, Shahroudi's recent trip to Iraq, aimed at shoring up relations with Iraqi Shia leaders, suggests he remains close to Khamenei and a strong candidate to succeed him.

The Iraqi visit countered moves with which Saudi Arabia abandoned years of shunning Iraq since the 2003 US-led invasion produced a Shia-led government friendly to Iran. June and July saw Saudi visits by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Interior Minister Qasim al-Araji.

Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was received in Jeddah in July by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz and, on his return home, demanded that once the Islamic State (ISIS) threat ends, the government disband the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), Shia militias that often coordinate with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The Saudis reopened the Arar

border crossing and announced consulates in Najaf, Basra and Mosul. This is partly business but mainly politics. At the Arar opening, Abdulaziz al-Shammari, Saudi chargé d'affaires, spoke of "a great history, Arabism and blood between us."

Sceptics cite Iranian influence based on geography and the Shia Islam shared by 55% of Iraqis and 90% of Iranians but they struggle to explain why Iraqi governments since 2003 have refused to endorse the 1975 Algiers border agreement, seen in Iraq as favouring Iran.

While some Iraqi Shias took Iran's side during the 1980-88 war and decamped to Tehran, al-Sadr's father, Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, stayed home and was assassinated in 1999. Muqtada after 2003 espoused an Iraqi nationalism stirring poorer Shias and often mocking exiles returning from Iran.

Al-Sadr's call for scrapping the PMFs' strikes at Tehran's Iraq policy. Even more serious for Iran is speculation that Ayatollah Ali Sistani, Iraq's leading Shia cleric, will rescind his 2014 fatwa that Iraqis take up arms against ISIS. Now 87, Sistani rejects velayat-e faqih, the theory placing a Shia cleric in Iran's top executive post. Many Iraqi Shia clerics say their country, with shrines of seven of 12 Shia imams, is the sect's natural centre.

Cue Shahroudi, appointed by

Khamenei to be chairman of the Expediency Council, a state arbitration body. Shahroudi is unique in Iranian politics with a large office in Najaf, city of his birth, and a wide Iraqi network. His rise in Iran, after leaving Iraq in 1980, was linked to Khamenei's succession to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

"In 1988, Shahroudi changed his nationality to Iranian, when he was still spokesman of the [Iraqi] Daw'a Party," said Saied Golkar, visiting assistant professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. "He became Shahroudi, from Shahroudi in north-eastern Iran and his rise was dramatic as judiciary chief 1999-2009 and now head of the Expediency Council. After Khomeini died in 1989, Shahroudi acted as Khamenei's teacher."

This was important, as many clerics believed Khamenei was unqualified to be leader, and created a close relationship. "I suspect Shahroudi's trip to Iraq was a response to Muqtada's welcome in Saudi Arabia," said Golkar. "Because of Shahroudi's background, Khamenei may think he can be a bridge between the two countries. Shahroudi speaks Arabic fluently, much better than he speaks Farsi. He sounds like an Arab."

However, with 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections looming and Kurdish pressure for independence encouraging talk of an

alliance of 'nationalistic' Shia and Sunni Iraqi Arabs, Shahroudi's visit was less than successful. While he met with Abadi and Hadi al-Amiri, a PMF commander, both al-Sadr and Sistani eluded him.

Shahroudi's role in Iraq could still help him succeed Khamenei. While Iraqi birth might stop him winning a popular vote in Iran, the choice lies with the 88 clerics of the Experts Assembly, albeit influenced by the bureaucracy, parliamentarians, senior clerics and the IRGC.

Shahroudi's lack of a clear political base in Iran might be an advantage, said Golkar. "He is less likely to come into conflict with Ayatollah Khamenei and it may also help him with the Revolutionary Guards, who may think he can be easily influenced," Golkar said. "Meanwhile, the ageing clergy in the assembly may prefer Shahroudi as part of an older generation."

At 69, Shahroudi is older and more senior as a cleric than 56-year-old rivals Larijani and Ebrahim Raeisi, head of the Imam Reza shrine. Shahroudi has also been cultivating the IRGC. He recently appointed as an aide Ahmad Vahidi, former commander of the IRGC al-Quds brigade and former defence minister, and he was accompanied in Iraq by the wily Mohsen Rezaei, Expediency Council secretary and former IRGC commander.

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