

# Iran's Militias in Iraq



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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he story of the 21st century has, at least in part, been the story of what has happened to Iraq, and what has happened within Iraq.

After the attacks on America on Sept. 11, 2001, and after the regime of Saddam Hussein refused to allow inspectors to continue their investigation of his alleged weapons of mass destruction programs, Iraq was invaded by an international coalition in March 2003. The armed forces of the regime were quickly defeated, and the occupation of Iraq began.

Over the following decade and a half, the international effort to rebuild and reconstitute Iraq was fatally undermined by two factors. The first was the Sunni terrorist campaign of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which later became the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, better known in the region by its Arabic acronym Daesh, which began major expansion in 2014.

The second was the Shia terrorism and militia violence largely coordinated and directed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, or IRGC. Some of these militias operated with the direct sanction of the then Iraqi prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki,



Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (L) with former Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki (R) in Tehran. Many now concede that Al-Maliki was an Iranian proxy from the beginning, with a sectarian agenda shared with the IRGC. AFP

under the catch-all title of Special Groups. In the war against Daesh, their centrality and importance only grew.

The two militant forces fed off each other. Their enemies were largely shared; both fought against the international coalition forces within Iraq, and Iraqi authorities. As often happens in terrorist insurgencies, extremists from each sectarian group grow symbiotically. So too in Iraq.

Daesh declared itself a caliphate, claiming rightful control over the land of Iraq. At its greatest extent it controlled much of Iraq and Syria, with Mosul as its Iraqi capital and millions of Iraqis living under its theocratic tyranny.

After a difficult military campaign, which cost Iraq tens of thousands of lives and a great

**Iraqi politics was so dysfunctional that a new start was not possible**



View of the dome of the destroyed Nuri mosque in the old city of Mosul, eight months after it was retaken by Iraqi government forces from the control of Daesh fighters. AFP

deal of money and damage, by 2017 Daesh had been defeated. The cities it temporarily controlled were taken back at great cost, and the terrorist group returned to the eastern desert, reverting to a smaller — although still dangerous — insurgency, which continues to menace Iraqis to this day.

At the same time as Daesh was being fought and defeated, the other threat to Iraqi prosperity and independence was growing. Under the guise of mobilising the citizenry to defend Iraq, the state allowed the raising of popular militias, many of which were coordinated by pre-existing IRGC front-groups and sectarian militias.

In the campaign against Daesh, these militias fought viciously. They were at the forefront of the destruction of Tikrit and Ramadi. They have also fought under IRGC direction in Syria and Yemen.

Now Daesh has been defeated, the Shia militias have taken over the Iraqi state. Their dominance augers badly for the future of Iraq.

## THE IRAQ WAR

The Iraq War was and continues to be a profoundly disruptive event in the history of Iraqi politics. The political kaleidoscope was completely reordered overnight, when the

Baath party regime of Saddam Hussein was overthrown and replaced with a new political landscape. The regime of Saddam Hussein, a one-party dictatorship under which opposition movements of all types were banned, and Shia resistance, particularly in the south of the country, was crushed brutally and repeatedly, both bred insurgent opposition domestically and fostered it abroad. A beneficiary and organiser of this opposition was the Islamic Republic of Iran.

After the overthrow of Saddam, Iraqi Shia who fought for Iran in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War returned to Iraq as Iranian agents. Among them were Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, a longstanding IRGC agent and militia leader, who rose within the Iraqi state as a member of parliament, the Iranian proxy Badr Corps, and the People's Mobilisation Forces, or Hashd Al-Shaabi<sup>1</sup>.

Iraq played an important part in the Iranian "axis of resistance" — an alliance of forces intended to oppose Saudi Arabia, the US and Israel in the Middle East. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, militia groups had been seeded and built in countries including Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria<sup>2</sup>.

The Iraq War and the deposition of Saddam Hussein created an opportunity for Iranian militias and IRGC planners to monopolise



the newly opened Iraqi public square. In the occupation which followed, Iranian and militia influence grew and mutated. Its effects were sudden, and they were violent.

## MILITIAS AND EFPS

The civil war in Iraq was brutal and vicious. International forces, led by the US, attempted to build an Iraqi government and state, which was assailed from all sides. American missteps meant Iraq became a fertile ground for recruiting militia members<sup>3</sup>, and Iran took full advantage of the situation.

Iranian proxies and IRGC projects sprang back into life with full force, and new bodies, with faces old and new in charge, were brought into being. With Iranian support, the Iraqi Shia community — a majority of those who live in the country — created a plethora of political parties, including the old Dawa party, which had supported the Islamic Revolution and received Iranian support in return. Together with the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, it formed an electoral coalition to contest Iraq's first post-Saddam elections in 2005.

But the electoral adventures of these parties were nothing compared to the involvement of their armed wings in the civil conflict. Many of the Iranian-led and influenced Shia parties ran militias that actively attempted to undermine the democracy in which they sought to participate. A spate of terrorist bombings by Al-Qaeda and its Sunni jihadist

US troops train Iraqi and Kurdish soldiers during a military exercise in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. The tripartite force marked a new chapter in the US military's role since the 2003 invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. AFP

allies, first on government and American targets, and later on the Shia population, in mosques and marketplaces, fuelled recruitment to armed groups<sup>4</sup>.

Over the course of the US occupation of Iraq, these militia groups grew in importance. At first, the prevailing American understanding was that they were an almost-organic response to Sunni jihadism. Very quickly after their emergence, however, it became clear that these were something else entirely. They were not forces of self-protection. Instead, these groups fought and killed Americans in large numbers. The militias took over areas of the country and ran them as private fiefdoms, and they did so at the behest of the Iranian IRGC, and under its command, in furtherance of Iran's broader regional strategy.

Most emblematic of the Iranian presence in Iraq was the dramatic proliferation of explosively formed projectiles, or EFPS. These weapons accounted for a significant percentage of all American and international casualties in the war — at least 196 American deaths, and hundreds more injuries, including many amputations<sup>5</sup>.

EFPS, easily manufactured with a minimum of equipment, used the force of an initial detonation to transform a metal plate made of steel or copper into a high-speed molten “dart” capable of penetrating armoured vehicles.

These weapons were more deadly than more

**To Tehran, allies are never permanent. The interests of the regime of the Islamic Republic are the only things that matter**

standard improvised explosive devices, which served as roadside bombs constructed by terrorist groups without state backing. The Iranian regime, through its IRGC Quds Force, provided the technology and the know-how to Shia militia groups to allow them to build or import these more sophisticated weapons, which served as tell-tale marks of Iranian backing for Shia insurgency and terrorism<sup>6</sup>.

## AL-SADR AND BADR

Muqtada Al-Sadr was the new face. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, he was not yet 30. Yet he was the heir to a great political movement, the Sadrist movement, championed by his father, grandfather and more than a handful of clerical forebears. A section of Baghdad had been named Saddam City in honour of the dictator; after his overthrow, it was renamed Sadr City after Muhammad-Sadiq Al-Sadr, after Muqtada's father.

The young Al-Sadr became a firebrand. Under the pretense of supporting an “Islamic Democracy,” his men armed themselves, formed a militia group — the Mahdi Army — and set about fighting the nascent Iraqi state, the American and global force of occupation, and every other armed group in sight. Al-Sadr's support in the poorer areas of Baghdad was obvious, and throughout the war and since he has used his numbers to muscle in on government turf, including storming the Green Zone multiple times.

In the intensifying civil war between 2004 and 2007, the Mahdi Army appeared increasingly well-trained and well-armed as it fought with the forces of the US<sup>7</sup>. Official sources indicated that although the Mahdi Army was not counted among Iran's most obvious regional proxies, it was nevertheless trained alongside one of them, Hezbollah, and Al-Sadr himself was a frequent visitor to Tehran, where he liaised with the religious leaders of the Iranian regime<sup>8</sup>.

The Badr Organisation was far older, “Iran's oldest proxy organisation in Iraq.”<sup>9</sup> The military arm of the Iranian-founded Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, its formation predated the fall of Saddam by decades. The Badr Organisation was not Iran's only proxy at this stage of the occupation and civil war, but it was the primary one. Badr and its affiliates fought and killed many in the international coalition attempting to reconstruct Iraq, including numerous American troops.

Both the Mahdi Army and the Badr Corps were forces of terror and destruction. They disrupted daily life in Iraq and made it more difficult for any government to emerge atop a shattered country with broken infrastructure and dysfunctional politics. Yet both organisations had designs on politics themselves.

The Badr Organisation was and is led by Hadi Al-Amiri, whose party, like him, plays a double game of militancy and politics. While Badr forces fought both the Americans and the Iraqi central government at Iran's behest, Al-Amiri himself sought to rise in the parliament and the government.

Similarly, Muqtada Al-Sadr's party repeatedly contested elections. After the defeat of Daesh in particular, Al-Sadr denounced violence, appeared to distance himself from Iran (although in practice this is suspect), and attempted to act as a parliamentary kingmaker in democratic and explicitly Iraqi national elections.

Many American and international policymakers chose to work with these parties. They saw them as the inevitable avatars of Iraq's Shia majority, and they believed it when their leaders said that they were for democracy and civic peace. This was almost certainly a mistake<sup>10</sup>.

As can be seen, from Nouri Al-Maliki of the Dawa Movement to Sadrists of more recent times, Iranian proxies have participated in both parliament and government — but hardly ever with constructive intent.

## ELECTIONS AND COALITIONS

The greatest threat to Iraq's elections was a test it failed early in the war. By 2010, Nouri Al-Maliki had been prime minister for four years. Initially, he was considered a compromise candidate, and a weak political figure with little personal following. By 2010, it was understood that far from being a transient political figure, Al-Maliki was a significant and Machiavellian force within Iraqi politics.

Many now concede that Al-Maliki was an Iranian proxy from the very beginning, with a sectarian agenda shared with the IRGC. It was even suggested by the biographer of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Quds force, that Maliki embarked on a nakedly sectarian policy at Soleimani's and Iran's explicit direction<sup>11</sup>.

At any rate, Al-Maliki's time in power exacerbated sectarian tensions, and prepared the way for the collapse of the Iraqi state before the emergence of Daesh.

As the first half of the last decade progressed, and more Arab regimes struggled in the face of the reformist wave of the Arab Spring, Al-Maliki's government became increasingly authoritarian and violent.

Iraqi commentators broadly disliked the way that Al-Maliki was able to cling to power after a lost election in 2010. They claimed that this was accomplished only because Al-Maliki had the support of both Iran — which had never wavered — and America, which was consistent despite increasing signs that Al-

Maliki was working with the IRGC to pursue its broader regional policy. When the US withdrew its forces in 2011, it lost its ability to rein in Al-Maliki or to promote alternative prime ministerial candidates.

The Badr Organisation — formally apart from Al-Maliki's Dawa Party but a member of his coalition — entrenched its place at the head of government departments. And the Iraqi military, under Al-Maliki's command, was accused of launching a massacre of Iranian dissidents in Iraq, reportedly at the behest of the Iranian state<sup>12</sup>.

If one accepts the central claims of Al-Maliki's critics, he ran a sectarian and uncompromising government that alienated many.

By 2014, Washington had noticed that Al-Maliki had strengthened the authoritarian nature of his rule, had increasingly begun to govern without the approval of national minorities, and had begun to be considered another regional tyranny ripe for overthrow by Sunni Arab youth. The Frontline program on America's PBS interviewed Iraqi Sunnis about alleged mistreatment at the hands of Al-Maliki's government<sup>13</sup>.

Iraq's former finance minister, Rafi Al-Issawi, told the program: "I think in 2011, everyone in Iraq thought that after the American withdrawal everything would be built (around) a national unity Iraqi government.

"Unfortunately, very rapidly, just soon after the American withdrawal, everything started to collapse. All the commitments that Maliki gave to the politicians in what's called the Erbil Agreement — that's the agreement that formed the government at that time — nothing from that agreement was fulfilled or implemented."

Al-Maliki, added Al-Issawi, "had to get rid of all Sunni politicians who were capable of saying no to him, his policies or his behavior. So it's the story of attacking, intimidating, marginalizing, whatever you want, of Sunni politicians."

Such an environment was ripe for collapse, and that collapse came with the advent of Daesh in January 2014.

## DAESH

The rise of Daesh in January to June 2014 was accompanied by widespread Iraqi defeat and humiliation. Major cities such as Mosul and Fallujah fell rapidly to the terrorist organisation, and at their peak Daesh forces were fewer than 100 km from Baghdad. Daesh had captured Iraqi army bases and stockpiles of equipment, as well as routing or killing thousands of Iraqi troops.

This was the effect in part of the alienation the Sunni Iraqi north and west caused by Al-Maliki's divisive and sectarian government,

and partly the result of corruption and incompetence becoming embedded within the architecture of the Iraqi state.

It is an irony that, when Daesh rose in Iraq, it did so because Iran had hollowed out Iraq's government and institutions — and that the reaction to this was a supercharging of Iranian power and influence within Iraq.

The threat to the survival of Iraq was significant. It looked as though the national capital was at risk. The army had buckled and collapsed at the emergence of the new threat, and by 2014 US armed forces were long gone, although at the request of Al-Maliki's government the US Air Force began strikes on the Daesh advance.

But the primary response of the Iraqi government to the Daesh threat was not obvious. Rather than building national institutions and cross-sectarian institutions, the Iranian influence at the top of government led to something else; the empowering and institutionalising of the militias into the heart of the war effort — and the creation of a more powerful umbrella of militias, run by the same Iranian proxies who had openly paraded their IRGC links for decades.

## HASHD AL-SHAABI

In June 2014, in coordination with Ayatollah Al-Sistani, the Iraqi government announced the creation of a new umbrella of militia groups convened to fight Daesh. It was to be called Hashd Al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilisation Forces — PMF — and was to consist of a group of pre-existing militia groups. Among the first seven official parties to this agreement were known Iranian IRGC proxies, including the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (led by Qais Khazali, leader of the IRGC-led Special Groups), and the Hezbollah Brigades (Kata'ib Hezbollah).

These new national structures were led by militia leaders with decades-long links to Iran's IRGC. At the head of the PMF until his death alongside his Iranian boss in 2020 was Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, Soleimani's Iraqi deputy.

From the beginning, the PMF represented a continuation of the Special Groups' work on Iran's behalf, but this time under the umbrella of the Iraqi state<sup>14</sup>.

By now, Al-Maliki had been ousted under international pressure<sup>15</sup>. He was later found liable by an Iraqi inquiry for the fall of Mosul<sup>16</sup>. Iranian foreign operations forces were, American sources suggested, more concerned with winning the war against Daesh than keeping their tainted man in power.

PMF forces fought with undisciplined and savage brutality. They were essential in the bloody campaigns against Daesh in the

Iraqi Shiite fighters march in Baghdad during a military parade marking Al-Quds International Day, an initiative started by the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini that calls for Jerusalem to be returned to the Palestinians. AFP



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Members of the Popular Mobilisation units - paramilitary forces dominated by Iran-backed Shiite militias - walking in Tikrit after Iraqi forces retook the northern city from Daesh. AFP

predominately Sunni areas of northern and western Iraq, in which American air power was used to back up the militiamen in bloody sieges that levelled large sections of Iraqi cities and allegedly wiped out hundreds of civilians for each Daesh member killed.

The most noteworthy of these battles were the bloody sieges of Ramadi, Tikrit and Mosul, in which the civilian death tolls were significant and the PMF and militias comprised large proportions of the collective Iraqi force.

In effect, many of the Iraqi battles of the counter-Daesh campaign took on the character of Iranian foreign operations. Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, took on more battlefield roles in the war against Daesh. He also became more visible, posing for photographs with Iraqi soldiers and militia leaders. Soleimani did more than command Iran's proxy army — he made himself seem essential to the whole Iraqi war effort, including in the autonomous Kurdistan Region. He flew into an Erbil practically under siege and struck a deal with Masoud Barzani, offering Iranian support, Iranian officers and Iranian air power<sup>17</sup>.

## THE SHADOW COMMANDER

Less than half a decade later, Soleimani was essential in the violent repression of an unauthorised Kurdish referendum on independence from Iraq. Soleimani travelled to meet Kurdish leaders after the vote at the head of an Iraqi federal army dominated by Iranian-supported militiamen. He “offered a mix of threats and inducements, including money and access to

oil-smuggling routes,” according to Dexter Filkins of the New Yorker<sup>18</sup>.

The threats were the most significant. If the Kurdish parties resisted too heavily, their cities would be burnt to the ground. Some Kurdish units fought the federal army, but others retreated or laid down their arms. The result was the seizure of Kirkuk by Iraqi federal forces and Iranian militias.

Iran has since threatened full-scale invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan multiple times<sup>19</sup>.

This is the lens through which to view Soleimani's role in the period of the war against Daesh, and the IRGC and Iranian role in Iraq more broadly. To Tehran, allies are never permanent — unless they are Iraqis with ties to Iran proper. All other partners are temporary and eventually discarded. The interests of the regime of the Islamic Republic are the only things that matter.

This is the story of Soleimani's career in Iraq, which ended in 2020 when he travelled, like a head of government, to meet the Iraqi prime minister and died, alongside his deputy, Al-Muhandis, in a US air strike as their convoy left Baghdad airport<sup>20</sup>.

It is possible to overstate Soleimani's role in the war, but not to overstate the extent to which the PMF became dominant within Iraq. It was the major beneficiary of the wartime period, allowed to accumulate numbers, arms and positions of political influence. Even after the war, when Ayatollah Al-Sistani declared that it was time for a general demobilisation, the PMF and its constituent militia members were not formally wound down and continued to work in the interests of Iran and the IRGC.

And very soon after Mosul fell in 2017 and Iraq declared victory in its war at the end of that year, it became clear that the militias were taking over the Iraqi state.

## TAKING OVER THE STATE

As the war against Daesh progressed, the influence of the IRGC and the Iranian state over Iraq became more overt and undeniable. Soleimani occupied a significant and publicised battlefield role. He had regular meetings not only with Iraqi military figures — many of whom were in IRGC-led militias — but with the Iraqi president and prime ministers.

Meanwhile, less publicised, the Badr Organization took over the Iraqi interior ministry and the militias of the PMF entrenched themselves at the heart of the Iraqi government and the economy.

The nature of the war itself was widely interpreted in Iraq's north and west as being fought to specifications favorable to Iran and its allies within Iraq. The majority of the civilians killed in the sieges of Iraqi cities were in Nineveh and the Kurdistan Region, and most of them were Sunni Arabs and Kurds.

The primary victims of Daesh's genocidal campaigns were the Yazidi people — who were subjected to horrific violence — Kurds and Sunni Arabs, whose homes and lives were either destroyed by Daesh or in the campaign to defeat them.

Many Sunni leaders saw the hand of Iran in what they considered the war's unnecessary brutality, including the near-levelling of Tikrit, Ramadi and Mosul's Old City.

Militia figures famed for their sectarianism and brutality, including Abu Azrael of the Kataib Al-Imam Ali militia, who was filmed committing war crimes and became a hero in the process, increasingly came to dominate the popular image of the war as a proxy conflict by which Iran killed Iraqi Sunnis, Arabs and Kurds, and the other parties, such as the US, concentrated on defeating Daesh.

## CORRUPTION AS FUEL

As the militias entrenched themselves within Iraqi government, they took their place in a network of corruption that has increasingly disfigured the Iraqi state since elections were first held in 2005.

Recent reporting has indicated a theft of almost \$2.5 billion of tax revenues from the state's coffers, withdrawn from government accounts via shell companies. An investigation by The Guardian reported that “the scheme was allegedly masterminded by a well-connected businessman and executed by employees in the tax commission, who enjoyed the support of an Iran-aligned political faction called Badr.”<sup>21</sup>



Quds Force commander Major General, Qassem Soleimani, attending a meeting of Revolutionary Guard's commanders in Tehran. A US airstrike assassinated the 'shadow commander' on January 3, 2020. AFP

In recent years, both during the war against Daesh and after the replacement of Haider Al-Abadi, the Iraqi state has become vulnerable to what experts call “state capture.” This is where powerful interests within a state begin to monopolise state resources, using them to enrich supporters, fund military expansion, or to menace the remaining forces of the state.

As Sajad Jiyad has argued in a Century Foundation Report, corruption hollows out the Iraqi state and ensures that the country remains poor and underdeveloped. Many factions benefit from corruption, and all parties to corruption of this kind are working in favor of their own narrow interests, and against the interests of the Iraqi people. “Iran-backed, US-backed, self-styled reformers, supporters of the status quo — all factions benefit from corruption schemes.”<sup>22</sup>

In the \$2.5 billion heist, The Guardian reported, the Badr Organisation “controls senior appointments to the tax and customs commissions, according to seven sources,” and was able to remove two possible critics by the use of violent threats<sup>23</sup>.

Those violent threats pervade the Iraqi political scene — and exist on the back of a campaign of murder that has dominated Iraqi politics for a number of years, and continues to reflect Iran's IRGC domination of the Iraqi political scene.

## A CAMPAIGN OF MURDER

Iran's militiamen rule Iraq not only with the threat of violence, but through a campaign of murder.

In 2020, the Iraqi scholar Hisham Al-

Hashimi was murdered in Baghdad. He was not the first to suffer that fate. In that year, many politically involved Iraqis were the victims of a large number of killings, which began in response to major protests from October 2019.

Since then Iraq's youth have continued to protest against 20 years of war and government failure and these protests have met with violence — violence meted out, according to an investigation by The Critic magazine, by pro-Iranian militiamen<sup>24</sup>.

This campaign has included violence perpetrated by “mystery gunmen” who fought demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Baghdad, in an event in which hundreds of protesters were shot with live ammunition and tear gas canisters. Some activists and journalists were later killed by militiamen when they returned to their homes.

In Basra, militia murders became almost commonplace. Tahseen Ali, an activist, was fatally shot in August 2020. Days later, Ludia Remon, another activist, was attacked, although she survived. Another victim was Reham Yaqoub, a medical worker from Basra. The same day as Yaqoub's killing, four other activists also met violent deaths. Three of them were killed in Basra, and one in Baghdad<sup>25</sup>.

This was not random violence. It was first incited by the Iranian authorities, which offered cross-border contracts for killings. Iran's Mehr News Agency had earlier claimed that several protesters in Basra were agents of the US and were, like spies, being “run” out of the US consulate. Iranian media widely used Yaqoub's photograph.

The Critic reported that “Ali, Remon, Yaqoub and other demonstrators were consistently threatened with death by militia leaders, and have been roughed up by militia muscle, since protests began. When demonstrations began in October, those participating were targeted by snipers. Military officials denied responsibility and all knowledge of what was going on. They seemed rather uncomfortable at having to do so in public.”<sup>26</sup>

This violence was linked to Iranian militias without reservation by Iraqi authorities.

“Iran-backed militias deployed snipers on Baghdad rooftops during Iraq's deadliest anti-government protests in years,” Reuters was told by Iraqi officials.<sup>27</sup>

The Critic noted the leaked documents that appeared in early 2020 and appeared to prove large-scale Iranian militia domination of Iraqi politics and institutions.

“Iran's capture of the Iraqi state is remarkable and was exposed in a series of leaked documents earlier this year,” it reported. “Militiamen run government departments and oversee the bureaucracy.



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Their armed mobs refused to disband or to disarm after the declaration of victory against ISIS almost three years ago. Theirs is a remarkable story of state capture, only recently undercut by international notice and domestic opposition.”<sup>28</sup>

Its conclusion is that “Iran is both comfortably powerful enough to kill on Iraq's streets without its influence being acknowledged and its agents prosecuted, but still feels sufficiently threatened by civic action that a campaign of murder is deemed necessary to protect its stake.”

This violence is both a product of political domination and a bid to keep it in the face of large, sustained and possibly growing popular opposition.

Iraqi politicians frequently campaign against foreign influence. Haider Al-Abadi attempted to do so before his removal, as did his successor Mustafa Al-Kadhimi — who was a friend of Al-Hashami and was himself almost assassinated on Nov. 7, 2021.<sup>29</sup>

Even politicians who have been close to Iran and are dependent on Shia partisanship for their support, such as Muqtada Al-Sadr, have campaigned at least in theory on a non-partisan basis. Sairoon, Al-Sadr's electoral coalition for the 2018 election, included a communist party, and he had called for a technocratic government.<sup>30</sup>

But Iraqi politics is more compromised than this rhetoric would indicate. Al-Sadr did not form a cross-partisan, cross-sectarian government after his party performed well in that election. His supporters continued their own mob violence and occupations of the Green Zone in Baghdad. Iraqi politics was so dysfunctional that a new start was not possible.

The majority of this dysfunction is due to the domination of Iraqi public life by the Iranian militias and the IRGC.

## DOMINATION

The militia's violence underpins this system, and it is widespread and effective. The IRGC and the militias have broadly subordinated Iraqi politics to their own regional strategy. Iraq could reasonably be considered a de facto Iranian colony, but this state of affairs is largely undiscussed. International monitors notice and note the violence within Iraq, but the Iranian influence is not heeded in the capitals of world powers.

Iraqi politicians, who know well the domination of the IRGC and Iranian militiamen, do not talk publicly about the ways their country and its self-government have been compromised.

Occasionally, big stories of Iraqi corruption or government abuse become internationally significant — including, for example, the “heist” of \$2.5 billion of taxpayers' money,



allegedly by the militias. But Iraq remains underground in the popular Western imagination — it is the location of a war two decades ago, and the campaign against Daesh that is thought to have ended six years ago, but otherwise of little note.

This perspective is a dangerous one. Iraq is a country with immense potential that is being throttled by misgovernment, which at its heart is caused by Iranian and militia domination of its institutions.

A well-governed Iraq would be a great benefit for the region and the world. But while the Iranian IRGC and its militias remain dominant, this positive outcome appears close to impossible.

## CONCLUSION

As the Iranian state struggles at home, it has begun to import aspects of its imperial project in Iraq.

As in Iraq, the agents of the Iranian state, including militia members, have fought with and killed demonstrators. If reports from opposition media are accurate, the Iranian government has even imported IRGC-led Iraqi militiamen into Iran proper to crack down on protestors.

As in Iraq, snipers lurk on rooftops due to be passed by protestors, and the threat of violence hangs heavy over all proceedings.

The world has grown increasingly appalled by and critical of the IRGC and the Iranian state in the four months of protests since the murder of Mahsa Amini in 2022. Now countries such as Britain and Australia are considering designating the IRGC an international terrorist organisation, as is the

Fighters of Iraq's al-Hashed al-Shaabi former paramilitary alliance integrated into the state's regular forces, take part in a security operation west of Najaf, in the desert that stretches up to the Saudi border. AFP

European Commission. They are prompted to do so because of the immediate horror of its violence on the streets of Tehran and Qom, but the tactics they abhor were first tried and perfected in Iraq.

International scepticism of the Iranian regime does not help the people of Iraq. They are still condemned to live in a militia-dominated state ruled by corruption and a conspiracy of silence. Their economy, and their taxes, support the militias. The world is waking up to the terror and crimes of the IRGC and the violent heart of the Islamic Republic. Iraq has suffered for a decade and a half under the same pressures, but its problems remain not only unsolved but, too often, go unnoticed by the wider world.

This must be remedied. Countries and organizations are currently reviewing the IRGC. This seems obvious, even inevitable, if these bodies examine its record of terrorism within Iraq alone.

They must have the courage of their convictions and designate the IRGC as terrorist. What happens within Iraq is as important. The world — and especially the US — must designate Iran's Iraqi proxies, levy increasingly harsh sanctions on their organisations and their leaders as individuals, and be prepared to launch more of the kind of military strikes that eventually solved the problem of Soleimani's terrorism.

Anything less would be to license the continued looting and destruction of the Iraqi state by Iran, and to continue to allow Iranian groups to carry on their plans to kill Americans, Europeans and their allies within Iraq.

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