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Prospects for Increased Iranian Influence in Iraq

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the subcommittee, the subject of today's hearings is one of considerable importance to American interests in the Middle East. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic has seen itself as locked in a struggle with the United States. At times, that competition was restrained—and even showed signs of possible detente. At other times, Iran has aggressively sought to hurt American interests by employing a wide range of stratagems and methods. Unfortunately, at present, and arguably for the past two years, Iran has turned decidedly in the direction of greater confrontation with the United States.

In light of the Administration's announcement that all American combat troops will be removed from Iraq by the end of 2011, it is particularly important for the United States government to consider how that decision will affect Iraq's future security, and especially how it may affect Iran's ability to influence or even dominate Iraq. There is no question that Iran has huge equities in Iraq, that it intends to maximize its influence there, and that Iran's goals in Iraq are mostly inimical to our own. Because of Iraq's intrinsic importance coupled with its significance to the vital Persian Gulf region, preventing Iran from achieving its maximal goals in Iraq will be crucial to America's interests in the region. Moreover, given the remarkable transformations sweeping the Arab world, it would be a terrible tragedy if Iran were able to exploit the volatility of the Arab Awakening to strengthen its position and undermine the stability of the Middle East. Here as well, Iran's ability to shape the outcome in Iraq will play a major role in determining how well Tehran is able to influence the wider political changes in the region. For all of these reasons, what happens in Iraq, and what happens regarding Iranian influence in Iraq, is one of the crucial questions facing the region today.

Unfortunately, the situation at present is not favorable to the interests of the United States and its allies in the region. Although it is both premature and beside the point to ask whether the United States "lost" Iraq or if Iran has "won" it, there is no question that Iran today has considerable sway in Iraq—far more than we or the Iraqis would like. Moreover, while it is certainly possible to imagine a course of action that the United States could pursue to reverse this state of affairs, under current circumstances it seems unlikely either that Washington would be willing to make the necessary effort or that if we were, that it would do more than marginally diminish Iran's

influence in the short term. This is part of the reason that a realistic assessment of Iraq's likely near-term future can only be a relatively pessimistic one. Most plausible scenarios for Iraq's future at this point are unhappy, at least in the near term, and the best (or perhaps, the least bad) scenarios do not seem to be the most likely. Iraq is liable to get worse before it gets better—*if* it gets better—although there are certainly things that the United States can do to minimize both the duration and the depth of these difficult times, if we are willing.

Iran's Goals in Iraq

Because of the inevitable uncertainty that shrouds Iranian decision-making, it is difficult to perceive Iranian objectives in Iraq. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that the Iranian regime as a totality maintains a range of goals with regard to its policy toward Iraq. Almost certainly, different individuals within the regime may favor certain sub-sets of those goals, or may cling to only one principal objective. Moreover, it is likely the case that that range can best be represented as a hierarchy of goals ranging from highest to lowest priorities, and that if Tehran believes its highest priority goals have been achieved (or are unlikely to be threatened), then it will focus its attention on attaining the next highest set of priorities on that list. Finally, it seems highly probable that Iran's goals toward Iraq have changed over time, both as a result of changes in Iraq (and U.S. policy toward Iraq) and in Iran itself.

Iranian behavior since 2003 indicates that Tehran's foremost goal in Iraq has been to prevent the emergence of an Iraq that is threatening to Iran itself. This goal should itself be seen as a category encompassing a number of potential threats to Iran from Iraq. The first of these was the possibility that the United States would use Iraq as a springboard to invade Iran, clearly an overarching concern for Tehran in the immediate months after 2003 when Iranians (characteristically) saw the U.S. invasion of Iraq as really being all about them. The second has been the longer-term fear of the re-emergence of a strong, unified, anti-Iranian Iraq—in effect, a recreation of Saddam Husayn's regime. Finally, the available evidence indicates that Iran has also feared chaos or all-out civil war in Iraq as being potentially harmful for Iran either because of the potential for it to spill over and destabilize Iran itself, or to drag Iran into a regional conflict over Iraq and its resources.

In addition to this set of goals driven primarily by threat and fear, it seems both reasonable to postulate and consistent with the available evidence that Iranian leaders have also seen opportunity in Iraq. Indeed, in recent years, objectives derived from a sense of opportunity in Iraq appear to have supplanted those of fear as the primary drivers of Iranian policy, probably a result of changes both in Iraq and Iran (and American policy toward both). Certainly, Iran would like to see the emergence of an Iraqi regime that is not only not an adversary, but a friend, and preferably a subordinate friend. Iranians might look for an Iraqi ally, like what it has with the Asad regime in Syria, or with Hizballah in Lebanon. Because Iraq borders Iran (and its territory formed part of Persia for many centuries), Tehran may want something more than that, likely seeking to dominate Iraq, to be able to dictate key policy decisions to Baghdad and ensure that Iraqi governments take no actions without Iranian consent. At some level, Iranians may seek to outright control Iraq as a proxy, although there is nothing to suggest that Tehran seeks to conquer Iraq. So far, Iranian behavior toward Iraq has been more sophisticated and judicious than that, thus it may be that some Iranian leaders hope to outright control Iraqi policy, but suspect that it

may be impossible to ever do so and are instead striving for a somewhat lesser standard while holding out the hope that their dreams might still be realized.

This set of overarching concerns can be translated into a set of likely Iranian objectives in Iraq that do seem to accurately conform to Iranian policy toward Iraq since 2003.

1. Iran has sought to evict the United States from Iraq to prevent it from using Iraq as a base of operations against Tehran, and to eliminate American influence, mostly because it fears an American attack from Iraq, but at least secondarily because U.S. influence hinders Tehran's own ability to dominate Baghdad.

2. Iran has sought to prevent the re-emergence of a strong, unitary Iraq, one that could potentially challenge Tehran's bid for regional dominance or even threaten Iran itself.

3. Iran has sought to prevent outright chaos or all-out civil war in Iraq which could destabilize Iran itself or drag it into a regional war that could overstretch Iranian resources and political cohesiveness.

4. Iran has sought to ensure that any Iraqi government that takes power in Baghdad is weak and beholden to Iran.

5. Iran would like to see a new Iraqi regime emerge that is allied with or even subservient to Tehran.

Iran's Policy Toward Iraq: Tacit Cooperation, 2003-2005

Laying out this hierarchy of Iranian objectives in Iraq helps explain Tehran's evolving approach to Iraq since the American invasion. At first, as noted earlier, Tehran feared that the American invasion was simply a precursor to a move against Iran itself. To what extent this was generated by careless American talk about a "right-turn at Tikrit" as was then common among some circles close to (and even within) the George W. Bush Administration, and to what extent by historic Iranian self-aggrandizement is impossible to know.

Regardless of the inspiration, Iran reacted cautiously to this second manifestation of America's overwhelming conventional power in the Middle East in a generation. Throughout the 2003 invasion, Iranian military forces remained wary, but passive. Tehran did allow/encourage the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its Badr Brigades, as well as other Iraqi dissidents, to return to Iraq, but appears to have cautioned them against provoking the Americans. As could only be expected, Tehran began infiltrating other Iranian intelligence personnel into Iraq (as was rapidly reported by American intelligence services), but again, these personnel kept a low profile. The began building contact networks, but otherwise remained non-confrontational. Moreover, it was during this period that Iran demonstrated the greatest willingness to cooperate on its nuclear program, agreeing to talks with Germany, France and Britain (the E3) and suspending its uranium enrichment program while it did so—the only time Tehran was ever willing to do so. Finally, it was in this context that the mysterious spring 2003 letter, supposedly from the highest levels of the Iranian regime, was passed by the Swiss to the United States. Although the provenance and importance of that note has been hotly disputed, if

there is any validity to the episode at all, it too would count as evidence of a sudden Iranian desire to placate the United States, something hard to explain except as the product of Iranian fear of an American invasion.

Indeed, within Iraq itself, Iran pursued a policy of tacit cooperation with the United States. Again, Iranian intelligence personnel fanned out across the country and developed far-reaching networks of information-collection and persuasion. There were also reports that Iranian agents were developing networks that could be used to wage covert attacks on American or Iraqi personnel, but these same reports made clear that Iran was doing so only as contingency planning in case things deteriorated in the future. There was no evidence that Iran was actively encouraging or supporting attacks within Iraq at that time. American personnel in Iraq believed that the Iranians were developing this network for use in the event that one of Iran's primary goals in Iraq was threatened and they faced either an American invasion, the re-emergence of a strong, threatening Iraq, or the fragmentation of Iraq and the outbreak of civil war. Until then, Tehran kept its notoriously mischievous Quds force operatives on a short leash so that it would not stir up trouble for Iran with the United States.

Indeed, throughout 2003-2004, the vast majority of violence against Americans came from Sunni groups that hated Iran. While it is true that Muqtada as-Sadr's Shi'i Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) did conduct attacks on American forces, at that time, his movement had only very loose links to Tehran. The Sadr family had been famously anti-Iranian, and various well-informed Iraqis claim that his decision to move to Iran and take up religious studies after his defeat in Najaf in 2004 were encouraged by Iran as an effort to remove a volatile and erratic Shi'ah leader from the scene who could create problems with the Americans for Iran in Iraq. During this period, Iran's closest allies were the leaders of the SCIRI (since renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI), who became some of America's most important allies in Iraq.

For its part, Tehran pursued a policy of securing its interests by playing within the American-imposed system. Fear of an American military response kept Iran from making trouble in Iraq, and it appears that the Iranians took the U.S. at its word when Washington said it intended to build a democracy in Iraq. In any true democracy, Iraq's Shi'i majority would dominate the government and Tehran could be assured that while they might not like Iran (Iranians are well aware that the vast majority of Iraqis, including Shi'i Iraqis strongly dislike Iranians), they would not be looking to go to war with Iran and would likely want to be on good terms with Tehran. This was probably the best that Iranian leaders believed they could hope for under the circumstances since taking a more active role in Iraq would have risked provoking an American military response, and this course still promised to satisfy their their three highest priority objectives—preventing an American attack from Iraq, preventing the re-emergence of a strong, anti-Iranian Iraq, and preventing chaos and civil war that would threaten Iran. ISCI became Tehran's key instrument to achieve these goals, pursuing a policy of going along with the American effort to build a democratic Iraq and then ensuring that groups friendly to Iran prevailed within that system. Thus, between 2003 and early 2005, Iran was NOT the problem in Iraq.

Iran's Policy Toward Iraq: Waging an Asymmetric War, 2005-2008

Iran's policy toward Iraq changed dramatically in late 2005 and early 2006. In effect, the extensive intelligence and covert action network that Iran had built in Iraq "went kinetic" at that time, shifting from simply collecting information and creating a contingency capability to actively attempting to promote various Iraqi armed groups and assist them in their fights to secure greater power, resources and territory. By late 2006, Iran was "putting money on every number on the roulette wheel," as several Americans in Iraq put it to me, providing weapons, cash, information, training and other forms of support to a wide variety of groups—Shi'i, Sunni, Kurdish and others. What's more, Iranian operatives began to provide weaponry to some Iraqi groups (particularly Shi'i groups) with the expressed purpose of killing Americans, and began to actively encourage and assist Iraqi groups in attacks on Americans in Iraq.

As best we can tell, there were two related reasons for this shift. First, Tehran appears to have concluded that Iraq was simply falling apart. By early 2006 it was apparent to any unbiased observer that Iraq was descending into an all-out inter-communal civil war. The Americans were failing to create a stable, let alone democratic Iraq, and Iran was powerless to stop it. Although it had been a goal of Iranian policy to prevent just such an outcome, because it was happening anyway, Tehran had no choice but to do what it could to secure its other goals in the face of that reality. In these circumstances, the best Tehran could do would be to carve out buffer zones in Iraq, empower groups with ties to Iran, and get the Americans out of the way to prevent Washington from hindering Tehran's actions. This meant ensuring that whoever won the struggle for power in Iraq was tied to Iran, which in turn meant providing support to any Iraqi group who would take it. Of course, Iran tended to provide more support to the Shi'ah than others, if only because the Iranians believed (with good reason) that Iraq's Shi'ah majority was both most likely to prevail and most likely to be well-disposed to Iran. As a result, Iranian support to ISCI/Badr became increasingly militarized, while Iranian relations with other Shi'i militias like Fadhila and Jaysh al-Mahdi blossomed. In addition, Iran had one huge advantage at this point, in that Iraq's descent into civil war made what Iran had to offer—weapons, information, training in unconventional warfare—the most desired commodities by the groups vying for control of Iraq. Many of them also wanted to kill Americans, either out of principle or because the Americans were hamstringing their efforts to harm their real enemies among the other Iraqi groups. Thus, providing Iraqi groups with the wherewithal to kill Americans became a tremendously important source of influence for Iran in Iraq.

Tehran's second motive for reversing gears and supporting the various militias and insurgents across Iraq was that Iraq's descent into civil war, coupled with other problems across the Middle East in 2006 (many of them the result of spillover from Iraq in the first place), meant that Tehran no longer had to worry about its first two objectives—preventing an American invasion from Iraq and preventing the re-emergence of a strong, threatening Iraq. Iraq itself was fragmenting, not growing stronger, so that was an unlikely problem. Meanwhile, the United States was clearly badly bogged down in Iraq and on the defensive across the Middle East. Iranian leaders began to openly talk about America's inability to threaten Iran, and even about how Iran was now bleeding America in Iraq.

Thus, what changed for Iran in 2005-2006 was a sense that it no longer had to worry about conventional military threats emanating from Iraq, and it only had to worry about the danger of chaos and civil war. But since Iran could not prevent Iraq from such an implosion, the only thing

it could do was to protect its interests there as best it could amid the worsening civil war, and that meant shifting from the passive posture of 2003-2004 to one of actively supporting a wide variety of violent groups in Iraq in the hope of ensuring whoever won was beholden to Tehran, and possibly even being able to choose which group would win. As a result, in 2005-2006, the Iranians became one of the greatest agents of violence and chaos in Iraq.

Iran's Policy Toward Iraq: The Great Reversal, 2008-2010

Tehran's strategic shift in 2005-2006 was arguably a reasonable, even understandable decision and it initially may have seemed wise to Iranian decision-makers—and overdue to others. However, the change in American policy toward in Iraq in 2007 badly undermined it. When the Bush Administration finally realized the extent of its catastrophic mistakes in Iraq and reversed course in 2007, this shift caught the Iranians on the wrong side of history again. The deployment of 30,000 additional American troops, the adoption of a Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC) strategy, the Sahwa (or "Sunni Awakening" which was in part made possible by the surge and the LIC approach), and the wholesale changeover of senior American personnel who then devised and implemented these operations, completely overturned Iraq's security and political situation.[1] Within the space of 18 months, the civil war was suppressed, the Iraqi government was newly empowered, and the Iraqi people were in charge of their political leaders and not the other way around. Having bet heavily on trying to "win" the Iraqi civil war, Tehran became one of its biggest losers when the civil war was snuffed out. Across the board, and particularly among the heavily Shi'i population of southern Iraq, Iraqis rejected Iran and anyone who had been associated with Iran during the dark days of the civil war.

The nadir came for Tehran in the spring of 2008. At that time, although the "Surge" strategy had resulted in a remarkable transformation in the political-military circumstances of central, western and much of northern Iraq, southern Iraq was still largely a no-man's land controlled by various Shi'i militias and disrupted by the occasional Sunni terrorist attack. The worst offender was the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), which effectively controlled Basra, Iraq's second largest city, along with a number of smaller cities throughout the south and Sadr City in Baghdad. At the time, JAM was also Tehran's strongest and most important ally in Iraq. JAM's creation of a state-within-a-state in Basra, along the lines of Hizballah in Lebanon, eventually became a personal affront to Prime Minister Maliki. He ordered a small operation by the local Iraqi division near Basra to try to signal to JAM that they should keep their behavior within boundaries. The Iraqi Army's brand new and inadequately-trained 14th Infantry Division was ordered to round up a number of the worst offenders. The JAM militiamen fought back, and initially inflicted a humiliating defeat on the 14th Division. To his great credit, the Prime Minister refused to back down and instead brought in reinforcements, including several of Iraq's best brigades from Anbar. The United States military, recognizing that the fight in Basra could be a make-or-break moment in the wider war between the government of Iraq and the militias, made the decision to back Maliki to the hilt and deployed considerable assets south to aid the Iraqi attack. The renewed Iraqi government

[1] I think it inappropriate to use the term "Counterinsurgency" to describe American strategy in Iraq after 2007. Although the Sunni tribes employed guerrilla war tactics against their enemies (both the United States and other Iraqi groups, including the Iraqi groups who controlled the government), Iraq was more properly an inter-communal (or ethno-sectarian) civil war in which the weaker side was simply employing insurgent tactics because they are the weapon of the weak. Indeed, some of the later mistakes that the United States made were a result of our misapplication of counterinsurgency doctrine to a civil war.

offensive was given the name "Charge of the Knights" and (with tremendous intelligence, fire support, and command assistance by the U.S. military) shattered JAM in its principal stronghold.

Of greatest importance, when the people of Basra saw that the Iraqi government was determined to take back the city from the Iranian-backed militia, they rose up against JAM and helped drive them from the city. Moreover, they did so explicitly because they wanted the civil war over, they wanted law and order provided by the central government in Baghdad, and they wanted the Iranians gone. In the weeks that followed, Prime Minister Maliki decided to run the table, mounting similar operations against JAM strongholds in Qurnah, Amarah, Kut, and Sadr City itself.

Charge of the Knights was a body blow to Iran in Iraq. Tehran was left reeling, its influence virtually eliminated by the assertion of Iraqi authority, the end of militia rule in southern Iraq, and the stunning public rejection of both the militias and Iran. Tehran's influence was at its lowest point in post-Saddam Iraq. In the 2009 provincial elections that followed, Iraqi political parties with ties to Iran—including both the Sadrists and ISCI—were virtually swept from office. Instead, Iraqis voted overwhelmingly for those parties they saw as being most secular, least tied to Iran, and least involved with the militias or culpable in the civil war. Indeed, 2009 saw the outbreak of democratic politics throughout Iraq, with various Iraqi militia parties forced to scramble to reinvent themselves as true political movements and Iraqi leaders forced to learn how to appeal to voters by actually delivering goods and services to their constituents rather than just taking them by force or graft as they always had in the past.[2] To try to rebuild his position, Muqtada as-Sadr was forced to renounce violence and disband the militia that had made him a major player in Iraq during the civil war, yet he remained deeply unpopular except with all small segment of the Shi'i population who continued to venerate his family name and his ultra-nationalist moderate-Islamist ideology. And throughout this period, Iran was left fuming on the sidelines.

Iran's Policy Toward Iraq: Back on Top, 2010-2011

Unfortunately, Iran's marginalization did not last for long. The problem, once again, lay in Iraq's internal politics. From 2008 to early 2010, Iran was largely shut out of Iraqi politics because the Iraqi people felt relatively safe and secure, and confident that their politics were moving in the right direction. Although Iraq was at best a proto-democracy, democratic politics and political pressures were increasingly taking root and driving the system. As a result, Iraqis felt that they did not need the hated Persians, and felt confident enough to push them out and keep them out.

This changed dramatically again, in the spring of 2010. In March of that year, Iraq finally held new national elections for its parliament, the Council of Representatives (CoR). The Iraqi people voted overwhelmingly for change, ousting 75 percent of the incumbents. As in 2009, they voted equally overwhelmingly for those parties they perceived as the most secular, the least tied to the militias, the least culpable for the civil war, and the least tied to Iran. They voted primarily for Prime Minister Maliki's State of Law coalition, and Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyya party. Iraqiyya took 91 seats and Sate of Law 89 out of 325 total.

[2] On the impact of the security improvement on Iraqi politics, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Battle for Baghdad," *The National Interest*, Number 103 (September/October 2009), pp. 8-18; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Something's Rotten in the State of Iraq," *The National Interest*, No. 115 (September/October 2011), pp. 59-70.

Maliki refused to believe that someone other than himself had won and sought to use ambiguities in Iraq's rickety constitution to block Iraqiyya from forming a new government. The constitution does not specify that the party that won the most votes in the election gets the first chance to form a government, although this is common practice in most (but not all) parliamentary systems. Maliki demanded that Iraq's high court rule on this. Chief Justice, Medhat al-Mahmud, eventually issued an opinion that the constitution was consistent both with the idea that the party that received the most votes in the election should have the first chance to form the government, and with the notion that whichever group could informally put together a governing coalition after the election could also get the first official chance to form the government. This was an exceptionally unhelpful ruling which has not only helped paralyze Iraqi politics today, but set a horrendous precedent for future elections. Of course, Iraqiyyah and Maliki's other rivals immediately claimed that the Prime Minister had pressured Medhat to produce such a tortured opinion. Privately, many Americans and other foreigners in Iraq indicated that they believed this too, although no evidence has been produced to support the accusation.

At that moment, the best thing that the U.S. could have done would have been to set Medhat's opinion aside and, in concert with the UN, announce that what was best for Iraqi democracy in the long-term was to allow the party that received the most votes in the election to have the first chance to form a government. If that party failed within the time allotted by the constitution, the party with the next largest number of votes would get their chance. Thus, Allawi's Iraqiyyah would have had the first shot at forming a government and had they failed (as Maliki's people insisted they would), then State of Law would have its chance. Instead, the U.S. and the UN took no official position and threw Iraq into political chaos.

The election produced four major blocs in the parliament—Iraqiyyah, State of Law, the Kurds with 53 seats, and the Sadrists with roughly 40 seats. It meant that only Iraqiyyah and State of Law together could pass the 163 seats needed to form a governing coalition. Otherwise, each needed both the Kurds and the Sadrists and a few independents as well. That made both the Sadrists and the Kurds king-makers and both set out to extract the most they could from the parties before committing. To make matters worse, the new Obama Administration placed an excessive emphasis on having a fully "inclusive" government, which ruled out a number of possible combinations that might have produced a more effective Iraqi government, and done so sooner. For nearly a year, Iraqi politics came to a complete halt, all of the provisions in the constitution regarding the timetables for forming a new government were ignored, and the United States (and the UN) did nothing to force a resolution. This too set a terrible precedent, undermining the nascent effort to establish the principal of the rule of law and adherence to the constitution. It also derailed the momentum Iraqi democracy had built up in the prior 18 months and established the dangerous standard that what mattered was not how the people voted, but how the parties politicked afterward.

With the United States unwilling to break the political logjam or enforce the rules of Iraq's political system, Iraq's leaders were left to their own devices. Of far greater importance, the heated divisions among the main Iraqi parties and their no-holds-barred infighting over forming the new government allowed the Iranians right back in. Once the parties were frightened, angry,

isolated and feeling abandoned by the Americans, Tehran was able to step and bribe, persuade, promise, threaten and coerce Iraq's politicians to do things their way. And without either a coherent American alternative plan or American push back on Iranian pressure, the Iraqi politicians were slowly brought around to Tehran's preferred solution.

First, the Iranians forced the Sadrists to accept Maliki as prime minister (something they had previously refused). Then, they strong-armed Maliki (who fears and dislikes the Iranians himself) into cutting a deal with the Sadrists (whom he also detests). With that shotgun wedding accomplished, Maliki could then sit sat down with Barzani and (again, with Tehran's approval) agree to the Kurdish leader's terms, at which point Maliki had the votes to form a government. But both the Americans and Barzani wanted the mostly-Sunni Iraqiyyah coalition in the government too—Washington to preserve the impression of inclusivity, the Kurds as an internal counterweight to State of Law and the Sadrists, both overwhelmingly Shi'a parties. In November 2010, the deal was struck and the following month the ministries were divvied up and the government seated, mostly. There were no ministers of defense and interior since Allawi and Maliki could not agree on who would take those crucial portfolios.

The government created was, in effect, a government of national unity. It included State of Law, Iraqiyyah, the Kurds, the Sadrists and a variety of independents. It simply took all of Iraq's political differences and brought them into the government, utterly paralyzing the Cabinet and much of the bureaucracy. It was weak and much too dependent on Iran, precisely as Tehran had hoped. So far, none of the Iraqi participants has fulfilled his side of the many deals that were struck, insisting that someone else do so first. But there is no move to dissolve the government or bring it down by a vote of no confidence because all of the parties like owning various ministries, which serve as massive patronage networks—really graft machines—by which Iraqi oil revenues are converted into salaries, contracts, and illegal payments to the partisans of whichever group controls that ministry. Since the government is so large, only the defection of at least two of the main power blocs along with a number of independents could bring it down, but since all of the parties dislike and distrust one another and they are all terrified of losing their ministries if they try and fail, it has effectively proven impossible to create such a coalition. And in the end, too many of the players are looking over their shoulder at Iran before attempting such a gambit, and the Iranians have consistently forbade it.

Change for the Worse in Tehran

The last piece of the puzzle that needs to be set in place to understand Iran's role in Iraq today, is the transformation of Iranian politics that occurred in the summer and fall of 2009. June 12, 2009 and the weeks that followed were a watershed for the Islamic Republic. The regime confronted its most dangerous internal threat ever as millions of Iranians took to the streets and to their rooftops to protest what they believed was a stolen election. For the first time ever, they demanded the resignation of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamene'i. In effect, they demanded an end to the Islamic Republic itself.

At that moment, the more moderate voices within the Iranian establishment counseled making concessions to the opposition. These were the leaders of the Iranian reform movement, and not coincidentally the same people who had shown a willingness to negotiate with the West in hope of alleviating Iran's crippling economic and diplomatic problems. However, Tehran's

hardliners, like President Ahmedinejad and the leadership of the Revolutionary Guard, insisted on cracking down and refusing to make even the slightest compromise. So too did the Supreme Leader, who believes that the Shah fell because he was weak and made concessions to the revolutionaries (of which he was one) which then opened a Pandora's box that could not be shut again. Neither Khamene'i nor the Revolutionary Guard, nor any of Iran's other hardline leadership, plans to be ousted the way that they ousted the Shah, and they have made clear that they will employ whatever levels of violence are necessary to retain power.

In the weeks and months that followed, the regime embarked on a massive, systematic, and brutal but also highly sophisticated crackdown that effectively crushed the street protests of the opposition Green movement. Simultaneously, the regime's hardliners effectively "purged" its more moderates elements. Some were imprisoned, but most were simply left in place but deprived of power which in Iran's Byzantine system of personal politics derives largely from informal influence ultimately bestowed by the Supreme Leader himself. Most of the key moderates have retained their positions but no longer wield influence when the key decisions are made.

Thus, today, Tehran's hardliners dominate Iranian decision-making in ways that they have not since the early 1980s. There are fissures even within the innermost circles of the hardliners—it is Iran after all. However, the hardliners seem to be in fundamental agreement on three key foreign policy issues:

1. They show absolutely no interest in having a better relationship with the United States. President Mahmud Ahmedinejad is the exception that proves the rule: alone among the hardliners he has called for negotiations with the Americans, but only to demonstrate that Iran is so powerful and important that it must be seen as an equal by the United States. In this, Ahmedinejad has been fiercely opposed by the rest of Iran's hardline establishment, including by Khamene'i himself.

2. They appear to believe that Iran is best served by an aggressive, offensive foreign policy that seeks to disrupt the Middle Eastern status quo by supporting all manner of terrorist, subversive, insurgent and other extremist groups. They eagerly provide support to enable and encourage these groups to employ violence against the United States and its allies across the region in hopes of overturning unfriendly regimes, driving the United States from the region and bringing to power governments beholden to Iran. It is worth noting that while they find greatest receptivity among Shi'i groups, they are perfectly willing to provide such support to violent Sunni fundamentalists (Hamas and Ansar al-Islam) and secularists (the PKK) as well.

3. They appear to have concluded that they are already locked in a clandestine war with the United States and its allies. The regime doubtless believes that the United States and/or Israel was responsible for the Stuxnet virus and the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists. They see American broadcasting into Iran and rhetorical support for the Green Movement as little more than the tip of the iceberg, hiding much greater American, Israeli, and Saudi efforts to foment rebellion in Iran. They appear to believe that the United States and its allies are already providing support to Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch

> oppositionists within Iran. Indeed, if the purported plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States is valid, it suggests that Tehran's leadership has concluded that this covert war has escalated to the point where they are prepared to conduct terrorist operations on U.S. soil—something they have not done in over thirty years.

For all of these reasons, it is not surprising that this harder-line leadership has pursued a more aggressive, more recalcitrant and more anti-American foreign policy than at any time since the early days of the revolution. Over the past two years, Iran has ramped up its support for radical Shi'i groups in Iraq who have in turn stepped up their attacks on Iraqi Sunnis, on more moderate Iraqi Shi'ah and on American troops. In Afghanistan, Iran has provided more assistance and more lethal weaponry to the Taliban, contributing to the rising U.S. and Afghan security force death toll there. Remarkably, despite the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1929—which imposed unexpectedly harsh sanctions on the regime for its refusal to halt its nuclear program, causing widespread economic hardship in Iran—Tehran thumbed its nose at international offers to negotiate an end to the nuclear impasse. Meanwhile, the regime has steadfastly clung to its Syrian ally, backing its slaughter of thousands of civilian protesters rather than give up its dictatorship.

Iranian Influence in Iraq Today

As of this writing, Iran's hardline leadership wields greater influence in Iraq than they have at any time since the American invasion. Senior Iraqi officials and political leaders from across the political spectrum grudgingly concede that no Iraqi can become prime minister without Tehran's blessing. Indeed, Maliki's re-election was engineered—much to his own chagrin—by the Iranians who forced him to partner with the Sadrists (and the Sadrists to partner with him), and then leaned on the Kurds to do the same, forcing Iraqiyya (and the Americans) to accept the current, dysfunctional government that serves no one's interests in Iraq except Tehran's.

Although Maliki and his advisers continue to dislike and fear Iran, they are unable to do anything contrary to Tehran's wishes. Consequently, the government has steadfastly ignored the violent depredations of Khataib Hizballah (KH) and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), Iran's two principal proxies/allies in Iraq who have indulged in numerous attacks on American forces, assassinations of various Iraqi leaders and other terrorist acts. It is worth noting that these groups have even gone after the Sadrists from time to time and many in Iraq believe that Muqtada as-Sadr himself fled back to his studies in Qom in January 2011 because AAH was trying to kill him. This makes clear that Iran, not as-Sadr, is the moving force behind these groups.

The Iranians are putting intense pressure on the Kurds as well, particularly the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, whose territory borders Iran. Iranian forces periodically shell Kurdish towns whenever the PUK acts more independently than Tehran would like. Kurdistan is overrun with Iranian intelligence agents, and PUK leader Jalal Talabani's personnel have no choice but to tread carefully because with the United States leaving, they see nothing that can balance Iran. Mass'ud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party is in a somewhat stronger position both because they do not share a border with Iran and because their strong relations with Turkey (temporary though that may be) afford them some ability to resist Iran.

This state of affairs is without question a product, directly and indirectly, of the American disengagement from Iraq. In a direct sense, the withdrawal of American military power from Iraq, the diminution of American aid to Iraq, and the general downgrading of Iraq policy by the White House have left Iraqis fearful of Iranian power projection capabilities—both conventional and unconventional. Iran's seizure of a single Iraqi oil well in December 2009 (with no response from either Iraq or the United States) was Tehran's way of signaling to Baghdad that it can use its conventional military power to inflict economically painful and politically humiliating damage on Iraq whenever it wants to without fear of American retribution. This was not lost on any Iraqi political leader, all of whom saw it—and the dismissive American reaction to it—as an extremely troubling development. Likewise, the assassination efforts of AAH and KH have impressed on all Iraqi leaders that their own lives could be at risk if they openly challenged Iran, in part because the United States cannot and will not protect them—either by physically guarding them or by threatening retaliation against Iran.

Nevertheless, it is the indirect manifestation of this problem that is ultimately the more important. As the brief history of Iranian involvement in Iraq since 2003 recounted above makes clear, the greatest limiting factor on Iranian influence in Iraq is the health of the Iraqi political system itself. When Iraq has been moving in a positive direction, when real democracy has been taking hold, when Iraqis have been confident in their security forces and their leaders, they eagerly and decisively shut Iran out of their country. To some extent this was true in 2003-2004, but it was unconditionally manifest in 2008-2009 when Iran suffered its worst defeats and was virtually shut out of Iraq because Iraqis felt like their country was moving smartly in the right direction. Whenever Iraqis have been fearful and internal conflict has prevailed, Iran has been able to exploit the fissures in Iraqi society to increase its influence. In 2005-2006, Iran was making tremendous gains across Iraq and some analysts argued that Iran was the most influential actor in Iraq, more so even than the United States.

Unfortunately, this is precisely the pattern that is manifesting itself in Iraq once again. The United States is disengaging from Iraq prematurely. Iraq shows no signs of being able to handle its security, its political differences, and its economic challenges by itself. Far from seeing the American departure as a clarion call to set aside their differences and make hard compromises to avoid the abyss, Iraq's political leaders are doing the exact opposite. So far, they have refused to compromise, dug-in their heels, employed every advantage to undercut their rivals, employed violence and engaged in graft whenever they could, and generally put the interests of their narrow power base ahead of the common good of all Iraqis. This, of course, is the path back to civil war. It is also the path toward ever greater Iranian influence in Iraq. As before, Iran has exploited the fissures, played divide and conquer, used its limited conventional and unconventional capabilities to exacerbate fear and mistrust and create an expectation of greater violence in the future which has prompted Iraqis to make short-term moves designed to protect themselves at the expense of a better future for the entire country.

It is too soon and too glib to argue that Iran has "won" in Iraq and we have "lost," but it is undeniable that our influence in Iraq is waning quickly, while that of Iran is growing at a similar pace. What's more, it is going to be very difficult—albeit not impossible—for the United States to change this dynamic. Indeed, it is probably more likely that the Iraqis may do so on their own with only modest help from the United States, although this scenario is probably the least likely

of the range of plausible futures one can imagine for Iraq in the near-term. This is more a statement about how little ability the United States has to fundamentally affect Iraq's political development at this point than it is about the likelihood that Iraqis will spontaneously start doing the right things, the things that they have been doing the opposite of over the past two years.

Scenarios for the Future of Iraq

It is not hard to discern that Iraq today is not headed in a positive direction. The government remains utterly paralyzed by the country's divisions, and by leaders absolutely unwilling to make compromises of any kind to break the logjam. Efforts to fight corruption, nepotism, and politicization of the military and bureaucracy have been discarded and all of these problems are running rampant. Indeed, corruption currently appears to be the only engine of government activity. Were there no corruption, the government might not be doing anything at all. Violence has re-emerged as a tool of various groups—including the governing coalition—seeking to advance their political agendas. This in turn is pushing other groups in the direction of taking up arms again if only to defend themselves against other groups using violence since the government is unwilling to apolitically enforce the rule of law.

Looking forward from this state of affairs, it is possible to imagine four broad, plausible directions in which Iraq might move. None would be worth celebrating, although some would be much worse than others. Unfortunately, in every one of these scenarios, Iran's influence in Iraq seems likely to grow, at least in the short term, which is both part of the reason that the scenarios are pessimistic (since Iran has an interest in seeing Iraq weak and divided) and part of where the pessimism derives from (since greater Iranian influence in Iraq, given the goals and composition of the current Iranian regime, is invariably problematic for American interests in Iraq).

A new dictatorship. Many Iraqis and many observers of Iraq, believe that the most likely future for Iraq is a new dictatorship, this time by the Shi'a. Although Prime Minister Maliki almost certainly is not consciously seeking such a position, his approach to Iraq's problems is nonetheless taking him that way all the same. Maliki evinces considerable paranoia, something entirely understandable from someone who was a member of a small, revolutionary party relentlessly chased by Saddam's security services for almost 30 years. This makes him prone to see conspiracies, especially among Sunnis. He is often impatient with Iraq's democratic politics, and he just as frequently acts arbitrarily, extra-constitutionally, even unconstitutionally to root out a suspected conspiracy or overcome political opposition. He is consolidating power within Iraq, and even within the Iraqi government, in a tight circle of people around himself. He is purging large numbers of people from other parties, groups, sects and ethnicities and rapidly politicizing Iraq's relatively professional armed forces.

If Maliki, or another Shi'a were to emerge as a new dictator, he would inevitably be pushed into Iran's arms. A Shi'a dictator of Iraq would axiomatically be rejected and ostracized by the majority Sunni states of the Arab world. The only ally he would have would be Iran—and perhaps Syria, if the Asads can hold power (and indeed, Maliki's government has come out publicly in support of the Asad regime in Syria's own civil war). Moreover, a Shi'i dictator would face tremendous opposition from Iraq's Sunni community, particularly the tribes of Anbar,

Salah ad-Din and Ninevah, all of whom would be supported by the Sunni regimes. Again, an Iraqi Shi'a dictator's only source of succor would be Iran.

Renewed civil war. Historically, this may actually be Iraq's most likely future. Although academic studies of intercommunal civil war show some variance, a considerable body of work—including the best and most recent studies—indicate that states that have undergone one such round of conflict (as Iraq did in 2005-2007) have anywhere from a 1-in-3 to a 1-in-2 likelihood of sliding back into civil war within about five years of a ceasefire (which in Iraq came in 2008).[3] Since the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraq has followed the quintessential pattern for how states descend into civil war, how they emerge from it, and now how they fall back into it. Everything that is going on in Iraq today as American peacekeepers prepare to leave—the resumption of violence, the rapid deterioration of trust, the expectation that things are going to get more violent and corrupt, the unwillingness of leaders to compromise, the determination of actors across the spectrum to take short-sighted actions to protect themselves at the expense of others' trust and security—shows that Iraq continues to hew closely to these awful patterns. Indeed, even Maliki's unconscious bid for dictatorship is probably more likely to produce civil war than a return to centralized autocracy. If he keeps pushing in this direction, the Sunnis and Kurds will likely revolt, the military will fragment (a la Lebanon) and the result will be civil war, not a stable tyranny.

Civil war would be bad for Iran. Indeed, it might actually be the worst scenario for Iran in that it would likely produce very significant spillover into Iran. It could easily radicalize large segments of Iranian society, perhaps prompting the Kurds and Arabs of Iran to revolt, or convincing Iran's dominant Shi'ah to become more actively anti-Sunni. It would doubtless encourage Iran to intervene heavily in Iraq, which would stress Iran's limited resources and provoke a counter intervention by Iraq's Sunni neighbors. Given the high degrees of popular antipathy toward the regime, and the willingness of Iranians to risk physical harm by the regime to voice their grievances, spillover from civil war in Iraq could generate new popular protests or even renewed rebellion in Iran (especially if intervention in Iraq taxed the Iranian state and its military the way that the First World War did Tsarist Russia, or the wars against England taxed Bourbon France). It could also bring Iran into covert or even overt conflict with Iraq's Sunni neighbors as the Congolese civil war turned into "Africa's world war" and the Lebanese civil war sparked conflict between Israel and Syria.

Nevertheless, civil war in Iraq would also be disastrous for the United States for a variety of reasons. One of them would be that in the short term, Iran would likely find itself able to

[3] On the proclivity of civil wars to recur, see Paul Collier, Lani Elliott, Havard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, The World Bank and Oxford University Press, Washington, DC, 2003, available at http://homepage.mac.com/stazon/apartheid/files/BreakingConflict.pdf, p. 83; James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 41, no. 3 (May 2004); Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2001); Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); T. David Mason, "Sustaining the Peace After Civil War," The Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, December 2007; Barbara Walter and Jack Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Barbara Walter, "Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004): 371—388.

dominate significant areas of Iraq by backing Shi'a militias in the fighting—militias that would have no one to turn to except Iran, as was the case in 2005-2007. Moreover, the radicalization of Iraq's Shi'a would likely spillover into Kuwait, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia, creating new opportunities for Iran to stoke unrest in those states, possibly with disastrous results.

A failing state. Another plausible outcome of Iraq's current state of affairs would be a weak, fragmented, or even a failed state. The central government has a certain amount of power, but it is not efficient and Iraq's provinces have a certain ability to resist. Moreover, as Maliki attempts to centralize power, so other groups are pushing in the opposite direction. Thus, while one set of scenarios would have to envision Maliki (or some other Shi'a leader) prevailing in this contest and establishing a new dictatorship, so another set of scenarios would have to imagine him failing because the provinces/regions/ethno-sectarian communities were successfully able to resist and to pull away from the central government. Indeed, Salah ad-Din province recently declared its autonomy, and there is widespread talk of Anbar and Nineveh joining it in a Sunni region akin to the Kurdistan Regional Government. Likewise, numerous groups and influential figures in oil-rich Basra are talking about doing the same. If they were to succeed, they would cripple the Iraqi central government. Because Iraq actually requires a fair degree of integration for economic reasons, such a centrifugal trend would likely result in an across the board breakdown in public services, economic affairs and security. Local groups (militias, but likely operating in the name of provincial governments) would fill the vacuums as best they could, but their efforts would be uneven at best, and at worst—and probably far more likely—would be corrupt, incompetent and prone to violence. Iraq might not quite look like Somalia, but it could end up bearing more than a passing resemblance to it, with all of the terrible implications for terrorism and instability in the wider region that implies.

Again, Iran too might suffer from lawlessness and corruption in Iraq along the lines of a lesser version of the civil war scenarios. However, like in that scenario, virtually all of the Shi'i groups would inevitably find themselves reliant on Iran for aid because none of Iraq's other neighbors would provide them with any support, and the Sunni neighbors will provide assistance to the Sunni groups. Indeed, in this scenario, some provincial governments might make better and more legitimate partners for Iran than the unadulterated militias of the civil war scenarios.

Muddling through, perhaps ultimately upward. The only plausible, positive (in a purely relative sense) scenarios that one can imagine for Iraq given its current state of affairs are ones that envision long, painful processes during which Iraq does not fall apart or fall into dictatorship, but not much positive happens either for some period of time. Then, at some point in the future, either because Iraqi voters are somehow able to bend Iraq's politicians to their will in a way that they could not in 2010, or because a charismatic and altruistic leader emerges who galvanizes the Iraqi polity, things begin to move in the right direction. Leaders begin to make compromises, small at first, but growing as they build trust in one another and reap the benefits of cooperation. Outside powers and businesses see progress in Iraq and begin to invest again, creating an economic stake for everyone in continued cooperation and progress. Violence is discredited. Eventually, this could produce a strong, self-confident, truly democratic Iraq that would have the strength and confidence to limit Iranian influence to what is customary among neighboring states.

Such scenarios are not impossible, but at present they also seem quite unlikely. There simply is no evidence in contemporary Iraq that would suggest that this is happening or could happen soon. The macro trends in politics, security and the economy are all negative, and while there are certainly some positive trends at a more micro level, these are all almost certain to be swamped if those macro trends continue to move in the wrong direction. When one looks at what is happening in Iraq today, it is very hard to find evidence to make a compelling case that Iraq is likely to muddle through its current problems, find a way to unlock its paralyzed political process, and begin to replace its vicious cycle with a benevolent one.

Options for the United States

To a very great extent, Iraq is passing beyond America's influence. This is a great pity because, as witnessed by developments there especially over the past 12-18 months, Iraq is not ready to stand on its own without significant external guidance and assistance. However, the policy of the Obama Administration has made this situation an irreversible, if unfortunate, reality. There is no turning back the clock, even if Washington suddenly had a change of heart. The decisions that have been made are now virtually set in stone. There will not be a significant American military presence in Iraq in the future. That train has left the station and it cannot be recalled or reboarded at some later stop.

There are effectively two broad policies that the United States can adopt to try to help Iraq to move in the right direction and limit Iran's ability to push Iraq in various wrong directions. The first of these would be for the United States to develop a major, across-the-board program of military/diplomatic/economic assistance to Iraq, the provision of which would be conditional on the Iraqi government's behavior. Although in some ways this is a "no-brainer" in that it could only have positive consequences for Iraq, we should not exaggerate the amount of influence it will buy us even if pursued energetically. Moreover, there appears to be little interest in adopting it among senior levels of the Obama Administration. The second course of action is by far the more difficult and dangerous one as it focuses on pushing back directly against Iran to limit its ability and willingness to make mischief in Iraq. Although this approach could pay dividends not only in Iraq but in other aspects of U.S. policy toward Iran, we should recognize that adopting this policy entails a number of important risks and costs and so should not be undertaken lightly.

Supporting Iraq. As noted above, the stronger Iraq is, the more that Iraqis will resist Iranian encroachment and the Iraqis are much better at doing this themselves than the United States is at doing it for them. However, a critical aspect of a "stronger" Iraq is an Iraq that is moving toward greater pluralism/democracy, rule of law, economic stability, anti-corruption, and internal integration. Given that Iraq is not moving effectively toward any of these goals, American aid would be extremely helpful—if not absolutely vital—to bolster Iraq directly and to create an incentive structure to get Iraq's political leaders to make the hard political decisions that will put Iraq's long-term good ahead of their (or their community's) short-term gain.

In a nutshell, Washington needs to redouble its efforts to continue to guide Iraqi political developments, push Iraqi leaders to make fundamental compromises and prevent them from subverting the system and dragging Iraq back into civil war. That will require a major push to preserve and even expand American influence there. In the wake of the withdrawal of American

military forces from Iraq, this will require a major effort to bolster American influence through the savvy employment of the long-term U.S. aid relationship with Iraq.

After 30 years of Saddam Husayn's misrule, three foreign wars, a dozen years of comprehensive international sanctions, and an inter-communal civil war, Iraq needs all the help it can get. The Iraqi armed forces want to purchase large amounts of American weaponry and retain U.S. training assistance. The Iraqi economy remains a basket-case, and Iraqis from across the country and across the political spectrum recognize a need for American assistance in rebuilding Iraqi infrastructure, agriculture, and industry; reforming Iraq's educational system, business regulations, and bureaucratic operations; and helping Iraq to reintegrate into the global economy, overcome a series of lingering diplomatic problems, and avoid excessive intervention by any of its neighbors. Many Iraqis even recognize that their fragile democracy would benefit from a continued American military presence in the country—if only to restrain predatory indigenous politicians and neighboring states alike.

All of these Iraqi needs and desires create leverage for the United States. They are all things the Iraqis want from the United States. Anything the Iraqis want from the United States can and should be provided, but only if Iraq's political leaders continue to behave in a manner consistent with Iraq's long-term best interests in building a strong democracy and the rule of law—which also just happen to be America's principal interests as well. Thus, the most important source of American influence moving forward is conditionality. Virtually all American assistance needs to be conditioned on the Iraqi political leadership guiding their country toward greater stability, inclusivity, and effective governance. The Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), a partnership document between Iraq and the United States that was initiated by the Iraqi government, provides a foundation for this type of assistance. If the United States wants to maintain leverage in Iraq, the SFA must ultimately deliver outcomes that Iraqis value.

Because Iraq's domestic politics is the key to the future stability of the country, and because it remains so fragile, it must be the principal American focus. Specifically, this will mean that several important standards must be met: continuing progress on democracy, transparency, and the rule of law; continued development of bureaucratic capacity; no outbreak of revolutionary activity, including coups d'état; no emergence of dictators; reconciliation among the various ethno-sectarian groupings, as well as within them; a reasonable delineation of center-periphery relations, including a workable agreement over the nature of federalism; and an equitable management and distribution of Iraq's oil wealth, as well as the overall economic prosperity that must result from such distribution.

On the economic front, U.S. assistance to Iraq should be conditioned upon the Iraqi authorities putting in place oversight and accountability mechanisms aimed at limiting the corrupting and insulating effects of Iraq's oil economy. The central challenge in this area will be reconciling U.S. and Iraqi expectations for future American aid and finding creative ways to use the SFA and whatever assistance the Congress and the administration are willing to make available in an era of sharply declining resources. Fortunately, there are key areas of the Iraqi economy where U.S. diplomatic support, technical assistance, consulting services, and technology and knowledge transfers could deliver substantial benefits.

None of this is unknown to the U.S. government. Many of the savviest members of the Obama Administration are well aware of all of this, and have argued for laying out a comprehensive aid package to Iraq under the auspices of the SFA, which was intended to do exactly that. These officials recognize that publicly fleshing out the SFA, making loud and clear to Iraqis that the United States is ready and willing to provide them with significant assistance on dozens and dozens of matters of importance to them would both increase their confidence in Iraq's future AND would create powerful leverage for the United States with Iraqi officials since the withholding of American aid that average Iraqis wanted because Iraqi officials were subverting Iraqi democracy or the rule of law would be threatening to Iraqi politicians.

Unfortunately, senior Administration officials have evinced little interest in providing significant new aid for Iraq (even at levels far below the height of American assistance under the Bush Administration). Along similar lines, the United States has simply done little or nothing to promote a far-reaching strategic relationship by employing the mechanism of the aid provisions of the SFA. American officials show little energy in pushing the Iraqis to negotiate such a package, and even less willingness to unilaterally explain to Iraqis publicly what is on offer from the United States and so force Iraqi officials to pick up the slack from their side. Numerous working level officials in the U.S. government, including political appointees, express enormous frustration that the United States is blowing potentially its last real chance to influence Iraq to move in the right direction and limit Iran's pernicious influence.

Pushing Back on Iran. The other approach that the United States might pursue to limit Iranian influence in Iraq either alone or in tandem with a greater effort to support Iraq in the future, would be to push back directly against Iran itself. Again, it is crucial to recognize that doing so entails far greater costs and risks because it could provoke an Iranian response.

In pursuit of this approach, the United States could embark on an aggressive, asymmetric campaign against Iran of its own. The United States could expand its support to the Iranian opposition, reach out to rebellious Iranian ethnic groups, mount covert operations against Iranian assets, employ cyber and information-warfare against Tehran, ratchet up economic sanctions, and oppose Iran diplomatically across the board. In truth, the United States appears to be doing virtually all of this albeit at relatively low levels. All of it could be intensified and expanded.[4]

The goal of such an effort in relationship to Iraq would be two-fold. First, a broad campaign along these lines might seize the initiative back from Tehran, forcing the Iranians to concentrate more on defending themselves and therefore reducing their ability to conduct their own asymmetric campaign against Iraq (or the United States or other American allies). Second, the United States could retaliate directly against Iran using these means whenever Iran made a particular move in Iraq, thus potentially deterring Iran and convincing it to rein in its agents in Iraq for fear of American retaliation directly against Iran.

There are a number of key uncertainties surrounding this course of action, at least as a solution to America's problems in Iraq. First, it is not clear how the Iranians will respond. Iran has a mixed record when it comes to being pressured by outsiders, particularly the United States: sometimes

[4] For greater elaboration on such a policy, see Kenneth M. Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Doubling Down on Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Fall 2011), pp. 7-22.

they counterattack, and sometimes they retreat. Karim Sadjadpour has suggested that the best way to understand this is that, "Iran does not respond well to pressure, but it does respond well to a LOT of pressure." For instance, as noted above, Iran believes that the United States is already conducting a low-level covert war against it and this may have been what provoked the purported assassination attempt against the Saudi Ambassador to Washington. This is a case of pressure on Iran triggering an aggressive Iranian response. On the other hand, Tehran has quickly drawn in its horns when it witnessed the ferocious American public response to its bombing of the Khobar Towers housing complex (in which 19 Americans were killed), when it experienced an American covert action in 1997, and when five of its intelligence personnel were apprehended in Iraq in 2005. Thus, a more aggressive effort along these lines could cause Iran to lash out or to back off, it is hard to know—although the evidence does suggest that a greater effort is more likely to produce the desired response than a lesser effort.

Second, this approach might have more merit when it comes to securing American goals with Iran related to its nuclear program than its influence in Iraq. Iran and Iraq are bound by geography, religious ties, trade, water and energy exchanges, common enemies, and several millennia of history. Iran has a wide range of subtle ways to exert influence within Iraq. It can shut off the flow of water to key Iraqi rivers or jack up the prices it charges Iraq for electricity. It can forbid Iranian pilgrims from journeying to Karbala and Najaf, where their spending is critical to the local economy. They can funnel weapons to a wide variety of Iraqi groups in ways that are difficult for the United States to perceive, let alone prevent. This is especially true now, after the removal of American military forces from Iraq has effectively eliminated the fine-grain situational awareness that the United States once possessed. Consequently, it may be very hard for the United States to eliminate Iranian influence, or even to know how much Iran is exerting at any given time.

The Challenge of Iran to America's Iraq Policy

There is nothing easy about this problem. Ambassador Ryan Crocker used to like to say, "Iraq is really, really hard, and it is really, really hard all the time." For its part, Iran is at least as equally difficult. Its opaque, Byzantine and even paranoiac political system make it unpredictable and deeply frustrating for its friends as well as its allies. It often seems to be a better candidate than Russia for Churchill's famous remark about a 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." By our many mistakes, stretching from the earliest days of 2003 to the latest hours of 2011, the United States has created opportunities for Iran to expand its sway in Iraq. Especially because of the dramatic shift in Iran's own leadership in 2009, that is very much to our own detriment and that of the Iraqi people. There is no easy solution to that state of affairs. We have only imperfect tools left to address the situation. But the worst course would be to not try at all.