

“IRAN’S PUSH TO CONTROL IRAQ”



SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST FORUM’ WEBINAR ADDRESSED BY HUSSAIN ABDUL-HUSSAIN



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GENERAL OVERVIEW

Tehran has attempted to control Iraq since the toppling of Saddam Hussein twenty years ago. In this regard, the Iranians use every tool at their disposal, from political manipulation to funding militias despite the fact that many Iraqis oppose this Iranian project.

KEY POINTS OF THE PRESENTATION

- Unlike the period under Khomeini, when the Ayatollah wanted merely to be in charge without any responsibility for governance, today’s Iran under Khamenei is a different set up altogether with 2 governments: One that is elected and powerless and the ‘Deep State’ that has its own army (IRGC) and economy and every other lever of real power in the country.
- For the Deep State, exporting the revolution as a means for enhancing Iranian influence in the region and most importantly in Shia Majority countries (Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain) has been priority.
- In trying to achieve this objective, the creation of militias, independent of their governments (e.g., Hezbollah in Lebanon) and resorting to targeted violence in eliminating all shades of opposition has been a tactic frequently employed by the IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran).
- The outcome of this tactic in Lebanon – country with a small population and a large Shia community has been a great success.
- Since 2003, the IRI has also tried to replicate the Lebanese success story in Iraq. But providing resources to 1 million Shias in Lebanon has been a much easier task than trying to co-opt some 20 million Shias in Iraq.
- IRI’s task in Iraq has also been further hampered by the fact that unlike Lebanon where the government was always short of resources, the Iraqi government enjoys a huge surplus (estimated to be \$60 billion) from some \$120 billion of oil revenues in just the past year alone.
- Consequently, given that the IRI cannot match the financial capabilities of the Iraqi government, they have had to rely on using militias as well as trying to manipulate sympathetic elements in the government in the best way that they can for the promotion of their objectives.

- In this regard, the IRI are now increasingly beset by the fact that the Iraqi Shias – unlike their counterparts in Lebanon, do not share the same amount of enthusiasm for the Iranian regime.
- The fact that Iraq is also host to the main centres of Shia teaching in Najaf and the presence of eminent religious leaders like Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, is yet another factor that has posed serious problems for Iran and its religious authority and legitimacy.
- Yet despite all drawbacks, apart from using Iraq as base for terrorism, Iran has successfully used Iraq in order to obtain access to foreign currency as well as circumventing US sanctions – something that has been a factor for the Iraqi Dinar being undervalued despite the country's huge surplus.
- While some Iraqi Shias have been increasingly pushing back against Iranian interference (e.g., by burning pictures of Khamenei and Soleimani), so far Iraq has been a mixed bag for Iran despite the fact from the IRI's point of view, Iraq is much more important to them than either Syria, Lebanon or Yemen.
- In the October 2022 elections, Iran supported elements did very poorly. However, through manipulations in the Iraqi Supreme Court and errors by populist leaders such as Moqtada Sadr, Iran has been able to retain its influence in the Iraqi government and as such maintain its tentacles in that nation.
- Lack of proper US attention to its various allies within Iraq, especially the KDP has exacerbated matters. It is believed that US has not put its full weight behind its local allies for fears of not provoking Iran in anticipation of reaching some kind of an agreement over the nuclear talks.
- It is a fact that IRI competes with the KDP for sale of gas to Turkey and it is for this reason that at times the Iranians have resorted to using missile attacks against Kurdish targets and gas installations on the pretext of removing Iranian Kurdish dissidents or Israeli elements from the border areas.
- Meanwhile, the Gulf countries who have essentially walked away from Lebanon considering it a lost cause, are not contributing in any meaningful way in Iraq.
- Unlike the IRI that relies on militias, Gulf states – most notably Saudi Arabia and UAE wish to enhance the power of the central governments – a task that has had little success so far.
- However, USAE has made a great deal of investment in the field of energy in Kurdistan and had backed Kurdish inspirations for independence that had been opposed by both Iran and the central government in Baghdad.
- Although, probably the single most powerful player, as things stand at present, taking control of Iraq has been a much harder than expected prospect for Iran.

