



Tehran and the Restive Iraqis

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1362, December 3, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: With many Iraqis (including Shiites) blaming Tehran for the social restiveness engulfing their country, Iranian policymakers fear the weakening of Tehran's grip on its neighbor.

While the popular unrest that has swept across Iraq over the past few weeks is primarily a result of the Baghdad government's failure to address the country's socioeconomic woes, many Iraqis (including Shiites) blame it on Tehran's interference in Iraqi domestic affairs. They are particularly incensed by the brutal suppression of the protests by the Iranian-controlled militias, which has exacted hundreds of civilian fatalities and thousands of casualties. Iranian representations and institutions in Baghdad, Karbala, and Basra have been attacked, and an extensive media campaign was launched under the slogan "[Let it rot](#)" ([#خليها_نخيس](#)), urging Iraqis to boycott Iranian-imported products.

The Islamist regime in Tehran responded swiftly to these developments, disparaging the protests as instigated by "foreign hands" – the standard pejorative used by Middle Eastern dictatorships to delegitimize domestic opposition. At the same time, the repressive measures used by the Iraqi security forces were remarkably reminiscent of those used by the Iranian authorities to suppress the 2009 and 2018 mass protests, combining wholesale blocking of internet communication with brutal repression of demonstrations.

This response reflects the importance attached by Tehran to its newly gained influence in Iraq. For while the Islamist regime tends to present its policies in purely defensive terms – "[creating strategic depth in order to protect Iranian sovereignty](#)" – this is but a ploy to harness the weary and disillusioned Iranian masses behind its hegemonic ambitions, which have remained largely unabated since its inception in 1979. The catchwords and slogans used in justification of these ambitions have of course changed over time in line with the vicissitudes in Iranian public attitudes and a declining readiness for

collective sacrifice: from “exporting the revolution” to “advancing the axis of resistance” to “creating strategic depth” against foreign enemies. But the overriding goal has remained unchanged: the attainment of regional hegemony as a steppingstone toward the “formation of a single, universal [Muslim] community” (in the words of the Iranian constitution).

Viewed from a 40-year vantage point, Iranian success in achieving its goals has varied in accordance with the existence of the following key variables:

- local population that is amenable to religious, social, ethnic, and economic influences
- popular support gained through soft power activities (establishing cultural centers, helping the poor and the needy, building schools, medical centers etc.)
- fertile ground for the formation of local proxy militias
- solid economic and logistic infrastructure for supporting loyal local forces
- asymmetric warfare capabilities, gained (in most cases) by blurring Tehran’s fingerprints
- lack of a strong local leadership that can challenge Iranian policies
- absence of great-power intervention
- public support and absence of effective opposition within Iran for the regime’s foreign policies
- a veneer of legality/legitimacy (e.g., official invitation, a la Syria) to deflect international intervention

Given the Islamist regime’s careful monitoring of international responses to its actions, failure to offer an adequate response to its provocations is certain to increase its temerity. This is all the more true as the Islamic Republic’s relentless isolation since its inception, exacerbated by the eight-year Iran-Iraq War and prolonged international sanctions, has made defiance and confrontation the main hallmarks of the regime. Conversely, regional developments attending the US-led invasion of Iraq (2003), especially the collapse of autocratic regimes during the Arab upheavals, have created a golden opportunity for Iran to advance its “strategic depth” strategy.

The popular restiveness in Iraq is highly detrimental to this strategy, not least because Baghdad’s subservience to its larger neighbor to the east has enabled Tehran to deploy military force and hardware on its territory and to use its vast spaces to establish a land corridor from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean.

For the moment, Tehran seems disinclined to moderate its anti-protest policy despite international pressure. The long-suffering Iraqis, in turn, disillusioned with their government and fed up with Iranian meddling in their domestic

affairs, are ignoring pleas by prominent Iraqi religious figures, notably Ayatollah Ali Sistani and Muqtada Sadr, to calm the situation.

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