Iran’s foreign policy towards post-invasion Iraq

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Abstract

The US invasion leading to Saddam Hussein’s overthrow in 2003 provided Iran with a unique opportunity to reshape its national and regional position. By taking advantage of the security vacuum in Iraq, Tehran has been employing a broad policy that tries to manipulate its neighbour’s political, military, religious, and economic sectors. This policy, primarily based on (legitimate) security concerns, has two major, interrelated aims: to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a strategic threat and to limit US influence. Iran predominantly uses its longstanding ties with some of Iraq’s foremost politicians and political parties to wield influence. Furthermore, it utilises its brand of Shi’a Islam as a political tool for mobilisation. This paper will examine the roots of Iran’s Iraq-policy, the role of identity, Iraqi and Iranian perceptions, and Tehran’s goals and various strategies. It concludes that Iran, despite playing a major role, has only achieved mixed results, at best. Its policy has been limited by two key, interconnected developments in Iraq, to which Iran’s sometimes contradictory and/or incoherent strategies have contributed substantially. Firstly, Iraqi resentment towards Tehran’s interference, also among Shi’a, has increased significantly. Secondly, a growing sense of Iraqi nationalism seems to be surpassing sectarian and ethnic associations. Therefore, a Shi’a-led government in Iraq does not necessarily mean it is pro-Iranian. However, the Islamic Republic is likely to continue its policy, considering Iraq is its main regional security challenge. In spite of an average record and growing limitations, Iran still has the leverage, resources, knowledge, and potential to influence Iraq’s future considerably.

Keywords: Iran; Iraq; US foreign policy; Shi’a Islam; Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force
Introduction

‘Americans planted a tree in Iraq. They watered it, pruned it, and cared for it. Ask your American friends why they’re leaving now before the tree bears fruit’.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (cited in Mausner et al. 2012: 2)

Although the removal of Saddam Hussein undoubtedly was an unforgettable, victorious moment for both Iran and the majority of the Iraqi population, it did not mean both sides’ security threats were over. Due to several factors, the coalition forces’ goal of stabilising Iraq gradually became more difficult. The failure of Operation Iraqi Freedom resulted in, among others, high levels of insecurity, anti-American sentiment, widespread corruption, and towering crime rates. Additionally, the growing signs of Iranian meddling in Iraqi society increased suspicions and hostility. This in combination with other internal problems, such as sectarian tensions, historical grievances, the destruction of Iraq’s physical infrastructure, and the lack of basic goods and services, resulted in the outbreak of a civil war in 2006. Iraq not only became a battleground for its own people, it also became the platform of strategic competition between two external parties, the US and Iran (ICG 2005; Mausner et al. 2012; Metz 2009; Williams 2009: 47-54).

Iran saw the security vacuum after the invasion as an opportunity to reshape Iraq in order to prevent it from re-emerging as a strategic threat. At least equally important, though interrelated, Tehran also took advantage of the turmoil in Iraq to limit US influence and to keep the coalition forces preoccupied. Therefore, it has designed a ‘whole-of-government policy’ towards Iraq, which consists of political, military, religious, and economic strategies. This paper attempts to provide an in-depth analysis of Iran’s policy towards post-invasion Iraq. It will discuss the roots of this policy, the role of identity, Tehran’s goals, its different strategies, the limitations, and to what extent these strategies have been successful.

The first two chapters will set the framework by providing a historical background (chapter one) and examining the role of identity (chapter two). Subsequently, chapter three will discuss Iraq and Iran’s perceptions of the invasion and their national security. Additionally, it will analyze the Islamic Republic’s goals and its key vectors of influence. The next chapters will examine Tehran’s political strategy (chapter four), military strategy (chapter five), and other soft power strategies (chapter six). The latter comprise the religious and economic strategies employed by Iran. This paper concludes that Iran has only achieved mixed results,
and that it has severely undermined its own policy through applying contradicting and incoherent strategies.

1. Historical background

In order to understand Iran’s foreign policy towards post-invasion Iraq, a historical background of the countries’ relationship and their domestic developments is essential. Barzegar (2008: 48) asserts that ‘[a] major part of Iranian foreign policy towards the new Iraq is influenced by a troubled history of competition and disproportionate Sunni dominance over Iraq’s natural resources, potential economic strength, and key geographical position’.

Despite numerous distinct features and decades of hostility, Iran (formerly Persia) and Iraq also have cultural, religious, and historical ties. Even more than two millennia ago, the Fertile Crescent, in which the present Iran-Iraq border is located, was already contested territory (Bakhash 2004: 12-3; Potter and Sick 2004: 4). Since Shi’a Islam was born in Iraq, Iraqi cities such as Najaf, Samarra, and Karbala have always been long-established centres for theological studies and destinations for religious tourists. Due to this historical association, Shi’a Iran has always seen Iraq, especially the Shi’a-dominated south, as part of its sphere of influence. On the other hand, Iraq has always had close ties to south-western Iran, where many Sunni Arabs live (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 2).

Until 1958, both states were relatively pro-Western monarchies and occasionally collaborated to control (potential) conflict. This changed after the revolution in Iraq (1958), and more importantly, after the Ba’ath Party’s coup in Iraq in 1968 (Bakhash 2004: 11, 24). This brought to power a government that pursued larger ambitions in the Gulf than its predecessors. Its ideology, Ba’athism, contradicted Tehran’s policies (Bakhash 2004: 11-2, 21-4; Owen 2004: 35-6, 138-143). Although Ba’athism was based on secular, Arab nationalist, and socialist principles, in practice, it was anything but liberating since it was used as a tool for control and mobilisation. Kurds and Shi’a Arabs were brutally oppressed and the regime became increasingly associated with dictatorship, tribal loyalty, ethnic affiliation, terror, and torture (Makiya 1998; Milton-Edwards 2000: 64-6; Owen 2004: 139-143).

A crucial event that heightened enmity was the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Gause 2009: 274-7). In the 1970s, the shah’s (king) rule became increasingly fragile through growing
opposition because of oppression and economic, social, and cultural tensions. The opposition, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, ultimately overthrew the shah’s regime in February 1979 (CQ Press 2007: 240-2; Owen 2004: 82-3). Although the opposition consisted of various political groups, power was consolidated by the Iranian clergy, with Khomeini in command. On 1 April 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran was declared (CQ Press 2007: 240; Mandaville 2009: 177). Khomeini pronounced that the preceding dynasty experienced a form of ‘Westoxification’ and that the only solution was a constitution based on Islamic principles. Accordingly, the new constitution derived from Khomeini’s doctrine of vilayat-i faqih (the rule of the just jurist), which validates the religious involvement in politics (Mandaville 2009: 177, 180; Owen 2004: 83-4). According to Mandaville (2009: 177), it implies that ‘...political power should rest in the hands of those possessing the most superior understanding of Islamic law’. The most powerful position is that of Supreme Leader, which Khomeini assigned himself. The Supreme Leader has a final say over all security issues and direct control of the police, army, media, and judiciary (Mandaville 2009: 177, 180; Owen 2004: 84). Another important feature of Khomeini’s ideology was anti-imperialism (Felter and Fishman 2008: 14-5).

Initially Iraq welcomed the revolution, but this drastically changed from mid-1979 onwards. While Shi’a resistance in Iraq rose, Iranian proclamations about spreading the Islamic revolution increased as well. The Iranian clerics also called upon the Iraqi people to bring down the regime (CQ Press 2007: 100; Gause 2009: 275-6). Tensions grew and incidents mounted, such as assassination attempts, executions, the expulsion of about 35,000 Iraqi Shi’a with Iranian roots to Iran, and border conflicts (Bakhash 2004: 21; Gause 2009: 275-6). Ultimately, Hussein decided to go to war, although his exact motives to go to war are not entirely clear. He undoubtedly saw the internal instability of post-revolution Iran as an opportunity, but also increasingly feared that the rising domestic turmoil was coordinated by Tehran (Bakhash 2004: 21; CQ Press 2007: 265; Gause 2009: 274-6). Therefore, as Gause (2009: 276) argues, Hussein also chose to go to war because ‘...a continuation of the status quo would only bring him more domestic problems’. Iran primarily aimed to overthrow Hussein, and if feasible, to put a Shi’a government in charge (Bakhash 2004: 21-2). What followed is known as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88): a long, devastating war in which two societies were ruined and approximately one million people died. The war ended in 1988, when Iran accepted a UN-mediated ceasefire. After eight years of intense fighting, neither side had gained something from the war (CQ Press 2007: 100-3; Gause 2009: 276-7).
A key issue regarding the war was the role of ideology, which will be examined in the next chapter. The war also resulted in deeply entrenched mutual mistrust and unresolved issues. Some of these issues are the disagreement about the strategically important Shatt al-Arab waterway’s demarcation, Iranian reparation claims, the repatriation of prisoners of war, and both countries’ support for some of each other’s opposition groups (Bakhash 2004: 23; CQ Press 2007: 247). In 2003, a US-led invasion overthrew Saddam, which provided Iran with an opportunity to strengthen its own national and regional position. Since the overthrow, Tehran has been employing a broad strategy in order to reshape Iraq to prevent it from re-emerging as a strategic threat.

2. The role of identity

Throughout Middle Eastern history, political identity has always been one of the key factors shaping politics (Hinnebusch 2009). This is no different regarding Iran-Iraq relations. Therefore, this chapter examines the role of identity, stresses its importance, and concludes that the assumption that Iraqi Shi’a generally are pro-Iranian is false and simplistic.

According to Hinnebusch (2009: 168), ‘identity is...rooted in shared history, faith, and language, facilitated by social communication, and aroused by conflict with the other over land and resources’. This definition demonstrates identity’s two-sidedness. On the one hand, a shared identity is a catalyst of mobilisation and collaboration in order to conquer a common problem. On the other hand, it automatically conceptualises an ‘other’, and it is against these ‘others’ that the group typifies itself. Prolonged conflict is a likely outcome if identity dissimilarities are reinforced by struggles over power (and thus, material resources, especially land). Conversely, if shared identity converges with a state’s material structures, i.e. its internationally recognised borders and economic interdependence, it is the most powerful tool for state legitimacy and stability (i.e. a nation-state). While only a few Middle Eastern states approximate the nation-state model (e.g. Egypt), the majority is divided by ethnicity, sect and/or tribe, despite a shared language and religion (Hinnebusch 2009).

A brief historical background of the Middle East is crucial in order to understand the current states system. Following the break-up of the Ottoman Empire in the late 1910s, the French and British colonisers drew new state boundaries, of which the vast majority intersected ethnic, sectarian, and tribal communities. This resulted in regional incongruence between territory and (frustrated) identities, and, as mentioned above, with protracted conflict as a
likely outcome. This pervasive mismatch between identity and territory through the imposition of state boundaries is the main reason for the region’s conflict-proneness (Hinnebusch 2009; Kumaraswamy 2008; Owen 2004: 5-17; Rogan 2009).

Iraq was created by the colonisers through uniting three of the former empire’s provinces – Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. Consequently, the artificially created state of Iraq consisted of several ethnic groups, sects, and tribes with no shared history of statehood (Hinnebusch 2009: 157; Noorbaksh 2008). Hinnebusch (2009: 159) argues that ‘Iraq’s wars are ultimately explicable in terms of its artificial character, arbitrary borders, and intractable nation-building imperatives’. Contemporary Iraq has a population of approximately 31 million and its ethnic groups are Arabs (75-80 percent), Kurds (15-20 percent), and Turkoman, Assyrians, or other (5 percent). Its sects mainly consist of Shi’a (60-65 percent) and Sunnis (32-35 percent). About 3 percent is Christian or other (CIA World Factbook 2012a). Basically, Iraq comprises three nations, of which the largest one is Shi’a Arab (60 percent). The other two, Sunni Arabs and Kurds, each roughly represent 20 percent of the population (King-Irani 2007: 92).

Unlike Iraq, non-Arab Iran (known as Persia until 1935) managed to resist Ottoman rule. Notwithstanding the occasional occupation of Ottoman, British, and Soviet forces, Iran has never been a real colony (CQ Press 2007: 240; Owen 2004: 5; Rogan 2009: 33-4). Even though Iran has not been ‘created’ by external actors, it also is a multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian, and multi-tribal state. It has a population of almost 79 million people, of which the majority is Persian (61 percent). Other ethnic groups are the Azeris (16 percent), Kurds (10 percent) Baluchis (6 percent), Lurs (6 percent), Arabs (2 percent), Turkmen and Turkic (2 percent), or other (2 percent). In terms of religion, Iran is significantly less divided than Iraq. Approximately 98 percent is Muslim, of which 89 percent is Shi’a (the state religion), and 9 percent Sunni (CIA World Factbook 2012b). Just like in Iraq, this diversity of peoples has led to internal conflict, albeit less extreme. For instance, the discrimination of ethnic minorities such as Arabs, Kurds, and Azeris resulted in several (violent) protests (Amnesty International 2012; Bradley 2006; Janabi 2009).

The most discussed ‘classifications’ of identity regarding Iran-Iraq relations are, without a doubt, sectarianism, ethnicity, and ideology. The Iran-Iraq War provides plenty of examples to demonstrate their importance. The war was a clash of identity: Islamist versus Ba’athist (pan-Islamic versus pan-Arab), Persian versus Arab, and Shi’a versus Sunni. Both countries’ authorities repeatedly asserted these matters to demonise the enemy. Khomeini and other
Iranian clerics figured the war as a battle for the defence of Islam, Iran, and the very spirit of the revolution (Bakhash 2004: 21-3). On the Iraqi side, Hussein depicted the war as ‘a struggle against the heterodoxy of Shi’ism’ (Mandaville 2009: 183). According to Iraqi officials, Iran was threatening the whole Arab world, which Iraq was guarding. They described Iran’s goal to enforce ‘Persian racial dominance’ over the Arabs. Additionally, Hussein named the Khuzestan province of Iran, inhabited by many Arabs and therefore called ‘Arabistan’ by Arabs, ‘usurped Arab land’. Saddam portrayed Iraq as the ‘shield’ to the Gulf states against Iran’s regional ambitions, which resulted in considerable financial support from Gulf states (Bakhash 2004: 22-4). As Bakhash (2004: 23) notes, ‘[n]ot since the first Safavid-Ottoman war in the sixteenth century, and the Shi’a-Sunni character of that war, has ideology and propaganda played so major a role in a conflict between Iran and a neighbouring power... This ideological dimension of the Iran-Iraq War contributed to its intensity and its prolongation, to its destructive force, and to its terrible cost in human life. The war left a legacy of mistrust that would prove difficult to overcome and of contentious issues that would prove difficult to resolve’. This view of mutual distrust is still entrenched in both countries after the overthrow of Hussein (Barzegar 2008: 48).

The Sunni-Shi’a dichotomy plays an essential role in Iran’s foreign policy, notably towards Iraq. Since Tehran’s focus seems to be on cooperating with Iraqi Shi’a groups, it is important to discuss the roots of this sectarian schism briefly. While the majority of the world’s Muslims adhere to the Sunni sect of Islam (about 85-90 percent), approximately 10-15 percent is a follower of the Shi’a branch. Iran is the largest Shi’a country, and only one of the few states, including Iraq, where the Shi’a constitute a majority (Blanchard 2009). Around 70 percent of the populace in the Gulf region is Shi’a, of which the bulk inhabits Iran and Iraq (Terhalle 2007: 69). The separation between the two dates back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, which resulted in a discussion about his succession. Most of the Muslims (who later became known as Sunnis), argued that this should be the most capable person, whereas the others (the Shi’a) opted for a family member of the Prophet. From this moment, the sects split and have been following their own convictions. Although both sects follow the same fundamental Islamic dogmas, their differences have led to (violent) conflict throughout history (Blanchard 2009).

What does this mean for Iran-Iraq relations? Tehran clearly tries to bond with Iraqi Shi’a and increase their political participation through its brand of Shi’ism. Although Iran not only supports various Shi’a groups (occasionally Kurds too, for instance), they definitely form the
core of Iran’s policy (ICG 2005). An important question here is to what extent Shi’ism implies a tie between Iraqi Shi’a and Iranian Shi’a. However, assessing the role of identity in the Middle East is difficult because ethnicity, sect, tribal affiliation, and ideology intermix. Historical evidence abounds that identical differences and similarities should not be taken at face value and are not as clear-cut as they might seem. For example, during the Iran-Iraq War, the majority of Shi’a Arabs fought against Iran. Furthermore, in response to claims that Iran is planning to create a ‘Shi’a Crescent’ in the region, Terhalle (2007: 70) argues that ‘the Shi’a-rise lacks both the political and religious cohesiveness of what is conceived of as a monolithic Shi’a bloc with Iran as its driving force’. One of the arguments for his statement is that the Shi’a populations are shaped by local political, economic, and social circumstances (Terhalle 2007: 79). This is also the case in Iraq, where many Shi’a resent Iran’s interference and do not perceive its notion of vilayat-i faqih as a suitable political model (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 15-7). Moreover, recent developments in Iraq also suggest that an increasing sense of Iraqi nationalism has trumped sectarian and ethnic associations (Rahimi 2012: 36). Consequently, a Shi’a-led government in Iraq does not necessarily mean a pro-Iranian regime (Yaphe 2008).

Ultimately, identity has always been and will remain a crucial factor in Iran-Iraq relations. In terms of identity, the next chapters will demonstrate that while Tehran extensively uses its brand of Shi’a Islam as a political tool for mobilisation, the majority of Iraqi Shi’a resent Iran’s influence.

3. Perceptions and Tehran’s interests

Without question, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was a jubilant moment for the majority of the Iraqi people. Although Iran was more than happy to see its arch enemy’s ouster, it was also concerned about the US’ unilateral decisions and arrival of US troops in Iraq (ICG 2005: 8-9). While Tehran saw the vacuum created by the US invasion as a chance to shape Iraq towards its own interests, and therefore to redefine its own national and regional position, it soon became clear that both Iraq and Iran were facing several threats. This chapter will discuss both sides’ perceptions of these (potential) threats. Additionally, it will examine Iran’s main objectives and its key actors.
3.1. Iraqi perceptions

Extensive research conducted in Iraq by International Crisis Group (ICG 2005) reported that Iraqis were already widely suspicious and regularly hostile towards supposed Iranian activity in the initial stages after the invasion. These statements were not only limited to Sunni Arabs, also Shi’a Arabs and Kurds asserted similar perceptions. Numerous actors, such as Iraqi tribal leaders and Iraqi, US, and EU officials stated they picked up signs of Iranian interference. Though proof was elusive, there were widespread and diverse accusations. These consisted of, for example, Iran providing significant amounts of money for governorates (especially in the predominantly Shi’a southeast of Iraq), attempts of bribery, the infiltration of intelligence agents, Iranian proxies, Tehran trying to establish an Iraqi theocracy, intentions to destabilise Iraq, and funding, training, and arming insurgents (ICG 2005: 1-6, 13-21). The king of Jordan, Abdullah II, incriminated the Iranian regime of sending more than one million Iranians into Iraq, in order to vote for the January 2005 elections, and thus, manipulate the results (ICG 2005: 1). A couple of factors counter this statement. First, a considerable amount of the ‘Iranians’ sent to Iraq, were in fact former exiles or Iraqis who fled the country during Saddam’s rule and now returned to their country. This does not necessarily imply that they are serving Iranian interests. Secondly, a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees document (UNHCR 2012) illustrates that the number of returning Iraqis in the period 2003-2011 has been much lower (527,186). Furthermore, a UNHCR officer told ICG (2005: 6) in 2005 that the majority of people crossing the border into Iraq consisted of pilgrims.

More importantly, ICG’s research (2005: 4-6) also suggests a wide interpretation of ‘Iranians’. Interviews illustrated that Iraqis also referred to certain Iraqi groups when they were accusing ‘Iranians’ of interfering in Iraqi affairs. The respondents’ designations included any of the following five groups. The first are Iraqi Shi’a ‘of Persian origin’, whose denomination derives from Ottoman legacy, when they chose to register as Persians. When Iraq became independent, it continued this designation on Iraqis’ identity cards. A lot of them were deported to Iran under the Ba’ath regime’s rule. Many have returned to Iraq, but are perceived by some as ‘Iranians’, even though they were forced to reside in Iran. The same applies to Fayli Kurds, who mainly live in the area between Baghdad and the Iranian border. Several thousand have returned to Iraq since 2003. Also Iraqis with an Iranian family name and/or those that speak Persian are perceived as Iranians. Additionally, Iraqi Shi’a clerics and members of their parties are suspected of being Iranian agents. Finally, Iraqis who fought against Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War are seen as traitors as well. The last two designations
especially apply to members of the Iraqi political party the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which changed its name into the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in 2007, in order to improve its image (ICG 2005: i, 4-6; Visser 2009: 12). With respect to this wide range of designations of ‘Iranians’, claims that a huge amount of Iranians were sent into Iraq, do have some credibility. However, an important note is that this does not necessarily mean they are ‘agents of Iran’.

The sparse, available, and reliable proof that ICG (2005: 6) was able to collect, though, suggests that Iran indeed took advantage of the chaos in post-invasion Iraq in order to expand its power. There is no question Iran has fundamental interests in neighbouring Iraq. It is significant for Tehran due to historical, political, security, economic, geographic, and religious reasons (Barzegar 2005; 2008; Taremi 2005).

3.2. Iranian perceptions and Tehran’s goals in Iraq

Iran maintained an ambivalent stance regarding the 2003 US-led invasion in Iraq. On the one hand, Tehran opposed the incursion since international laws were violated and it entailed ‘colonialist ambitions’ (ICG 2005: 8-9). Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (cited in ICG 2005: 9) argued that ‘[t]he US claims that its objective is the elimination of Saddam and the Ba’athist regime. This is, of course, a lie. Its real aim is to appropriate OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) and to swallow up the region’s oil resources, to offer a closer support to the Zionist regime and to plot more closely against Islamic Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia’. Furthermore, since the US military was already present in the Gulf and in Afghanistan, the invasion resulted in Iran being encircled by thousands of US troops. Historical tensions between the US and Iran, the US proclaiming Iran as one of the members of the ‘axis of evil’, and the US invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to impose regime change increased Iran’s fears that it could likely be the next victim of US foreign policy. On the other hand, possibly no other country was happier about Saddam’s removal than Iran (Ansari 2007: 58-62; Hooglund 2006: 173; Taremi 2005: 35). The overthrow of the Ba’ath regime offered Iran a unique and momentous opportunity to shape Iraq, and therefore, strengthen its own national and regional position (Barzegar 2005: 49-50; Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 1).

Although sources vary about the intensity of the strategies employed by the Islamic Republic, most of them agree about Iran’s main two, to a large extent interrelated, objectives in Iraq.
The first is to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a threat. Here the term ‘threat’ encompasses a broad range, namely threats of a political, military, religious, and/or economic nature. The second aim is to limit US influence in Iraq and to keep the US preoccupied. By doing so, Iran hopes this will deter the US from invading Iran (Ansari 2007: 58-62; Guzansky 2011: 97-8; ICG 2005: i-ii; Mausner et al. 2012: 14; Taremi 2005: 30). While some authors also focus on the role played by ideology or Iran seeking regional hegemony, Tehran’s policy in Iraq is primarily based on national security concerns. That does not mean ideology and regional aspirations are not important or that they do not play a role, because they certainly do, but a close examination suggests that both are subordinated to national security. Ideology, for instance, is only one source of power and has been used by Iran as a political instrument (which will be discussed in the following chapters). Since Iran’s security has always been heavily influenced by Iraq’s levels of security (or insecurity), Iraq’s future is Tehran’s main regional security challenge (Barzegar 2005; 2008).

So if the main goal is to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a threat, what then, could be considered a threat in the eyes of Iran? In terms of military affairs, Ba’athist Iraq was a superpower in the Middle East. However, due to two wars, the invasion, subsequent US policies (such as the de-Baathification and disbanding the Iraqi army and intelligence services), and the widespread infiltration of militias into the Iraqi security forces (ISF), Iraq’s security apparatus became practically non-existent. Iran wants to prevent Iraq from becoming that military superpower again (Hills 2009: 110-4; 2010: 310-2; Mausner et al. 2012: 20; Pirmie and O’Connell 2008: 71-2; Williams 2009: 15, 46, 267).

Politically, post-invasion Iraq poses several threats to Iran. Firstly, since a Shi’a-dominated regime is likely to come out of the elections due to their demographic weight, Tehran fears an unfriendly, potentially hostile, Iraqi government led by secular and nationalist Shi’a (the majority of the Shi’a population) who might be seeking Sunni cooperation (Guzansky 2011: 97; Visser 2009: 28). Secondly, the Islamic Republic probably fears even more that Iraq might become a well-armed US client state or US ‘puppet’. Therefore, Iran seeks to limit American influence in Iraq, because the US could use its neighbour as a platform from which it could invade Iran or put more pressure on Iran’s regime and/or its nuclear program (Barzegar 2008: 48; Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 2; ICG 2005: 11; Taremi 2005: 32-3). Thirdly, Iran could be threatened by the emergence of a competing political model in Iraq. This could either be a democratic or alternative religious system. If a democratic political system with equal rights for every citizen, irrespective of ethnicity, sect, tribe, or class, can be
implemented successfully, it could present a danger to the appeal and legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. Oppressed minority groups in Iran, such as the Kurds and Arabs, might be inspired and could rise up more intensely against the authorities (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 2; Guzansky 2011: 97; ICG 2005: i). Fourthly, Iran also has concerns about the political future of the Kurds. Even though the Kurdish insurgencies in Iran have been less severe than the ones in Turkey and Iraq, they are still seen as a significant potential danger to the Iranian regime. If Iraqi Kurds manage to gain more autonomy (or even become independent), the disaffected Iranian Kurds might be motivated to accomplish the same, and could therefore threaten Iran’s territorial integrity (Barzegar 2005: 50, 54; 2008: 52-3; ICG 2005: 10). Fifthly, other threats to Iran are Sunni extremist militants or groups in Iraq, such as Al-Qaeda (Khan 2010: 101), and chronic instability or civil war in Iraq, which is (also) very likely to result in a ‘spill-over effect’ (ICG 2005: 11, 22).

Economically, Iraq has always been of significant importance to the Islamic Republic. Because Iran and Iraq respectively possess the fourth and fifth biggest oil reserves in the world (CIA World Factbook 2012c), Tehran sees its neighbour’s significant oil reserves as a source to re-emerge as a strong competitor regarding the export of oil and oil products. Possibilities are that Iran could lose influence in the OPEC or experience reduced revenues due to lowering oil prices (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 12). Religiously, Iran is afraid that under a new Iraqi government, the Iraqi shrine of Najaf will re-emerge as the most important learning centre of Shi’a Islam. In terms of historical and religious significance, Najaf overshadows Iran’s most holy city, Qom, but the Iraqi city has suffered under the Ba’ath Party’s rule, whereas Qom has bloomed since the revolution. Because Iranian ayatollahs in Iraqi shrines advocate a moderate interpretation of political Islam and reject the idea of vilayat-i faqih, Iran fears a re-emerging Najaf might lead to Iranian clerics moving to Iraq and increased criticism of the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy (ICG 2005: 11-2, 18-9; Katzman 2007: 6).

Despite several potential threats, Tehran also saw plenty of opportunities to influence Iraq’s future with the Ba’ath regime gone. Iran’s ‘whole-of-government approach’, as Eisenstadt et al. (2011) call it, consists of numerous overlapping political, military, religious, and economic strategies cautiously employed in order to both prevent Iraq re-emerging as a threat and limit American regional dominance. A key part in these strategies is played by Iran’s longstanding ties with some of Iraq’s foremost politicians, parties, and militias (Eisenstadt et al. 2011; ICG 2005).
Tehran’s influence in its neighbour’s territory is complex and not easy to assess, not only because it regularly lacks hard evidence, but also because its actions and intentions regularly are contradictory and/or poorly coordinated (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: ix, 4-5, 11; Felter and Fishman 2008: 12; ICG 2005: i, 17). Moreover, though not surprising, mostly when Iran has been accused of meddling in Iraq, Iranian officials deny any interference (ICG 2005: 17; Mausner et al. 2012: 78). It seems like the Islamic Republic does not want a destabilised Iraq, but that it also does not want it to fully stabilise either (ICG 2005: 10). Therefore, it seeks to maintain a weak Iraq and manipulate its politics by encouraging a democratic process in such a way that a pro-Iranian Shi’a-dominated government will be elected (Eisenstadt et al. 2011; ICG 2005).

Although this paper focuses on Iran’s influence in Iraq, recent events in Syria have added another dimension to Iran’s Iraq-policy. In order to prevent Sunnis from overthrowing the Syrian regime, the only Arab ally of Iran, keeping president Bashar al-Assad in power seems to have become an important objective for Iran as well. Because Iranian agents are having significant influence in Iraq, Tehran now has, to some extent, direct access to Syria. It reportedly exploits this by sending arms and/or fighters into Syria via Iraq to support the regime, while at the same time increasing control of the Iraq-Syria border to prevent weapons being smuggled into Syria to the opposition groups. Furthermore, Tehran might try to induce or even compel the Iraqi government to support the Syrian regime (Katzman 2012: 32-4; Mausner et al. 2012: 14, 94-6; Wong 2012).

3.3. Iran’s key actors

In order to assess Iranian influence in Iraq, it is essential to examine whether it actually is Iran’s central leadership that is coordinating its foreign policy towards Iraq. This is made more difficult due to Tehran’s complex regime structure, which has often been a frustration for Western analysts. While an Iranian official told ICG that Iran’s Iraq-policy is not coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but by the Supreme National Security Council, Western and Iraqi diplomats believe Iraq-policy is organised by a division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Ministry of Intelligence (ICG 2005: 14-5). In the initial phase of the post-invasion period, Iran’s intelligence network was allegedly active. It was generally believed it had sent undercover agents in order to collect intelligence, employ Iraqi refugees and exiles going back to Iraq, and recruit informants (which was tempting for
poor Iraqis due to salary offers). After the initial phase, more and more evidence appeared that it indeed was the IRGC playing an essential role in Iraq (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 7; Felter and Fishman 2008: 13; ICG 2005: 12-3). The IRGC, or Pasdaran, was created just after the revolution in 1979, in order to protect the clergy’s interests (Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011: 45-7). As a result of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC and other branches of Iran’s security apparatus have become greatly familiar with its neighbour’s physical and political infrastructure (ICG 2005: 15). Nowadays the Pasdaran is Iran’s strongest military body (Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011: 45-7). Especially the Qods (Jerusalem) Force, a special branch of the IRGC (IRGC-QF), has been particularly active in Iraq. Established in the early 1990s, it is the IRGC’s unit that serves Iran’s interests abroad (among others in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and Iraq), and reports directly to Supreme Leader Khamenei (Felter and Fishman 2008: 15-8; Guzansky 2011: 86; Mausner et al. 2012: 75-6; Rahimi 2012: 32). Several IRGC-QF members have been captured by US forces in Iraq. In December 2006, two senior officers were arrested in Baghdad in a compound that supposedly belonged to ISCI’s leader, Abdulaziz al-Hakim. One month later, five more IRGC-QF operatives were apprehended in Irbil. The key target of this raid was allegedly staying at a house of the Kurdish Democratic Party’s (KDP) chief and Iraqi Kurdistan’s president, Massoud Barzani (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 7; Mausner et al. 2012: 60). Therefore, these events not only demonstrate the IRGC-QF’s involvement, they also, according to Eisenstadt et al. (2011: 7), “...highlight the close ties between the IRGC-QF and prominent Iraqi politicians and officials and underscore the ease with which Qods Force personnel operate in Iraq”. Furthermore, the fact that both the former and current Iranian ambassador in post-2003 Iraq, respectively Hassan Kazemi-Qomi and Hassan Danaifar, are both IRGC-QF officers, emphasises the key role of the Qods Force (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 6-7; Guzansky 2011: 87). The most important Iranian in Iraq is Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the IRGC-QF (Chulov 2011; Rahimi 2012: 32, 34). According to various sources, he played a considerable role in forming the 2005 Iraqi government and in mediating ceasefires between militias, but also between the Iraqi government and insurgent groups (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 7; Guzansky 2011: 89). In a message to US General David Petraeus in 2008, Suleimani confirmed both that the Iranian ambassador is a IRGC-QF officer and that it is not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs running foreign policy in Iraq, but the Qods Force (Chulov 2011; Mausner et al. 2012: 76). Undoubtedly, the IRGC-QF is the primary Iranian source of leverage in Iraq, but it is unclear whether they are coordinated by the central authorities in Tehran. However, due to Iraq’s importance to Iran, the significantly increased political power of the IRGC (Hen-Tov and
Gonzalez 2011), and the IRGC-QF’s close connection to Khamenei, it is very likely that Iran’s Iraq-policy coincides with Iranian senior leadership’s interests.

Apart from the IRGC-QF, Iran wields influence via its embassy in Baghdad and its consulates in Sulaymaniyah, Irbil, Basra, and Karbala (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 6). Another important vector of influence is Tehran’s network of informers and agents. It consists of both Iranians and Iraqis, of which some of the latter are against Iranian interference, but are tempted by the money offered by Iran. The network is, among others, responsible for the distribution of money through which Iran literally buys influence. Iranian money has been invested in numerous projects, such as social welfare, religious tourism, supporting political parties, and construction (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 7). The next two chapters will discuss the most significant Iraqi ‘agents of Iran’.

4. Political strategy

‘They are putting chips on red and black, and whatever is in between’.

A US official about Iran’s political strategy in Iraq (cited in Ignatius 2010).

Despite risks perceived by Iran, Tehran also saw growing opportunities to influence Iraq’s future. Iran has been employing a broad political strategy, which is the core of its ‘whole-of-government approach’. This chapter will examine Iran’s political goals and strategy, its supposed Iraqi political allies, and the results of these policies.

4.1. Goals and strategy

There is a general consensus among scholars about the Islamic Republic’s political goals in Iraq. The key one is to ensure a pro-Iranian Shi’a-led government in Iraq. Ideally, this government should remain too weak to pose a threat (especially in terms of military power), but strong enough to preserve Iraq’s territorial integrity and prevent chronic instability and/or civil war. Through assembling a friendly government with allies in high-ranking positions, Iran wants to limit US influence in Iraq and prevent its neighbour from re-emerging as a threat (Eisenstadt et al. 2011; ICG 2005).

Tehran has employed several strategies in order to generate a pro-Iranian Iraqi Shi’a-dominated government. The first one is promoting democratic elections, while at the same
timing trying to unite the Iraqi Shi’a. Due to the fact that the Shi’a comprise approximately 60 percent of Iraq’s population, Iran hopes the elections’ results will resemble this demographic advantage (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 3; ICG 2005: 10-12). Contrary to accusations, Iran does not seek to convert Iraq into a theocracy. Iranian officials declared that clerical rule is not an option in Iraq considering its multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian character (ICG 2005: 11). Iran’s support of democratic elections coincides with US interests, resulting in strategic competition in Iraq between Iran and the US, in which Tehran has three advantages over the US (ICG 2005: 11; Mausner et al. 2012). The first is Iran’s extensive network in Iraq, which forms a key part of its policy. Except for the IRGC-QF, the most significant levers of Tehran in Iraq are its longstanding ties with three Iraqi Shi’a Islamist political parties. These will be discussed in the next paragraph (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 3-7). Secondly, Tehran has more experience in post-conflict reconstruction due to the turmoil after the Iranian Revolution. Lastly, in contrast to the majority of the coalition’s members, many Iranians are proficient Arabic speakers (Ansari 2007: 60).

The second strategy of Iran is one of ‘portfolio diversification’. Visser (2009: 4) states that ‘[i]n general, Iran’s policy in Iraq seems to be to co-opt as many Iraqi Shi’a factions as possible’. Iran not only maintains longstanding ties, it has also established relations with, or has co-opted, other Shi’a movements (such as the Sadrists), Kurdish factions (some of which were also already supported by Iran decades ago), and armed groups. Political rivalry among some of these groups has occasionally led to violent conflict (ICG 2005: 15-23; Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 3-7). Major points of discussion were (and still are), for instance, the degree of federalism/centralism and the role of Iran. Prior to December 2011, the timetable of the withdrawal of US troops was a fiercely debated topic as well (Barzegar 2008: 51-3). While some might argue that this, to some extent, demonstrates Iran’s lack of coherence or poor coordination because of its efforts to unite the Shi’a, it seems more plausible that this is a deliberate strategy. By collaborating on as many (predominantly Shi’a Islamist) fronts as possible, Tehran attempts to maximise its leverage in Iraq. Since Iran’s activities take place both inside and outside Iraq’s government and on both sides of key national debates, Iran simply secures its interests. Irrespective of political outcomes, the Islamic Republic will have some form of influence (Visser 2009:24). Moreover, Tehran knows any Iraqi government will need a good relation with Iran (Yaphe 2008: 46-7). Therefore, Barzegar (2008: 51) asserts that ‘[b]eing encircled in a Sunni neighbourhood, having less than sympathetic
neighbouring states, and trying to balance its domestic politics and regional relations, a Shi’a government of any kind would inevitably require Iran’s political support’.

Through these extensive networks, Iran tries to influence Iraq’s political landscape. Tehran has reportedly encouraged these groups (and preferred individual candidates as well) to participate in politics and assisted them with political advise and financial, organisational, and logistical support (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 3-7; Guzansky 2011: 88-90; Ignatius 2010). Some claim Iranian agents also bribe Iraqi candidates (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 7; Guzansky 2011: 90; ICG 2005: 13) or even try to assassinate influential figures (Ignatius 2010; Mausner 2012: 76). According to a report of the US Embassy in Baghdad released by Wikileaks, Iran is providing $100-200 million to its Iraqi allies on an annual basis (The Guardian 2010).

Another method of increasing support for the main Iranian-backed Shi’a Islamist parties is Tehran’s commitment to grassroots work and post-conflict reconstruction. By reaching out to the poor and unemployed Iraqi Shi’a via welfare and social services, the Islamic Republic hopes to produce a more pro-Iranian public opinion too (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 12; ICG 2011: 13).

4.2. Political allies

Although Tehran has tried to cooperate with all Shi’a and Kurdish political parties, the foremost alleged Iraqi vectors of Iranian influence are three Shi’a Islamist parties with longstanding ties to Iran. These were Iraqi opposition groups in the Ba’athist era and many members of these movements were granted political asylum by Iran after either having fled the country or being exiled by the Iraqi regime (Guzansky 2011: 89). While officials of these parties have proclaimed to be operating independently from Iran, it is widely assumed, especially among Sunni Arabs and secular Shi’a, that these groups (notably ISCI) are affiliated with Iran (ICG 2011: 15-19). While they were adherents of clerical rule during their stay in Iran, they moderated their interpretation of political Islam after returning to Iraq (Fikkins 2005; ICG 2005: 15-9; Visser 2009: 13). Tehran not only supports Shi’a Islamist movements because of historical ties and ideological similarities, they also constitute a better alternative than secular nationalist parties, which consist of many anti-Iranian Arab nationalists (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 3).

The first ally is ISCI, which was founded in 1982 in Tehran by Iraqi refugees and exiles. The party’s former military wing, the Badr Corps, was set up and trained by the IRGC and fought
alongside the Iranians in the Iran-Iraq War. Prior to 2003, it was also considered a significant division within the IRGC-QF regarding operations against the Iraqi government and the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organisation (MKO), an Iranian opposition group harboured in Iraq. Many members returned to Iraq after the fall of the regime in 2003. There they were, and still are, seen as traitors. Despite the fact that several party’s officials deny Iranian influence, it is believed to be the most pro-Iranian faction, which at times is even openly acknowledged (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 5; Felter and Fishman, 2008: 7, 19-21, 26-7; ICG 2005: 15-7; Katzman 2009: 5; Visser 2009: 13). A US Embassy document released by Wikileaks (The Guardian 2010) stated that ISCI is provided approximately $70 million yearly by Iran. Ironically, ISCI was also significantly empowered by the US after the invasion (Visser 2009: 12-3).

The second movement is the Badr Organisation, which formerly was known as the Badr Corps. Upon return in Iraq, the Badr Corps changed its name into the Badr Organisation and declared to focus more on politics and social welfare. From 2003 onwards, it gradually operated more independently from ISCI. Many of its members were recruited for (but others also infiltrated) positions in the Iraqi army, intelligence services, and special forces, such as the Ministry of Interior’s special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams. From these posts, they reportedly constitute a significant source of Iranian influence (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 5-8; Katzman 2007: 2).

The third party is the Islamic Dawa Party, which was established in 1957. The faction was supported by Iran because of its resistance against the Ba’ath Party. Just like in ISCI’s case, many of Dawa’s members were persecuted and are former deportees. Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq’s prime minister since 2006, is Dawa’s leader. Although Maliki shares the Islamic Republic’s ideology to a large extent (except for the notion of clerical rule), he has tried to balance US and Iranian interests (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 5; ICG 2005: 15-7; Mausner et al. 2012: 53-5; Shanahan 2004). Over the years, Iran has gained large control over Dawa (Visser 2009: 15).

Some other parties are reportedly connected to Iran, but these links have proven problematic. One of these is the Sadrist movement, a key nationalist and Islamic party led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who rapidly emerged as one of the most influential people in Iraq. Both his father, Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr, and father-in-law, Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, the founder of the Islamic Dawa Party, were executed by the Ba’ath regime. The Sadrist’s base is Sadr City, a densely-populated, poor Shi’a neighbourhood in Baghdad. By being the only Shi’a faction
against the occupation, and providing welfare, social services, and security through its militia, the Mahdi Army (or Jaish al-Mahdi), the party received considerable support in the large Shi’a lower-class communities. Many of the recruits for its militia are local, young, and unemployed Shi’a (Cockburn 2008; Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 5-6; Hills 2010: 310; Mausner et al. 2012: 55). Despite Sadr embracing clerical rule (although not as strict as Iran’s doctrine), he constantly emphasised Iraqi nationalism (ICG 2005: 17). The Sadrist faction has not only openly criticised Iran’s role, but also other Shi’a parties such as ISCI and Dawa for not having stayed in Iraq during the Ba’athist era and for being Iranian proxies (ICG 2005: 17-8; Visser 2009: 18). Sadr also became a key voice for Shi’a resistance against the occupation. His Mahdi Army, comprising approximately 60,000 fighters in 2003, was deeply involved in insurgencies against the coalition forces and sectarian cleansing during the Iraqi civil war in 2006-2007. Iran is believed to be supporting the Sadrists with political advice, money (approximately $8 million per month), and weapons (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 5-6; Ignatius 2010; Mausner et al. 2012: 55). However, the relation between the two seems incompatible, since Sadr strongly opposes Iran’s role in Iraqi politics (but seems more than happy to receive financial support), and Tehran considers the Mahdi Army a ‘wildcard’ because of their unmanageable use of violence (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 8; Felter and Fishman 2008: 8). According to Mustafa Zahrani (cited in ICG 2005: 18), an Iranian senior officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘[p]eople do not like how Sadr is trying to play a role in Iraq... [but] the consequences of what Sadr is doing may be beneficial for Iran’. Former foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi confirmed some of the widely assumed links as well. Although he denied any financial support, he did admit Tehran attempted to control Sadr (ICG 2005: 18). Therefore, it appears that Iran’s support for the Sadrists has only been short-lived and for tactical purposes, mainly for undermining the coalition forces’ presence (Barzegar 2008: 51; ICG 2005: 18). However, this might have changed since the Sadrists have gained substantial political power after the 2010 parliamentary elections. Furthermore, it seems that Tehran has gained some influence over Sadr after he fled to Iran in 2007. In Qom he was reunited with Ayatollah al-Haeri, who took on a role as a mentor for Sadr after Sadr’s father was killed. Despite a tense relationship at times, al-Haeri is perceived as one of Tehran’s (few) levers over Sadr (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 6, 11; Visser 2009: 19).

Iran also exerts some control via the main two Kurdish parties, the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. These ties predate 2003 as well, since Kurdish rebels (peshmerga) cooperated with the Iranians in the Iran-Iraq War (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 6; ICG 2005: 19-22).
The connection between them and Iran is ambiguous though, since it appears that Iran only supports the Kurds when it is in its own interests, and more importantly, Tehran opposes an independent or more autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan. Increased autonomy for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will likely inspire the disaffected Iranian Kurds, which consequently could lead to the disintegration of Iran. Therefore, the Iraqi Kurds, who are also suspicious about Iranian meddling in the region, view Iran as both an opportunity and a challenge (Barzegar 2008: 55; ICG 2005: 19-22).

4.3. Results

Despite Tehran played a major role in Iraq’s last decade’s politics, it has only achieved mixed results. In the January and December 2005 parliamentary elections Iran’s key allies competed on a single list: the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). It comprised, among others, ISCI, the Islamic Dawa Party, the Sadrists, and the Badr Organisation. The UIA got the majority of the votes in both elections and accordingly played an essential role in drawing up the Iraqi constitution and the subsequent formation of the government. In 2006, Maliki was chosen as prime minister (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 3-5). From this moment onwards, the united Shi’a front began to fragment. While Iraq descended into a sectarian civil war in 2006-2007, Shi’a factions clashed as well. In combination with growing political divisions, intra-sectarian violence deteriorated in 2007, to which Iran also contributed because of their increased weapon supplies for Shi’a armed groups. When Maliki and ISCI in 2007 decided to cooperate with the coalition forces in order to crack down on the mounting insurgencies, including the Mahdi Army’s, Sadr decided to pull out his party from the UIA. Previously, Maliki had prevented attacks on the Sadrists’ militia to protect their alliance. The Mahdi Army regularly clashed with ISCI and Badr militiamen, who fought alongside the ISF and coalition troops. Unsurprisingly, the intra-sectarian violence severely affected the potential of Iran’s goal to unite the Shi’a. Furthermore, when Iranian efforts to unify the battling groups surfaced, public Iraqi resentment, also among Shi’a, towards Tehran and its allies increased (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 3-4; Katzman 2007: 1-2; 2010: 3; Mausner et al. 2012: 55-6).

According to the abovementioned leaked State of Department document (The Guardian 2010), the IRGC-QF preserved its fundamental role in Iraq. Suleimani reportedly still had close ties with key officials, such as prime minister Maliki, president Talibani, and former prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. The document also suggests that Supreme Leader
Khamenei and president Ahmadinejad frequently consulted with Iraqi government officials in order to expand influence in Iraq.

In an attempt to limit US influence in Iraq, Iran tried to prevent Iraq from signing two agreements with the US. These accords, the Status of Forces Agreement and the Strategic Framework Agreement, consisted of arrangements about cooperation on political, economic, and security issues. Tehran’s attempt was unsuccessful, since the US and Iraq signed the agreements in November 2008. However, due to Iranian pressure, the Status of Forces Agreement contained a timetable concerning the withdrawal of US troops, and included an article (i.e. article 27) prohibiting Iraq from attacking other states (Guzansky 2011: 89; US Department of State 2008a; 2008b).

Regarding the January 2009 provincial elections, Iran’s key allies were not as united as they were four years earlier. Instead of competing on a single list, as Iran preferred, they decided to run separately (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 4). The most noteworthy result of these elections was ISCI’s dramatic decline in public support, which is generally believed to be a result of an increase in Iraqi nationalism in combination with resentment over ISCI’s close relations with the Iranian authorities (Reid 2009). Maliki, however, competed on his State of Law Alliance (SLA) list and ended up the clear winner (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 4; Katzman 2012: 6).

In the run-up to the March 2010 parliamentary elections, some Iranian actions damaged both its own image and that of its allies. One is the occupation of an oil field by Iranian troops in the bordering Iraqi Maysan province in December 2009. Notwithstanding widespread Iraqi condemnation, also among Shi’a, the Iraqi authorities reacted nervously (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 4). Additionally, Iran also manipulated the elections via the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC), the successor of the De-Baathification Commission. This organisation was led by Ali al-Lami, a Shi’a who was suspected of collaborating with Iran. The same was said about his predecessor, Ahmed Chalabi, who allegedly was linked to Suleimani and was still influencing al-Lami. Both were also members of the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) list, which included ISCI, the Badr Organisation, and the Sadrists (Katzman 2012: 7-8, 10). General Ray Odierno (cited in Shanker 2010), the US senior commander in Iraq, stated that they ‘clearly are influenced by Iran... We have direct intelligence that tells us that’. The AJC banned 499 candidates, most of which were either Sunni or secular Shi’a. Iraqiyah, a cross-sectarian, nationalist, and secular list led by former prime minister Ayad Allawi (a Shi’a who accused Iran of interference), and supported by Sunnis, was affected the most by this decision,
since two of its leading politicians were among the banned campaigners. Even one day before the elections, 55 more candidates were disqualified, most of which were Iraqiyah members. These attempts turned out largely unsuccessful because many banned candidates were replaced quickly and others were still allowed to compete after having appealed in court (Guzansky 2011: 90; Katzman 2012: 10).

Iran’s efforts to unite its political allies for the 2010 elections achieved mixed results as well. While ISCI, the Badr Organisation, and the Sadrist movement reunited in the INA, Maliki remained dedicated to the SLA (Katzman 2010: 7; 2012: 8). Despite Iran’s attempts to undermine Iraqiyah’s potential in the elections, it won the majority of the votes (although with a narrow margin over Maliki’s coalition). Therefore, Tehran’s actions instantly focused on preventing Allawi from establishing a government. In order to unite the key Shi’a parties once again, all Shi’a factions, but also Allawi, were invited to several conferences in Tehran. Ultimately, Iran’s efforts were successful and resulted in the merging of the SLA and INA into the formation of the National Alliance (NA) in May 2010. Although ISCI, the Sadrists, and Iraqiyah opposed a second term for Maliki as prime minister, little progress and Iranian mediation still led to Maliki preserving his position (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 4-5; Katzman 2012: 11-12, 42). Hence, Guzansky (2011: 90) asserts that ‘the political pilgrimage to Iran immediately after the elections demonstrated how significant [Iran’s] role was in shaping the future government of Iraq’.

Although Iran succeeded in various efforts to unite its key allies again, it remains to be seen to what extent it will be able to influence Iraqi politics. The new government may prove fragile, since only just a few years ago, some of its factions were fighting each other (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 4). There are already signs that the main parties of the NA are disintegrating. While little progress has been made regarding ISCI and Dawa’s disagreements on numerous issues, Sadr demanded the ouster of Maliki. Sadr also chose to cooperate with Iraqiyah, the secular rival of Maliki (Arango 2012; Mausner et al. 2012: 26). Additionally, the strong position of the Sadrists following the 2010 elections (40 of the 325 seats in the parliament), could cause problems for Iran. Not only is the relationship between the two strategically incompatible (considering both sides’ ideologies), Sadr also aims to strengthen its nationalist agenda by limiting Iranian influence, focusing more on politics, and experimenting with cross-sectarian strategies. In doing so, he also hopes his violent record will gradually fade away (Arango 2012; Rahimi 2012: 35-6).
Ultimately, Iran significantly contributed to two key, interrelated developments in Iraq that severely limited its own policy. Firstly, it seems that a growing sense of Iraqi nationalism has trumped sectarian and ethnic association (Rahimi 2012: 36). Secondly, Tehran’s extensive interference has resulted in widespread resentment of Iranian influence, also among Iraqi Shi’a (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 15-7; Pollock and Ali 2010; Rahimi 2012: 35-6).

5. Military strategy

In support of its core political strategy, Tehran has also funded, trained, and armed Shi’a militias and insurgent groups in Iraq. Iran’s hard power policies are possibly the most disputed, mainly because hard evidence remains scarce. While international media and US officials focused on Tehran’s military assistance, the Islamic Republic’s more important political activities were obscured (Felter and Fishman 2008). This chapter discusses Iran’s military goals and strategy, the available evidence, and the outcomes of this strategy.

5.1. Goals and strategy

In order to prevent a spill-over effect, Iran wants to maintain its neighbour’s territorial integrity and avoid civil war. Therefore, Iran does not intend to destabilise Iraq ‘too much’, since this will likely affect Iran’s national security. However, the provision of weapons and training to a wide range of (sometimes competing) groups implies that Iran does not want Iraq to fully stabilise either. Complete stabilisation in Iraq could threaten the Islamic Republic as well, for instance through the successful implementation of a competing political model or significant American influence. It appears that Iran tries to alleviate these risks by employing a strategy of ‘controlled chaos’, of which Iran itself is the manager (ICG 2005: 22). The fact that violence caused by Iranian-backed armed groups tended to decrease when key political events were approaching, demonstrates that Iran indeed had control over its militias, to a certain degree. For instance, mortar and rocket attacks on the Green Zone in Baghdad, signature attacks of Iranian-linked insurgents, instantly declined after the Sadrists approved Maliki’s second term as prime minister (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 10-1; Felter and Fishman 2008: 27).

Iran’s military strategy has several aims. The first, and possibly the most important, was to subdue and chasten the US presence. By keeping the US preoccupied, Tehran hopes to have
deterred the US from invading Iran. The Iranian-backed groups could also have been an instrument to strike back at US troops if they or Israel had attacked Iran. Secondly, through supplying arms to its key allies, it enables them to weaken or get rid of political opponents. Thirdly, these proxies provide Iran with more sources of leverage in Iraq, especially in case its political allies seem untrustworthy or unpredictable. Fourthly, the militias also constitute a means to prevent complete stabilisation in Iraq (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 8). Fifthly, Iran allegedly employed this proxy strategy so that they did not have to fight the coalition troops themselves. Additionally, Iran could deny affiliation whenever they were accused (Guzansky 2011: 89). Lastly, the armed groups and insurgents’ actions obscured Tehran’s efforts in the political arena, to some extent (Felter and Fishman 2008). Although some sources suggest that Iran’s intentions were also to stoke sectarian violence, these claims lack proof (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 11). According to US intelligence reports, detained alleged insurgents deny this as well, asserting that Iranian training was mainly focused on forcing out the coalition troops (Felter and Fishman 2008: 56).

Iranian-backed paramilitary proxies are not a new phenomenon, since the Islamic Republic already supported several Iraqi insurgent groups since its inception, such as the Badr Corps and Kurdish rebels (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 8; ICG 2005: 19). After the overthrow of Hussein, Iran initially focused its support on loyal Badr militiamen, of which many were recruited for positions in Iraq’s security apparatus. Estimates say that between 2003 and 2005 approximately 16,000 militiamen were integrated into the ISF, most of which were from the Badr Organisation (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 7-8). However, Iran extended its leverage by splintering off radical individuals from the Badr Organisation and the Mahdi Army to organise clandestine special groups (Special Groups). Tehran also wanted to create more controllable substitutes for Sadr’s unmanageable Mahdi Army. This strategy was first utilised by Iran in Lebanon, when it persuaded Amal movement’s supporters to join the more radical Hezbollah (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 8; Mausner et al. 2012: 76).

The paramilitary proxies are reportedly supplied with weapons, intelligence, equipment, training, and money by undercover IRGC-QF officers, assisted by experienced, Arabic-speaking, Lebanese Hezbollah secret agents (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 8; Guzansky 2011: 85-7). Although the presence of Lebanon’s Hezbollah members in Iraq is not well-documented, some sources provide evidence that they indeed play a role. In 2007, for instance, US troops arrested a senior Hezbollah leader in Basra, Ali Mussa Daqduq, suspected of organising Special Groups and covert cells (Mausner et al. 2012: 77; Roggio 2009).
5.2. Evidence?

Claims about Iran funnelling weapons and munitions to Iraq have mounted. These can be countered, to a certain extent. For instance, because smuggling across the porous border has become much easier since 2003, Iranian weapons found in Iraq do not provide direct proof of interference by Iranian officials. Furthermore, due to the coalition forces’ inability to secure the numerous weapon depots stemming from the Ba’athist era, arms were widely available (ICG 2005: 14, 17). Iran denied smuggling arms and stated that discovered Iranian-made weapons could have been sold by independent weapon dealers, and/or are remainders of the Iran-Iraq War (Felter and Fishman 2008: 71). However, there is evidence of Iranian arms provided to insurgent groups. According to Felter and Fishman (2008: 76), ‘Explosives Ordnance Disposal personnel from MNF-I’s [Multi National Forces - Iraq] Iranian weapons task force – highly trained experts particularly skilled at determining the origins of weapons and ordnance – began physically assessing caches with contents of suspected Iranian origin... Based on the findings of this expert assessment, MNF-I reported that Iranian munitions were recovered in 166 incidents between 1 January and 23 May 2008 [of the total amount of 219 incidents reported in this period]. Of these incidents, 85 were determined to include weapons and/or ordnance produced in 2003 or later and 28 incidents had sufficient evidence to determine they were manufactured before 2003’. Iranian arms were, among others, advanced rockets and mortars, and explosively formed penetrators (EFPs). The extensive use of these EFPs is another feature of Iran’s influence. They have been increasingly seen in Iraq since 2005 and became the most feared weapon for coalition forces, since they have killed hundreds of members (and therefore more effective than any other weapon used by militias). EFPs are able to pierce a Humvee’s armour and it is generally believed they are of Iranian descent, since Iraq does not have the technical capabilities to produce these advanced bombs. They are exclusively related to Special Groups supported by Tehran (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 10-1; Felter and Fishman 2008: 38, 77-9). Additionally, according to US intelligence, detained militants told US officials about smuggling routes and procedures (Felter and Fishman 2008: 80-1).

According to Felter and Fishman’s research (2008: 55-70), which is primarily based on intelligence documents and interviews with detained Iraqis, Iran has also provided extensive and sophisticated paramilitary training programs to insurgents. It even included a program to train skilled militants to become trainers themselves, so future fighters do not have to travel to training camps in Iran and Lebanon anymore. In doing so, Iran tries to disguise its own
role (Felter and Fishman 2008: 64). The report also confirms Lebanese Hezbollah members’ participation in training Iraqis. Furthermore, Eisenstadt et al. (2011: 9) argue that attacks against the coalition forces were rewarded with thousands of dollars, making this attractive for poor Shi’a.

5.3. Results

Iran’s support for armed groups has undermined its own efforts to unite the Shi’a. In a time when Iraq descended into sectarian civil war, some of the Iranian-linked factions started to fight each other as well. The Mahdi Army in particular, which took control of several Shi’a cities, engaged in numerous fights against Sunnis, ISCI, coalition troops, and the ISF (dominated by Badr members). A key event that widened the rifts between the Shi’a Islamist groups even more was the Battle of Basra. In order to regain control from the Mahdi Army over Basra, a strategically vital city due to its geographical location, Maliki launched ‘Operation Charge of the Knights’ in March 2008. The fighters on Maliki’s side consisted of ISCI militiamen, the ISF, and coalition forces. Five days after the battle had begun, it was ended by a ceasefire, in which IRGC-QF’s commander Suleimani reportedly played a major role (Katzman 2007: 1-2; 2010: 3; Mausner et al. 2012: 55-6). Suleimani was believed to be a key mediator and one of the signatories of the ceasefire (Fadel 2008; Guzansky 2011: 89; Ignatius 2008). This unravels also another contradictory feature of Tehran’s policy, namely backing the Iraqi authorities, while at the same time supporting armed groups to weaken the government. Therefore, Iran regularly intervened to mediate conflicts that it helped create, hoping this would both generate more public sentiment for Iran and bring the Shi’a Islamist parties together again (Eisenstadt et al. 2011; xi, 4, 8). Due to these intra-sectarian clashes, Iran seemingly reduced its support for insurgent groups and militias and shifted to focus more on soft power strategies (Guzansky 2011: 88; Mausner et al. 2012: 54). Another motive for Iran to narrow down its military support was an increasingly hostile public opinion towards its activities, also among Shi’a (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 15-7). Although likely less important than the intra-sectarian violence, the civil war, and increased resentment, another reason for scaling back its hard power could have been the signing of the Status of Forces Agreement by Iraq and the US, which included the schedule concerning the withdrawal of US troops.

Nevertheless, while focusing more on its political strategy, Iran did not stop supporting militias. According to Eisenstadt et al. (2011: 9), ‘[b]y 2010, Iran had narrowed down its
military support to just three groups: the Sadrist movement’s Promised Day Brigade (PDB), Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), and Kataib Hezbollah (KH). The PDB is the successor of the Mahdi Army and was named PDB in June 2008. AAH, or League of the Righteous, is an offshoot of the Mahdi Army and a Special Group developed as an alternative to increase IRGC-QF control. It is responsible for several kidnappings and killings of coalition troops, but gradually shifted more towards politics too, which resulted in competition between them and the Sadrists. While AAH and the PDB maintain some independence from the IRGC-QF, KH is under control of the Qods Force. KH, also known as Battalions of Hezbollah, was established in 2007, consists of less than 400 members, and is Iran’s highest developed Iraqi militia, responsible for special operations. Apart from the IRGC-QF, also Badr members, of which many have positions in Iraq’s security apparatus, reportedly play a key role in providing intelligence and coordinating attacks (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: x, 9-10; Knights 2010). While having narrowed down the number of insurgent groups it assists, it seems that Iran has upgraded its training and weapon supplies (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 10-1; Guzansky 2011: 88).

Similar to Iran’s political strategy, its military strategy has achieved mixed results, at best. On the one hand, it succeeded in keeping the US troops preoccupied, and possibly contributed to the US’ decisions to withdraw, to some extent. On the other hand, its military strategy has proven counterproductive and severely hindered Tehran’s whole-of-government approach. By supplying a broad range of, at times competing, actors with weapons and training, Tehran contributed to the escalating sectarian and political violence since the mid-2000s in Iraq. Iranian-backed Shi’a factions started to fight each other as well, drifting the Shi’a apart and therefore, impeding Iran’s goal of uniting them. Consequently, Iran reduced its military assistance and started to focus more on soft power strategies. However, it is likely Iran will retain influence over some insurgent groups, since they remain a source of leverage in case of unforeseen political developments. If groups such as AAH renounce violence and completely move to politics, Iran will probably set up Special Groups again by splintering off radical individuals (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 8-11).

6. Other soft power strategies

The Islamic Republic has also tried to influence post-invasion Iraq through other soft power strategies. Therefore, this chapter will examine Iran’s religious and economic activities.
6.1. Religious strategy

Iran has used its brand of Shi’a Islam as a political tool for mobilisation in order to expand its leverage, strengthen the Iraqi Shi’a, prevent (Iraqi and Iranian) clerics based in Iraqi shrines from criticising the Islamic Republic’s ideology, and export revolutionary Islam. Therefore, Tehran has employed two main strategies to influence Iraq’s religious component. Firstly, Iran has sought to win over the Shi’a clerical network (consisting of both Iraqis and Iranians) in Najaf, Iraq’s most important shrine. Since the majority of clerics in Najaf are educated in the quietist tradition of seminaries (hawzas), they advocate a more moderate version of the Islamic Republic’s vilayat-i faqih (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 12, 14-5). Iran has tried to gain influence through sending Iranian agents and clerics (who were educated in Qom and promote Iran’s version of clerical rule) to the Iraqi shrines to infiltrate the hawzas. These Iranians were provided large amounts of money to outspend the moderate clerics, try to co-opt the seminaries, organise propaganda campaigns, and therefore, increase support for clerical rule. One of Tehran’s concerns is the presence of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf, the most senior and most worshipped Shi’a leader. Although he is Iranian, he opposes the idea of clerical rule and is the key advocate of the quietest interpretation. Enjoying much popularity in Iraq, Iran considers him as both a threat and a source of leverage (albeit a limited one). Since Iran is able to prevent Iranian sources from providing money for Sistani, he has not openly condemned the Islamic Republic. The 80-year old Sistani’s bad health condition may provide Tehran with new opportunities to extend its influence (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 14-5; ICG 2005: 18-9). Secondly, since Najaf not only is Iraq’s most holy city but also has emerged as possibly the second most important city in terms of political affairs (after Baghdad), Tehran has invested significantly in the city’s infrastructure. As the centre of Shi’a theology and a major destination for religious tourists (millions of Shi’a Muslims visit Najaf annually), Iran has financed numerous projects, like setting up travel agencies and the construction of hospitals, hotels, and airports. This strategy is not only employed for business opportunities, but also, and probably mainly, to mobilise the Shi’a (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 12, 14-5; Guzansky 2011: 91-2).

However, these attempts have proven to be limited due to the same factors that have hindered Tehran’s previously discussed strategies. Since the majority of Iraqi Shi’a opposes clerical rule, the Iraqi Shi’a do not constitute a united front, and Iraqi nationalism has been rising, Iran’s religious strategy has so far proved unsuccessful (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 14-7; Guzansky 2011: 91-2; Rahimi 2012: 34-8). Therefore, Guzansky (2011: 91) asserts that
‘[d]espite the links between the Shi’a religious leaderships in Iran and Iraq, there is little probability that Iraqi Shi’a will subordinate their national loyalty to their religious beliefs and side with Iran over Iraq’.

6.2. Economic strategy

Although economic incentives are interesting for Iran, it seems that this strategy (too) is mainly aiming to boost leverage in Iraq. Economically, Iran is of vital importance to Iraq, since it is Iraq’s main trading partner (together with Turkey). Estimates suggest trade between the two countries has increased with 30 percent since 2003 (Guzansky 2011: 92). In 2010, trade between Iraq and Iran totalled $8 billion (Rahimi 2012: 27-8). The Iranian rial is even an increasingly accepted currency in southern Iraq, the only place outside the Islamic Republic (Guzansky 2011: 92). Other positive developments are Iran’s extension of a $1 billion credit line, its pledge of $300 million for Iraq’s reconstruction, and several agreements on collaboration regarding, for instance, security, education, industry, tariffs, and customs (Guzansky 2011: 92; Taremi 2005: 39). Furthermore, various Iranian actors have assisted in funding construction projects, such as the building of hospitals, schools, airports, and housing (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 12-5). In order to create a more positive public opinion towards Iran, Tehran has also established social welfare networks for the poor and unemployed Iraqi Shi’a, notably in the south and in Baghdad’s ghettos (ICG 2005: 12-3).

However, the balance of trade strongly favours Iran. Due to Iraq’s inability to meet its national demands for food products and electricity, Iraq has become dependent on Iran. Several actions by Iran have resulted in even more resentment among the Iraqi population, and have thus undermined Tehran’s policy. For instance, Iran’s damming and diversion of the Shatt al-Arab river’s tributaries, and its dumping of low-cost, subsidised consumer and food products into Iraq, has severely affected Iraq’s production industry and agriculture. Additionally, due to Iraq’s chronic shortage in electricity supplies, Iran decided to help out by providing (a part of the demand for) electricity to some of the bordering Iraqi provinces (this applies to fuel products as well). Occasionally, electricity and fuel supplies were cut off by Iran, which sometimes even occurred at the same moment when Iranian-linked parties were demonstrating against the Iraqi government. This increased resentment among Iraqis, but also added to the assumptions that Iran’s economic activities are politically motivated (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 12-4; Guzansky 2011: 92-4; Rahimi 2012: 28). Regarding the damming and
diversion strategies of Iran, Iraq has frequently accused Iran of exploiting the waterways as a means to compel the Iraqi authorities to force out the MKO (Guzansky 2011: 93). Furthermore, Tehran also exerts a certain degree of control in the KRG, since Iran is a key destination for oil products smuggled from Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran might even exploit these channels in order to evade (future) international sanctions (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 13-4; Guzansky 2011: 93). Religious tourism is another source of income (and leverage), as discussed above. Lastly, Tehran has also tried to win pro-Iranian sentiment in Iraq (but also in other Arab countries) via propaganda activities through Arabic-language radio and television channels set up by Iran (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: 15).

Overall, it seems that Iran’s economic incentives are subordinated to political motives (particularly to increase influence). However, because these efforts have augmented Iraqis’ antipathy towards Iran, they have thwarted Tehran’s goals.

**Conclusion**

Iranian foreign policy towards post-invasion Iraq is a complex and highly contested topic. US officials, unsurprisingly, tend to focus on Iran’s supposed military activities, notably its support in arming and funding militias and insurgent groups. On the other hand, also not shocking, Iranian officials have consistently denied accusations of interference. Assessing Tehran’s policy is made more difficult because of a lack of hard evidence. However, the proof that is available confirms that Iran has taken advantage of the security vacuum in Iraq following the US-invasion. In order to both prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a threat (whether of a political, military, religious, or economic nature) and to limit US influence, Tehran has been applying a whole-of-government policy, comprising various strategies to manipulate Iraq’s politics, national security, religious significance, and economic potential. Politically, Iran has been trying to unite the Iraqi Shi’a, mainly through using its longstanding ties with key Iraqi Shi’a Islamist political parties as leverage. Since the Shi’a comprise approximately 60 percent of the population, Tehran hopes this demographic weight will be translated in a pro-Iranian Shi’a-led government. Iran also supports other parties in order to maximise leverage. Militarily, Iran has been training and supplying Iraqi insurgents and militias with arms and munitions to keep the US preoccupied, deter it from invading Iran, and maintain political leverage through a strategy of ‘controllable chaos’. The Islamic Republic also employed other soft power strategies, mainly focused at increasing leverage, preventing
Iraq from fulfilling its economic potential, and undermining the network of Shi’a clerics in Najaf.

Iran’s efforts have only achieved mixed results, at best. Although Iran succeeded in uniting its main political allies for the elections in 2005 and 2010, the factions have increasingly been drifting apart. By supporting numerous and, at times, competing parties, Tehran has undermined its own attempts to unite the Iraqi Shi’a. The same applies to its military strategy. Through supplying various groups with weapons and training, Iran contributed to the escalating violence in Iraq from the mid-2000s onwards. Iranian-backed Shi’a militias started to fight against the government (which was also supported by Iran), but against each other as well. Obviously this intra-sectarian violence has severely thwarted Iran’s objectives. Therefore, Tehran’s contradictory and incoherent strategies have added to the fragmentation of Iraq’s Shi’a. Consequently, Iran appears to have made a shift since the late 2000s. It narrowed down its support for armed groups and started to focus more on politics. Regarding limiting US influence, it seems that Iran has been largely successful. Although it is unclear to what extent Iran has played a role in the US’s decisions to withdraw, the withdrawal’s completion in December 2011 was perceived as a victory by Iran (Guzansky 2011: 98; Mausner et al. 2012: 78-9; Kamber 2012).

Overall, Iran’s policy has added to two key developments in Iraq that make its goals harder to achieve. Firstly, it seems that Iraqi nationalism is gradually exceeding sectarian affiliation. And secondly, Tehran’s interference has lead to widespread resentment towards Iran, also among Shi’a. Therefore, it remains to be seen to what extent Tehran will be able to influence Iraq’s political, military, economic, and religious landscape. Considering Iraq’s importance, Iran will likely continue its policy, despite an average record and growing limitations. Iran might raise its influence in Iraq as well if the Syrian regime falls, in order to compensate the loss of its only Arab ally (Mausner et al. 2012: 95). However, because of the IRGC’s familiarity with Iraq’s political and physical infrastructure, Iran’s longstanding ties to key politicians and parties, Badr members throughout Iraq’s security apparatus, and Iran’s ability to adapt to changing situations, the Islamic Republic still has the leverage, resources, and potential to manipulate Iraq’s future drastically. Moreover, most deals are made behind closed doors, where public opinion matters less.
References:


