

U.S. opened door to Iran's domination in Iraq

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Baghdad: Walk into almost any market in Iraq and the shelves are filled with goods from Iran – milk, yogurt, chicken. Turn on the television and channel after channel broadcasts programs sympathetic to Iran.

Pawns on a chessboard:Members of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, a mostly Shia militia group, keeping an eye on the road at the Syrian border outside Al Badi, Iraq.NYT

A new building goes up? It is likely that the cement and bricks came from Iran. And when bored young Iraqi men take pills to get high, the illicit drugs are likely to have been smuggled across the porous Iranian border.

And that’s not even the half of it.

Across the country, Iranian-sponsored militias are hard at work establishing a corridor to move men and guns to proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon. And in the halls of power in Baghdad, even the most senior Iraqi Cabinet officials have been blessed, or bounced out, by Iran’s leadership.

When the United States invaded Iraq 14 years ago to topple Saddam Hussein, it saw Iraq as a potential cornerstone of a democratic and Western-facing Middle East, and vast amounts of blood and treasure – about 4,500 U.S. lives lost, more than \$1 trillion spent – were poured into the cause.

From Day 1, Iran saw something else: a chance to make a client state of Iraq, a former enemy against which it fought a war in the 1980s so brutal, with chemical weapons and trench warfare, that historians look to World War I for analogies. If it succeeded, Iraq would never again pose a threat, and it could serve as a jumping-off point to spread Iranian influence around the region. In that contest, Iran won, and the United States lost.

Long-term mission

Over the past three years, Americans have focused on the battle against the Islamic State in Iraq, returning more than 5,000 troops to the country and helping to force the militants out of Iraq’s second-largest city, Mosul.

But Iran never lost sight of its mission: to dominate its neighbour so thoroughly that Iraq could never again endanger it militarily and to use the country to effectively control a corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean.

“Iranian influence is dominant,” said Hoshyar Zebari, who was ousted last year as Finance Minister because, he said, Iran distrusted his links to the U.S. “It is paramount.”

The country’s dominance over Iraq has heightened sectarian tensions around the region, with Sunni states, and U.S. allies, like Saudi Arabia mobilizing to oppose Iranian expansionism. But Iraq is only part of Iran’s expansion project; it has also used soft and hard power to extend its influence in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan, and throughout the region.

Iran is a Shia state, and Iraq, a Shia-majority country, was ruled by an elite Sunni minority before the U.S. invasion. The roots of the schism between Sunnis and Shias, going back almost 1,400 years, lie in differences over the rightful leaders of Islam after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. But these days, it is about geopolitics as much as religion, with the

divide expressed by different states that are adversaries, led by Saudi Arabia on one side and Iran on the other.

Iran's influence in Iraq is not just ascendant, but diverse, projecting into military, political, economic and cultural affairs.

At some border posts in the south, Iraqi sovereignty is an afterthought. Busloads of young militia recruits cross into Iran without so much as a document check. They receive military training and are then flown to Syria, where they fight under the command of Iranian officers in defence of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Passing in the other direction, truck drivers pump Iranian products — food, household goods, illicit drugs — into what has become a vital and captive market.

Political domination

Politically, Iran has a large number of allies in Iraq's Parliament who can help secure its goals. And its influence over the choice of Interior Minister, through a militia and political group the Iranians built up in the 1980s to oppose Saddam, has given it substantial control over that ministry and the federal police.

Perhaps most crucial, the Parliament passed a law last year that effectively made the constellation of Shia militias a permanent fixture of Iraq's security forces. This ensures Iraqi funding for the groups while effectively maintaining Iran's control over some of the most powerful units. Now, with new Parliamentary elections on the horizon, Shia militias have begun organising themselves politically for a contest that could secure even more dominance for Iran over Iraq's political system.

Iran's great project in eastern Iraq may not look like much: a 15-mile stretch of dusty road near the border in Diyala province. But it is an important new leg of Iran's path through Iraq to Syria, and what it carries — Shia militiamen, Iranian delegations, trade goods and military supplies — is its most valuable feature. NYT

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