

# 218 IRAQ: BATTLEGROUND OR BUFFER STATE?

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**F**oreign policy magazines and journals covering international relations often depict Iraq as a “battleground” for foreign interests – mainly those of the United States and Iran. But the country’s military and political realities suggest that Iraq should be seen as a “buffer state”.

Defining Iraq accurately is important, because such definitions condition the different approaches to the country: an external power may wish either to mitigate the destructive policies of other actors, or to conduct general relations with a state in which foreign interests need to be balanced.

The definition of a buffer state is hard to agree on. In Michael G. Partem’s *skeleton* definition, a buffer state is: a) geographically located between two rival states; b) small or weak in terms of capabilities; and, c) neutral in its foreign policy towards the two rival states. As Partem himself admits, the definition is rather broad and vague, but it serves as a starting point.

The rival concept of a battleground state is simultaneously more intuitive and more broadly applicable. A battleground may be defined simply as the physical space

in which states do battle. Since battles are fought to be won, the definition demands that a battleground state is an arena in which disputes are to be settled and the prize includes control of the state in question.

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**This system, rather than functioning solely as a platform for proxy interests, has resulted in a culture of consensus-making based on both popular mandates as well as the need for each actor, foreign and domestic, to avoid further instability in the country.**

**Neither of the main regional actors – Iran and Turkey – prefers a situation in which Iraq is ungovernable, and this is definitely not in the interests of the United States, which is invested in the country’s stability.**

**Much of the reason for the ability of domestic actors to avoid competing in a way which would ensure state collapse is the wish by Iraqis themselves to preserve the state.**

**One particularly potent threat to the stability of this arrangement of a buffer state is the shift in foreign policy priorities by the Trump State Department, which has disrupted elements of the security and political regime that allow foreign interests to operate in the state.**

Before exploring the arguments for why Iraq should be considered a buffer state rather than a battleground one, it should be emphasised that the reasons for this distinction are contextual and based on the willingness of key stakeholders to preserve the status quo. Changes in the interests, perceptions and attitudes of surrounding states and invested actors have the capacity to change this vulnerable state of being.

### The arguments for Iraq as a battleground state

The narrative of Iraq being a battleground state is so *well-established* (partly as a result of both US and Iranian self-perpetuation of the concept) that few conclusive arguments are made to substantiate it. However, some of the ingredients of a battleground state may be distilled from articles that take this line of reasoning.

One such element is the fact that Iraq's political system would constitute what is referred to as a "penetrated system", meaning that it is influenced to a very high degree by actors external to the state. According to **Brown's definition**, "a penetrated political system is neither effectively absorbed by the outside challenger nor later released from the outsider's smothering embrace [...] a thoroughly penetrated society is not adequately explained – even at the local level without reference to the influence of the intrusive outside system".

The second element is the history of violence in the post-Baathist era between militias loyal to other states in the region, such as Iran and, to a lesser extent, Turkey.

### **A penetrated system based on consensus-making**

As is the case with many post-conflict states in the region, Iraq shows the characteristics of a penetrated system, with several elements of its political landscape unable to be analysed without reference to outside actors. One oft-cited characteristic of this is the presence of multiple blocs in the Iraqi Council of Representatives (CoR) with alleged allegiances to outside actors like Iran, the United States and Turkey.

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This system, rather than functioning solely as a platform for proxy interests, has resulted in a culture of consensus-making based on both popular mandates as well as the need for each actor, foreign and domestic, to avoid further instability in the country.

The modern history of consensus-making in Iraq arguably began with the end of the Iraqi Governing Council and the beginning of its Transitional Government. While the preceding institutional power was meant to represent all of Iraq's sectarian and ethnic groups, its members were very pro-Western. The Transitional Government, however, went beyond that to include personalities and parties with direct relations with and the backing of foreign powers like the – for many years dominant – Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which until the 2003 invasion was hosted by neighbouring Iran.

The current status quo of specifically Iranian, American and (in a minor role) Turkish co-influence in Iraq should be seen as a continuing process-based outcome and not as a prior condition. While actors in Iraq with allegiances to the aforementioned states did decide outwardly to work together, and often created grand coalitions in government, the cabinets that resulted were often conflictual and government crises were frequent.

Prior to the 2018 elections, **many political analysts agreed** that the US favoured the Nasr alliance led by then Prime Minister

Haider al-Abadi. Iran, on the other hand, was seen as primarily backing the Fatah alliance led by the head of the ISCI, Hadi al-Ameri. Some observers may say this facet of Iraqi politics vindicates the perception of Iraq as a battleground state, but this is not necessarily true. In fact, as a buffer state, a considerable amount of political penetration by external actors is expected and perhaps even necessary.

Comparing, for example, the situation of Finland during the Cold War, which was a typical buffer state until the collapse of the Soviet Union, one notices that Western and Soviet interests were present both in the form of representative parties as well as influence within the ruling coalitions of the time. The unique position of the state in the post-war order produced a system in which internal political decisions were mostly made domestically, while foreign policy decisions had to be made with the understanding of definite neutrality.

Iraq may be seen to mostly adhere to the Finnish precedent if one looks at the relatively unrestricted domestic legislative and executive with a distinctly Iraqi focus, and the avowedly neutral foreign policy of successive Iraqi cabinets.

The strong relationships between members of the executive, politicians and parties with external states that lead them to represent foreign interests domestically are often either open or well-known. Nevertheless, since 2005, Iraqi governments have been formed on the basis of grand coalitions that include representatives of all sects and ethnicities – and therefore of external states.

The reason for this ability to cooperate within grand alliances in spite of representing seemingly opposing interests is the perception that an escalation of violence or an attempt to take over complete legislative or executive power would produce an untenable and unstable situation. Neither of the main regional actors – Iran and Turkey – prefers a situation in which Iraq is ungovernable, and this is definitely not in the interests of the United States, which is invested in the country's stability.

The only comparable state to Iraq in the region is Lebanon. Both are penetrated systems and have relatively free and fair electoral cycles. Yet the differences between the two are important. In Lebanon, which has seen a comparable level of regional rivalry to Iraq and is in an exposed geographical position, bordering both Syria and Israel, the country's main political actors show an open affiliation with other regional states. But the major *current* external rivalry in Lebanon is not between Israel and Syria, as geography might suggest, but between Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Although Lebanon's situation seems thus far comparable to that of Iraq, the major difference is in the lack of restrictions on escalation by regional rivals. Lebanon has faced multiple crises – near-impossible government formations, civil war and recurring periods of instability with the potential for escalation.

But while Iraq has also faced seemingly impossible challenges of government formation and ineffective rule, the es-

calation to actual civil war or a complete breakdown in relations between its many ethnic and sectarian components has not materialised. In the few instances where the trajectory seemed to be heading in this direction, external states mostly acted as moderators of behaviour rather than instigators. Recent examples of this include both Iran and Turkey holding talks with Kurdish authorities prior to the independence referendum to avoid a conflict in the north of the country so soon after the territorial defeat of ISIS.

In light of this, while Iraq's political system clearly shows the interference of competing external actors, the level to which they challenge each other is restrained by a need to not destabilise the state entirely. The way consensus has been reached with the formation of grand coalitions of parties affiliated with external and competing states is testament to this.

Looking further at the military chronology and the balance of actions by actors affiliated with regional and international forces in Iraq, one sees strong parallels in terms of restraint and flexibility in the political system, as the following section will argue.

### **Violent competition between foreign-affiliated actors**

The second and possibly most widely held argument for Iraq being a battleground state is the history of conflict between actors affiliated with or who receive military support from foreign actors. However, it is precisely the history of the conflict and the limits on violence of each actor that reveals their self-imposed restrictions in terms of escalation.

In practice this means that the main violent actors and sponsors of violence in Iraq are the US, Iran and Turkey. Of the three, while Turkey has armed and mobilised some forces in Iraq, the influence of Iran and the US on overall violence in the country has been far greater. This section will mainly examine these two actors.

Returning for a second to the presumptions made about battleground states, one would expect the US and Iran to compete for control of the state to the degree that one party would force the other to concede or be functionally unable to retaliate. The buffer state definition, however, makes no such explicit presumptions. It implies that when violence occurs between rival powers, the object is not to gain total control of the state but to limit the chance of state collapse.

During the insurgency against US forces in Iraq, most attacks against coalition troops were perpetrated by local Sunni insurgents with connections to the defunct Baathist state security apparatus. However, the remaining attacks were perpetrated by various Shia militias and militants, mostly armed and trained by Iran.

As Sunni insurgents were not (convincingly) backed by any external state but had backgrounds mostly in the defunct for-

mer state security apparatus, they have little to add to the debate on battleground vs buffer zone definition and thus they will not be explored in this analysis. We will instead focus on militias backed by Iran and the direct involvement of US forces.

Prior to the surprise victory of Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon Alliance in the most recent Iraqi federal elections, his **Mahdi Army** militia were responsible for a large share of US casualties in Baghdad during the active phase of the coalition occupation. The Mahdi Army itself was supplied with Iranian weapons. Without them, and the training provided to its forces by the Iran-linked Lebanese Hezbollah movement, the Mahdi Army would not have been able to harass the US occupation effectively.

In addition to the Mahdi Army, Iran also funded and helped nurture the long-standing **Badr Brigades** (now renamed the Badr Organisation of Reconstruction and Development), which also attacked coalition forces but also, at times, violently competed with the Mahdi Army for supremacy among the Iraqi Shia militias.

Although the weapons provided to the Mahdi Army could and should be seen as a way to complicate US involvement in

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Iraq, there was not enough military support given to Sadrist groups to decisively challenge the US in Iraq. In addition to the relatively small amount of military support given, there seems to have been no significant pay-off for Iran in terms of improved relations with the Sadrist movement. For example, although the movement did accept the nomination of Iran's preferred Dawa Party-candidate Nouri al-Maliki, the relationship was strenuous at best and resulted in Maliki having to order **a siege of Sadr City** to attempt to disarm Sadr's militia.

Given these factors, the provision of weapons and training to Shia militia served two purposes: the first was to test and exasperate the US in Iraq and the second was to fulfil the necessary commitments to a fellow Shia movement to promote the image of Iran as the natural ally for Iraqi Shia actors. A further demonstration of this is the fact that more directly Iranian-administered organisations like the Badr Brigades were reined in by Iran and limited their engagement against coalition forces while those of the markedly more independent Sadrists attempted to challenge the US position head-on.

The story of the Iraqi insurgency should illustrate that neither Iran nor the US have made any significant moves towards turning Iraq into a theatre of total war. The instances of Iranian-backed militias clashing with US forces never reached levels of violence that would force either the US or Iran to escalate the situation militarily to the point of open

combat. This means that, while each actor has attempted to ensure that their representatives are in control of vital state security apparatuses, including the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defence, none have tried to take total control, but have rather understood their strategic limits and the need for a certain level of compromise and at times even coordination.

The starkest example of this came with the campaign to defeat ISIS and the level to which coalition forces coordinated with newly formed, and often Iranian-trained, Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). Towards the end of the war, there were allegations that the Ministry of Interior had officially supplied most state-integrated PMUs like the Badr Organisation with **American-produced heavy weaponry and armour**.

## The main violent actors and sponsors of violence in Iraq are the US, Iran and Turkey.

### Saudi Arabia and Iran

Although the most important regional actors with influence in Iraq at the moment are arguably Turkey and Iran, Saudi-Iranian relations in Iraq provide a good representation of how Iraq's importance as a buffer state has developed. Competition between the two states is long-standing but did not fully develop its regional importance until the end of the first Gulf War and the limiting of Iraq's ability to mitigate either actor's regional ambitions.

With the second Iraq War and the toppling of the Baath party in 2003, both states began to reach out to existing affiliated networks (the Badr Organisation for Iran; tribal actors and Sunni politicians close to Saudi Arabia), as well as funding new networks to increase their control over Iraq. Iran in this sense had a considerable advantage, as most of the Iraqi Shia opposition's exiled leadership was based in Iran at the time of the war. Saudi Arabia on the other hand relied on proxy supporting actors like Ahmed Chalabi or Ayad Allawi via the United States, as it did not have the ability to project influence at the time.

Although both actors have engaged in the same type of competition illustrated above, Iraq has seen surprisingly little confrontation between the two rival states. In contrast to other states in the region where the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been escalated to actual combat, albeit mostly by proxy, Iraq has not seen this level of escalation. Instead, the rivals seem to have reached an understanding that Iraqi foreign relations should be neutral, and the country free to maintain good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Prominent recent examples of this have been both Saudi Arabia's recent normalisation campaign in Iraq – **opening up its borders, appointing an ambassador to the country** and creating a **new air route between the countries** – and Iran's non-interference and apparent encouragement of improved Iraqi-Saudi ties.

### Iraq as an actor

Although domestic players in Iraq, whether political or military, enjoy the support of differing and competing external powers, this does not mean their focus is not domestic, or that they necessarily put external interests above domestic ones. Much of the reason for the ability of domestic actors to avoid competing in a way which would ensure state collapse is the wish by Iraqis themselves to preserve the state. After all, even if a PMU is organised, trained and equipped by the IRGC, it will still be manned by Iraqis and operating in Iraq.

Theoretically, even if external actors have incentives not to escalate rivalries beyond a point at which their own interests are threatened, domestic actors might have found the incentive of total state control too strong to ignore. But this has not materialised, and formally the consensus approach continues – even if it is currently under some strain.

Some may argue, as ardent proponents of Iraqi agency sometimes do, that the political manoeuvring by Iran and the US was less relevant than the will of the Iraqi electorate and that Iraqi agency itself was what encouraged political actors to compromise. The chronology of diplomatic meetings between affiliates in Iraq and their foreign benefactors paint a different picture. Post-electoral mediation, particularly by Iranian and American diplomats between Iraqi political blocs, is only the most recent and most high-profile example of an expectation that is now standard when forming a **government**.

### Potential game changers

At the time of writing this article, one particularly potent threat to the stability of this arrangement of a buffer state is the shift in foreign policy priorities by the Trump State Department, which has disrupted elements of the security and political regime that allow foreign interests to operate in the state. **The US pull-out from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA)** was especially concerning as a harbinger of future instability in the region and could push actors opposed to Iran to destabilise Iraq as part of a shift from the status quo towards pushing Iranian power back towards its own borders.

In addition to the political dimensions of the US reinstating sanctions on Iran, current (and at times erratic) shifts in military policy in the region, like that of the abrupt **US withdrawal from Syria**, are reducing the US ability to exert political power in Iraq, while reducing Iran's need to act with caution. This apparent tapering of US commitments to the region (and Iraq in particular) has the potential to impact Iraq's buffer state status by reducing the costs of taking over institutions in the state by Iran in particular.

Another threat to the continuation of the buffer state is the institutionalisation of the Popular Mobilization Units, mostly Iranian-backed militias which played a large role in the fight against ISIS post 2014. These units were integrated into the state

security apparatus by necessity after the war on ISIS ended and **have accrued both military might and political and economic power as a result.** The effect of the rise of PMUs on things like foreign policy or the state's ability to host non-Iranian friendly forces is yet to be seen, but the potential for disruption is evident, as shown by the recent attempt by parties close to the PMUs to **expel US forces from the state.**

## Conclusions

Because of the risks the US and Iran perceive of violence spiraling out of control, both states have incentives to limit violence against the other while cooperating as much as necessary on political matters. The regime of political power-sharing and consensus-making formed as a result is in effect self-perpetuating on a local level. Local actors are incentivised to limit instability by making sure actors affiliated to rival states are represented in any power-sharing agreement.

A system based on balancing competing actors is, however, neither formalised nor a durable recipe for Iraq's long-term stability. If one actor perceives their position to have changed, revisionism may occur, and the status quo will most probably be disturbed as a result.

In terms of Iraqi politics, as the last section of this article mentioned, this potential breakdown may already be happening. The apparent US disengagement from Syria and the renewed sanctions and political pressure on Iran are creating an environment in which Iran has perceived both opportunities and reduced costs for increasing its presence in Iraq. Iranian diplomats are currently staking their claim as the long-term friend of a growing plethora of local Iraqi actors, including **Kurds** and Southern Shia tribesmen.

Historically, buffer states occupy a temporary position in the international system and most of the time, if the state has the capacity to return to full sovereignty, it will, as Finland did after 1991. Iraq should similarly be able to return to being a sovereign state if it either becomes powerful and incentivised enough to reject foreign interference in the state, or if there is agreement between current regional rivals to leave the state to its own devices. However, it may very well be that Iraq is in a process of transformation from the buffer state it has been since 2005 towards a position more akin to a pseudo-client state of Iran.

For Iraq to be able to eventually regain its former sovereignty, no single foreign actor can be allowed to co-opt its nascent institutions. If Iraqi institutions are not yet strong enough, and regional and international political rivalries do not allow for disengagement from Iraq, ironically, the best hope for its sovereignty is continued balancing of major foreign players within the state. In other words, the US and other actors need to be sure not to abandon the state to Iranian expansionism. At least not until Iraqis themselves can muster an effective and unified challenge to foreign states trying to dominate their domestic affairs.

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