

Iran May be the Only Winner in Iraq

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Intelligence documents reveal how Tehran took advantage of US blundering

The American invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of that nation's government in 2003 has rightly been described as the greatest foreign policy disaster in the history of the United States. Eight thousand one hundred and seventy five American soldiers, contractors and civilians [have died in Iraq](#) since 2003 as well as an estimated 300,000 Iraqis. By some more expansive estimates the so-called "global war on terror," of which Iraq was the major component, may have directly killed 801,000, of which at least 335,000 were civilians. Other estimates indicate that the total dead from collateral causes, to include disease and starvation, could exceed 3 million, overwhelmingly Muslims.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq alone have also cost, according to the same [Brown University study](#), an estimated \$6.4 trillion and still counting as the money to pay for it was borrowed.

The invasion destabilized the entire region and shattered forever the relatively stable status quo whereby minority Sunni dominated Arab Iraq served as a check on Shia dominated Persian Iran's ambitions. The two countries had in fact gone to war in 1980-1988. The United States provided support to Iraq in that conflict, which killed as many as half a million military and civilians on each side.

After the US invasion, as Shia were a majority in Iraq it was inevitable that the country's new "democratic" government installed by the victors would eventually find much in common with its eastern neighbor in spite of Washington's efforts to prevent such a development. The resulting armed conflict that also involved the independence minded Kurdish minority was something like a civil war. It primarily pitted the displaced Sunni against the ascendant Shia militias and was a contributing factor in the subsequent birth and development of the terrorist group Islamic State, also referred to as Daesh.

A remarkable 700 pages of documents relating to Iran's role in Iraq has surfaced and was printed recently in *The Intercept*, which received the material, and also [in The New York Times](#), which agreed to help validate and process the information. The *Times* headlined its piece on the documents with *Leaked Iran Cables: Key Findings From Secret Documents: Leaked spy cables reveal how Iran came to dominate the political and military spheres in Iraq. Here's what the hundreds of documents tell us*. For [The Intercept](#), the key insight provided by reviewing the documents was how the "[devastation that followed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq](#) gave Iran a golden opportunity to build a political and social order there that was more favorable to their interests."

The documents consist of copies of original reports and cables written in Farsi that have been sourced to the Iranian external spy service, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). They mostly date from 2013 through 2015. Many of them are field reports that detail the routine of spying – secret meetings, paying bribes, surveillance and countersurveillance. They were sent to *The Intercept* anonymously by what would appear to be a disgruntled Iraqi official who expressed a desire to “let the world know what Iran has been doing in my country Iraq.” Even though the material is extremely interesting and undeniably genuine, the stories in the *Times* and *Intercept* unfortunately only had a short run before disappearing into the mass of impeachment coverage.

As a former intelligence officer, my take on the story was to wonder why anyone should be surprised at what had happened. Iran, operating on internal lines from a position of strength, was working assiduously to infiltrate and place under control a neighboring country that had gone to war with it 30 years before and had killed half a million of its citizens. It was also working to penetrate and manage the new, hostile American presence which was sitting right next door. Spying on one’s friends and enemies alike and co-opting politicians is routine and expected from any competent intelligence service. It is precisely the same formula used by the United States, admittedly more openly, in Afghanistan to this day and also in Iraq after the invasion of 2003.

Just as the United States placed its proxies in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran has clearly exploited its own relationships with Iraqi Shiites, some of whom actually lived in exile in Iran during the rule of Saddam Hussein. The Iranian intelligence service developed special working relationships with many of those individuals and also sought new recruits within the increasingly Shiite government in Baghdad. Current Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi is known to have a “special relationship” with Tehran through his Iranian official contacts operating in Baghdad.

The documents, in fact, make clear that the Iranian government considers Iraq a client state whose friendly government has to be propped up at all costs. It has indeed penetrated virtually every government ministry at nearly every level. The documents reveal how in 2014 an Iraqi military intelligence officer met with an Iranian spy carrying a message from his boss in Baghdad Lieutenant General Hatem al-Maksusi, commander of military intelligence in the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. His message was “Tell them we are at your service. Whatever you need is at their disposal. We are Shiite and have a common enemy. All of the Iraqi Army’s intelligence — consider it yours.” The Iraqi described secret targeting software provided by Washington and offered to provide it to Iran, saying “If you have a new laptop, give it to me so I can upload the program onto it.”

From the American perspective, the documents reveal that the meetings between senior American diplomats and their Iraqi counterparts in Baghdad and Kurdistan were regularly reported back in considerable detail to Tehran. The Iranians were particularly interested in developing agents who had once worked for the US government and were able to provide information on the CIA and DIA intelligence networks remaining in Iraq after the US military was forced to leave in 2011. The documents reveal, for example, that a CIA asset operating under the pseudonym “Donnie Brasco” offered to sell to Iranian intelligence officers the locations of Agency safe houses, details of training and also the identities of other Iraqis who had worked for the Americans.

The documents indicate that Iranian efforts in Iraq were coordinated by Major General Qassim Suleimani, commander of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards,

who worked with the existing Iraqi-Shiite militias that had become increasingly powerful during the fighting with the Sunnis. The papers reveal that though there was some fumbling, the Iranian intelligence officers were generally very professional, objective oriented and effective.

Suleimani sought with considerable success to construct a vast network of informants and co-optees within the Iraqi government, many of whom are named in the reports. Interestingly, the Iranians have experienced some of the same problems in seeking to manage the fragile Iraqi political situation that previously plagued the United States, though they have benefited from the Shiite relationship. Deadly anti-government protests currently taking place in Iraq that have killed more than 300 have focused on the country's pervasive corruption, but there have also been numerous [calls for an end to Iranian influence](#). The Iranian Consulate in Baghdad has been attacked and burning Iranian flags have been a regular feature in the violence. Iran clearly was more successful than the US in the contest for influence over Baghdad, but the reports suggest that it has failed to fully appreciate the genuine Iraqi desire for independence from both Washington and Tehran.

If there is a lesson to be learned from the documents it is that if you blunder around the world breaking countries that you know little about, you will wind up with up doing more damage to yourself. It should have been obvious even in Washington that Iran, with its Shiite connection and first-rate intelligence service, would be well placed to convert Iraq into a Persian satrapy after the removal of Saddam Hussein, but imperial hubris at the Pentagon and White House did not permit any consideration of "What comes next?"

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