

The US Is in Constant Arm-wrestling with Iran Over Iraq and Syria

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Global Research, July 25, 2018

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Region: Middle East & North Africa

Theme: Intelligence, Militarization and WMD, US NATO War Agenda

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#),
[IRAQ REPORT](#)

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The end of the Islamic State (ISIS) occupation of a third of Iraq and the return to control by Government forces of the entire territory is not giving peace and stability to Mesopotamia.

People took to the streets in many southern provinces protesting about the lack of basic services the country has been suffering from for over a decade. In addition, despite an all-party agreement over the results of the last parliamentary elections, the choice of a Prime Minister is not going to be easy. And that is not all: Mesopotamia's problems continue with the bras-de-fer between Iran and the US, which is intensifying. The actual Prime Minister Haidar Abadi is no longer Iran's favourite candidate but to the US and its regional Middle Eastern partners he remains so. The big question remains: in the event of successfully backing "their" candidate, who would be the winner, Iran or the USA? Both are determined not to lose and are using all available means to promote their own candidate-agenda.

Interim Prime Minister Haidar Abadi is managing for now to absorb the anger of the population, who took to the streets. They were demonstrating about the lack of jobs, the rationing of fresh water in the southern city of Basra, the regular power cuts in the very hot weather in southern and central Iraq, and they were revolting against the overwhelming corruption Iraq has suffered from since the US occupation in 2003.

Some of the demonstrators destroyed public institutions (the airport of Najaf), burned private shops and homes belonging to some members of the parliament and local organisations, and this justified the intervention of the security services. They arrested many individuals, and designated a specific place for demonstrators to manifest their freedom of expression. The security services opened all closed roads, even the ones between Basra and Kuwait.

That most oil-rich city, Basra, is characterised by its situation on a giant oilfield, the largest in the world, and its ample resources of oil and gas. It produces an average of 3.2 million barrels per day (b/d) and exports an estimated 4.6 million b/d through its southern port. The Rumaila field on its own, one of the biggest fields of Basra (with 340 oil wells), contains the finest oil in the world. However, despite the high oil yield in the south of Iraq (in the provinces of Basra, DhiQar, Maysan, Muthanna and Wasit), very little has been done for its

population who right till today are still suffering from the absence of basic services.

Iraq [sold](#) 3.84 million b/d in June, increased it to 4.5 million b/d in the same month and would reach 4.7 million b/d this month of July even if OPEC limit was set to 4.35 million b/d for Iraq. Political parties in Mesopotamia are calling the government to detach itself from OPEC and go for unlimited daily production. The country needs money and has invested hundreds of billions in fighting and defeating the “Islamic State” group (ISIS).

Southern Iraq, despite its riches in oil and gas production, desperately lacks electricity. Basra and other provinces receive electricity from Iran that has delivered back-up supplies to Iraq since 2012: Khoramchehr supplies Basra, Karkhah supplies Amara, Mirsad supplies Diyala and Serpil Zahab supplies Khaniqin. Iraq has suffered a shortage of electrical power since 1990.

Following the US invasion, corruption within the central government and many terrorist attacks on electric facilities caused a huge increase in power cuts each day, cutting the electricity supply from twenty hours to eight hours per day, and this in a country where the temperature can reach 58 degrees Celsius (I have experienced for many years the July temperature, where without electricity the indoor temperature reached 49 degrees Celsius. People were managing to sleep on the roof for a few hours after midnight). However, at one stage Iran halted over 1200 MW of electricity supplies to Iraq, due to over \$1bn accumulated debt.



This is where the problem starts:

Iraq paid \$100 million of Iranian debts but is faced with the US sanctions on Iran. Iraq, under Abadi, would like to abide by the US measures. Sources in the office of the Prime Minister said “the US is trying to substitute the Iranian supply of electricity by putting pressure on two main neighbouring countries (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) to support Iraq with its basic needs and inviting them to offer their structural capabilities to Abadi offering electricity in exchange of oil. The aim is to push Iran away and limit its influence in Mesopotamia”.

Indeed, US Ambassadors based in the Middle East and the US special presidential envoy to Iraq Brett McGurk are doing their best to convince Gulf countries of the necessity to support

Haidar Abadi and Moqtada al-Sadr and promote these so they can gain power in the new government selected, and stand against Iran and its allies in Iraq. They are asking neighbouring countries (rather than Iran) to provide Iraq with electricity so that the Iranian economy does not benefit.

“US envoy Brett McGurk visited us in Baghdad and asked us to support Moqtada and Abadi in one coalition to re-elect the actual prime minister. We told him that Moqtada al-Sadr is unpredictable and can't be considered reliable. Your (US) policy in Iraq has never been successful and your choices are not in our interest” said the highest two political Sunni authorities in Iraq visited by the US envoy. Ambassador McGurk, said the sources, apparently didn't like this unexpected answer: if Iraqi leaders don't abide by the US's” recommendations”, he threatened reprisals.

“We told Ambassador Brett that if he is threatening us he will receive no collaboration from our side and will create a negative outcome for all”, said the sources.

And the Sunni are not the only ones refusing to support Moqtada and Abadi. The US envoy visited Kurdistan and received similar answers from the Kurdish leaders.

The US is also calling upon Shia party leaders, especially Sayyed Ammar al-Hakim, who seems the most docile of all those contacted, and shows himself very willing to collaborate.

It seems the chances of Haidar Abadi of renewing his mandate for another four years are becoming slimmer by the minute. Iran and its allies, or perhaps the anti-US parties in Iraq among Shia, Sunni and Kurds, are prevailing. There was a time when both Iran and the US agreed on the same candidate, the actual Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi. Today, the US has declared economic war on Iran to cripple its capabilities, affecting the Iranian people and its local currency. The embargo will seriously begin in August and will intensify in November.

Therefore, Iran can't accept a hostile government in Baghdad, and the US finds it difficult to see Iraq on Iran's side, particularly as this threatens the effectiveness of its “unilateral” embargo. Iraq could help to sell Iran's oil and increase commerce and trade with Tehran, thus spoiling Donald Trump's plan to force the “Islamic Republic” into some kind of submission.

Moreover, the US feels very uncomfortable with the Iraqi security forces, Hashd al-Shaabi, created in 2014 to fight ISIS, following the Grand Ayatollah Sistani's call for Jihad against the terror group (wrongly accused of being under Iran's command). These forces have taken up positions along the border between Iraq and Syria.

Syria-Iraq Border – Iraqi Shiite Militias Headquarters, Attacked on 18 June 2018



On the 18th of June, Israeli jets bombed and [destroyed](#) Iraqi security forces HQ on the borders with Syria. The Hashd's position served to monitor ISIS movement from Syria into Iraq. Due to the presence of ISIS in the US controlled area in the north-eastern Syria, no regular ground troops, Syrian or Iraqi, are allowed to attack and pursue ISIS in the territory it controls. This is what pushed Hashd al-Shaabi to:

1. Launch a clear threat to the US forces, promising to return the hit against its forces that caused the death of 24 Iraqi security members (no obvious reaction from Baghdad). The Hashd considers the US in control of the sky over Iraq, therefore, no Israeli attack could have taken place without the US approval. The Iraqi forces will, without any doubt, retain the right to retaliate even if the balance of power shifts in Mesopotamia so that the Iraqi government decides to side with the US against Iran.
2. Take the decision to surround the entire area where ISIS is based. Moreover, Hashd has pushed its forces further: in agreement with the Syrian army, both forces in respective countries have surrounded the US base in al-Tanf to limit the movement of these forces on the ground.

The US forces had imposed a 50-mile (80 Km) safety circle around its bases in Syria and Iraq. Both countries respect the US procedure but have established static forces around the base, creating a real feeling to these forces that they are unwelcome, since their function is limited to occupying Syrian territory and preventing commercial exchanges between the two countries. There is no ISIS in the eastern Tanf crossing.

Moreover, Hashd commanders believe the US is aiming to establish several military bases in Iraq and in particular close to the borders with Syria. The Iraqi security forces believe it is capable of standing against any ISIS resurrection or attack and therefore is not in need of not even one single military base in the country. Also, there is no longer a need for a US-led military coalition in Iraq, only trainers and an exchange of experiences and intelligence for fighting terrorism, according to Hashd commanders.

In many past circumstances, Abadi wanted to remove the vice head of Hashd al-Shaabi Jamal Jaafar Mohammad Ali, aka Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes. He is Iran's man and that "said it all". However, the Iraqi prime minister is not in a position today to create a reaction against him from Hashd al-Shaabi, a group that is very popular in Iraq. This is why Abadi has visited Hashd HQ to meet Mohandes and put an end to these rumours (for the time being). It is known among decision makers that US has accepted the role of Hashd and its inclusion within the Iraqi security forces but would like to see Mohandes removed from power.

The US is in constant arm-wrestling with Iran over Mesopotamia and the Levant. It is trying to reduce Iran's possibilities in the Middle East so as to prepare for the embargo by the end of the year. The US agreed to promote even Moqtada al-Sadr, the one responsible for killing many US soldiers during their occupation in 2003-2011 to the country!

He gained points because he expressed himself against Iran on a few occasions and has visited certain neighbouring countries, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, who hold animosity against Iran.

Actually, Moqtada is not pro-American nor pro-Saudi but is trying to achieve a personal identity and adopt the role of supreme leader in Iraq. However, he is imposing himself on Mesopotamia not through charisma (which he is lacking), but through silent terror as he directs his "Saraya al Salam" militants towards manifestations or bullying. This is making him a feared personality.

Moqtada, in fact on many occasions, requested shelter in Iran during the US occupation of Iraq, and was financed by IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) general Qassem Soleimani for years. Still today he meets with the Iranian general and asks him to include him, rather than letting him be isolated from any large coalition that is expected to form the new government.

Abadi and Moqtada are creating today, along with al-Hikma of Sayyed Ammar al-Hakim, a possible coalition to oppose another coalition within the Shia community led by Nuri al-Maliki and Hadi al-Ameeri. Abadi's chances are steadily reducing in the eyes of many Iraqi leaders, who are dwelling on two names, Ameri and Faleh al-Fay'yad, the head of Hashd al-Shaabi, to lead the new government.

The last word has not been pronounced, but is expected by the end of this summer. Who will win? The US - with certain of Iraq's neighbours - promoting Abadi? Or Iran, successfully tempting candidates away from the US's orbit?

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