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By Katherine Lawlor

IRAQ 2021–2022: A FORECAST

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Table of Contents

IRAQ 2021–2022: A FORECAST

Executive Summary

The United States cannot stabilize—or safely deprioritize—the Middle East without first stabilizing Iraq. Regional powers treat Iraq as a battleground to carry out proxy conflicts that harm US interests and exacerbate instability through the region. Stability begets stability; strengthening the Iraqi state such that foreign proxy wars cannot easily take place within its borders would reduce tensions in the region. A more resilient Iraqi state will be better protected from future foreign interference like internationally sponsored militia activities, political influence, and jihadism. A stable and sovereign Iraq could provide a physical and political buffer between its heavyweight neighbors: Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, and between Iran and its projects in Syria and Lebanon. That buffer could help enable a desired pivot in US policy and security focus away from the Middle East and toward pressing concerns elsewhere in the world.

Unfortunately, Iraq is not moving toward increased stability in the medium-to-long term. The decision-making of external actors will likely overwhelm and derail the results of Iraqi leadership decisionmaking in the next 18 months. Continuing governance of Iraq's corrupt political system by many of the same elites who have shared power since 2006 may produce some degree of domestic resiliency following Iraq's 2021 elections, but will likely be unable to overcome the meddling of other regional powers.

In the spring of 2021, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) conducted a series of workshops with internal and external experts to forecast the most likely and most dangerous trajectories for the Iraqi state in the next 18 months. This paper presents the conclusions of ISW's research and offers initial assessments of the most likely, most beneficial, and most dangerous paths for US interests and Iraqi stability in that timeframe. This paper will also provide a series of alternative scenarios and highlight the indicators that can help US policymakers anticipate inflections and better understand the implications of major events as they occur. The paper builds on the assessments of Iraq's stability outlined in the author's previous paper: Iraq Is Fragile, Not Hopeless: How Iraq's Fragility Undermines Regional Stability."

ISW found that Iraq's internal drivers will reinforce its corrupt political status quo, providing short-term continuity without addressing the state's deep-seated flaws. Most of Iraq's political elites, particularly the collection of Shi'a and Kurdish political faction leaders who have shared power since 2006, have bought into the country's spoils-based political system. They will remain invested and avoid all out conflict or civil war so long as they retain their share of the spoils. Continuity of governance following the 2021 parliamentary elections will not improve quality of life for the Iraqi people but may increase near-to-medium-term state stability and create room for a new system to develop. However, Iraq's political and economic status quos are ultimately unsustainable. The Iraqi state cannot afford to keep creating government jobs to appease its underemployed, ever-growing, and increasingly dissatisfied population barring a dramatic and sustained increase in oil prices.

Iraq's stability is, in many ways, outside its control; its difficult internal dynamics are likely to be overwhelmed by larger and more threatening regional ones. Iran, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, Israel, and Turkey each play out their conflicts on Iraqi territory, destabilizing Iraq and the broader Middle East. Of these conflicts, those

involving Iran are the most dangerous and carry the highest risk for Iraq and the region. The United States must work to manage or suppress the most negative external conflicts, thereby creating room for Iraq's domestic system to evolve into one that is stronger, less corrupt, and more representative.

- **Iran will continue its campaign to expel the United States from Iraq and the Middle East.** Iran and its proxies likely intend their attacks to directly shape reviews of the US force posture in the Middle East and, specifically, outcomes of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue. Iran-backed militias will regularly conduct attacks on US forces and facilities (and those associated with them) to incentivize a complete US withdrawal from Iraq and possibly the entire region, both core Iranian objectives. Future Iranian proxy attacks on US assets in Iraq will likely rely on newer attack types like drones, increasing the accuracy and potential lethality of attacks. The lethality, frequency, and scale of these attacks will most likely be determined by the state of US-Iranian tensions. In a most dangerous scenario, however, Iraqi militia leaders could get ahead of Iran's calculus and conduct attacks to further their separate but complementary campaigns to shape US and Iraqi government decisionmaking and oust US forces. Independent militia activity would risk an uncalculated escalation between the United States and Iran.

- **Iran will increasingly conduct attacks via Iraqi proxies and from Iraqi territory into Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.** Iran-backed attacks on regional actors will continue as Iran's Iraqi proxies improve their drone capabilities unless Iran and Saudi Arabia can reach some sort of de-escalation. Iran will increase these attacks alongside its talks with Saudi Arabia to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and its US partners and to prevent any improvement in Saudi-Israeli ties. Iran will

likely simultaneously deny responsibility for the attacks and promise to curtail them should Saudi Arabia acquiesce to Iranian demands and distance itself from the United States.

- **Iran may increasingly threaten Israel from Iraq and Syria, triggering further retaliatory Israeli strikes in those countries.** Iran is using Iraq to build strategic depth and help deter a conventional attack by Israel or others on Iran. Israel will conduct additional airstrikes against targets within Iraq if it perceives a growing threat from Iran-backed Shi'a extremist groups in Iraq. This perception could arise from increased demonstrations of long-range drone capabilities by Iran's Iraqi proxies, the participation of Iraqi groups in anti-Israeli activities in Syria or Lebanon, or the departure of US forces from Iraq. Israeli airstrikes would likely trigger destabilizing retaliatory attacks by Iran's proxies against US or partnered forces and against the Iraqi government should Iran's proxies deem the government response to Israeli violations of Iraqi sovereignty insufficient.

- **Turkey's further disruption of the last quarter-century's status quo in northern Iraq and elsewhere in the region could trigger destabilizing Turkish-Iranian competition in Iraqi territory.** Turkey's attempts to expand its influence and security presence outside the traditional Turkish sphere of influence in Iraqi Kurdistan and into the traditionally Iranian-dominated parts of northern Iraq have already prompted at least one lethal Iranian proxy attack on a Turkish base. Iran and Turkey are most likely to compartmentalize this tension. However, in a most dangerous scenario, Iran and Turkey risk igniting a proxy conflict for influence over parts of Iraq that Turkey may increasingly view as rightfully belonging in a Turkish sphere of influence.

While Iran and other adversaries seek to coerce Iraqis into supporting corrupt policies and ideologies that harm Iraq's future, the United States should continue to strive for a stronger, more democratic, and more independent Iraq that can provide a regional buffer to mitigate future conflicts. It must therefore balance four oft-competing Iraq policy priorities:

1. **Continue providing US assistance, training, and advice to every level of the Iraqi Security Forces**. The continuing counter-ISIS mission still relies on US intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support to the Iraqi Security Forces. US support will maintain the enduring defeat of ISIS and prevent the resurgence of that threat while helping build a more professional Iraqi military. Meanwhile, the United States must provide targeted, small-scale advice and training to the security forces responsible for protecting senior officials in the Iraqi government. This support can enable those officials to make the difficult choices necessary to secure Iraq's future while protecting themselves from foreign and domestic threats.

2. **Deter and disrupt Iranian interference in Iraq as much as possible**. The Iranian regime likely views its nuclear negotiations with the United States as compartmentalized from its proxy attacks in Iraq; the primary objective of that campaign is to expel US forces from Iraq rather than to shape US-Iran negotiations. The United States should therefore be less concerned that its negotiations will be derailed by US responses to malign Iranian activities and attacks in Iraq. Retaliating for Iranian proxy attacks that threaten US forces and facilities within Iraq is a necessary component of re-establishing deterrence against Iran and its proxy militia network. The United States should also call out Iran's harmful political and economic activities in Iraq, including smuggling, vote-buying, and threatening activists.

3. **Use diplomatic and security cooperation with US regional partners and allies to discourage destabilizing activities within Iraq**. Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states have the potential to dramatically destabilize Iraq through their responses to Iranian activities there. The United States should work with these partners to create a shared regional approach to Iraq that better manages the threat posed by Iran's entrenchment in the state.

4. **Support the demands of Iraq's popular protest movement and longer-term civil society efforts to lay the foundation for a more representative Iraqi system**. US projects that set conditions for long-term civic participation will likely have the largest positive impact on Iraq's future. In the immediate term, that means encouraging voter participation and electoral transparency and calling out actors who threaten either. The United States should also consider supporting civil society efforts like student government, civics classes, or debate clubs that introduce the next generation of Iraqis to core elements of a secular and participatory democracy. Such programs can help counter insidious, Iran-backed programs that indoctrinate vulnerable youths into extremist ideologies and destabilize the Iraqi state.

US decisionmakers must approach the Iraq problem set not only with an eye for anticipating and pre-empting the significant political and security events of the next 18 months, but also with a whole-of-government approach intended to set conditions for a more stable Iraqi system in the decades to come. That outcome is one worthy of the last 18 years of American and Iraqi investment.

Introduction

In October 2019, widespread protests unexpectedly swept southern Iraq, calling for reform and garnering widespread, pan-sectarian support. Those protests brought down Iraq's government for the first time since 2003. Two months later, a US strike killed the commander of Iran's hugely influential Iraqi proxy network, IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, and his Iraqi deputy, Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis. That action prompted forecasts of war between the United States and Iran, an intra-Shi'a civil war, an ISIS resurgence, and even an Iranian coup in Iraq.[1] As of June 2021, none of those things have occurred. While the person in the premier's office changed, the formal and informal structure of the Iraqi government did not. Iran's Iraqi proxies have continued their attacks on enemies of the Iranian regime, but generally not on one another. Intra-Shi'a violence and the US-Iranian conflict each has remained below the level of an all-out war.

The United States' policy toward Iraq over the last decade has been reactive, pushing back against the rise of ISIS and the expansion of Iran's regional proxy network. ISW's previous report in this series outlined how threats to US interests in the Middle East too often stem from an unstable Iraq, which in turn destabilizes the region.[2] US leaders must aim to help Iraq become a strong and sovereign state to provide a stabilizing regional influence, allowing the United States to pivot to other foreign policy priorities without incurring excess risk in the Middle East.

A proactive US Iraq policy to that end should be predicated on a well-informed understanding of Iraq's possible future trajectories, rather than by reactive approaches to discrete events. Analysts and policymakers can benefit from an improved understanding of which trajectories are possible, which players are most likely to drive continuity or change, and which decisions or events are most likely to push the state (and with it, the region) onto a significantly different trajectory. Who are the spoilers, and who are the stabilizers? What indicators can help policymakers to identify when the country has stepped onto a new path?

This paper is designed to assist US policymakers and analysts as they think through the problems of Iraqi and regional instability and reevaluate the US relationship with Iraq through the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue. ISW evaluated current Iraqi political and security trendlines and conducted a series of internal exercises and workshops with external experts to identify Iraq's drivers of instability and most likely trajectories between June 2021 and October 2022. This paper will present the conclusions of ISW's research and offer initial assessments of the most likely, most beneficial, and most dangerous paths for US interests and Iraqi stability in that 18-month timeframe. This paper will also provide a series of alternative scenarios and highlight the indicators that can help US policymakers anticipate inflections and better understand the implications of major events as they occur.

US policymakers need to incorporate the enduring elements of Iraq's political ecosystem into their understandings as they consider the next steps for US involvement in Iraq and the region.

Despite dramatic changes to Iraq's leadership over the past 18 months, the core conditions of Iraq's governance remain consistent. These conditions include sectarian quota filling, widespread corruption, personality-driven politics, endemic militia violence, pervasive foreign interference, public sector bloat, a homogenous economy reliant on oil revenues and government jobs, a largely unrepresentative government, and a dissatisfied populace.

With that baseline in mind, this paper will walk through the key internal and external political and security drivers of change for Iraq's trajectories. It will then provide a synthetic forecast for the next 18 months based on those identified drivers, emphasizing the unfortunate reality that the Iraqi state is not currently the arbiter of its own destiny and therefore unable to play a stabilizing regional role. This paper will conclude with a series of policy recommendations for the next phase of US-Iraqi relations and the overall US approach to the Middle East.

Internal Drivers

Key Findings: Fifteen years into Iraq's democratic governance project, political and militia leaders increasingly seek to preserve the existing distribution of power even though it does not adequately represent the interests of the Iraqi people. This de facto elite pact will likely continue to provide a degree of stability in the near term, barring significant new foreign intervention or an acute economic crisis. Iraq's upcoming early elections, scheduled for October 2021, will likely not fundamentally alter the nature of that political status quo. Elections are also unlikely to solve Iraq's persistent and worsening economic realities, including bloated public sector employment and complete reliance on oil sales for government revenues. In a most-likely scenario, the perpetuation of the spoils-based political system will provide near-term continuity but further the state's gradual slide toward an economic crisis or potential state collapse. In a best-case scenario, high voter turnout in early elections could lead to some reformist gains, staving off those destabilizing crises and creating space for a young, post-sectarian generation to come of voting age and restructure Iraq's political landscape.

This section will walk through the key political and security conditions shaping Iraq and their likely inflection points and trajectories in the next 18 months. It provides an overview of the inflections most likely to occur in the lead-up to early elections, of expected post-election jockeying, and of ISIS and militia trajectories in that timeframe.

Political Conditions

Before Elections: Preparations for early October 2021 elections will lead to politically driven violence intended to provoke voter boycotts and preserve the power of the political elite.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi will continue to prioritize early elections in October 2021 to fulfill a campaign promise. Kadhimi offered early elections as one of his primary concessions to Iraq's popular protest movement, which triggered Iraq's highest Shi'a religious authority to force Kadhimi's predecessor to resign.[3] Kadhimi is unlikely to be able to fulfill his other promises, including justice for protesters killed by Iraqi security forces at the height of demonstrations in autumn 2019. Parliament elevated Kadhimi as an interim prime minister whose primary purpose in office is to combat COVID-19 and prepare the country for free, fair, and early elections, initially scheduled for June 2021.[4] Kadhimi's advisors and Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) convinced him that a June election was not feasible.[5] October is a more reasonable date for which IHEC can prepare, but early elections are still not guaranteed.

Iraq has already met the legal preconditions for early elections. It has overseen the passage of a new elections law, the general layout of new electoral districts, reforms to the Federal Supreme Court, and approval of elections funding and a parliamentary mechanism to dissolve Parliament before October 10, 2021. The voter registration period closed in April 2021 with the IHEC having registered fewer than two-thirds of eligible Iraqis.[6]

The Iraqi government will likely hold early elections in October 2021. Entrenched elites and reformists alike will struggle to turn out politically fatigued voters who no longer believe that their votes will change the behavior of Iraq's governing elite. An organized boycott and record-low turnout

plagued the 2018 elections. The next election will be structured differently from previous votes, with sub-provincial districting, first-past-the-post victory, and slightly improved opportunities for independent or locally influential candidates who can now run without a party list. That new structure provides a needed opportunity to reengage some Iraqis in the political process. However, in many geographic areas, only candidates with ties to pre-existing political elites will likely be allowed to

Entrenched elites and reformists alike will struggle to turn out politically fatigued voters who no longer believe that their votes will change the behavior of Iraq's governing elite.

stand for election. Most successful candidates will allow themselves to be co-opted, formally or informally, by pre-existing political blocs for protection and improved electoral chances. Many candidates who do not allow themselves to be co-opted will be convinced not to run through intimidation, blackmail, or assassination, particularly in southern Iraq.
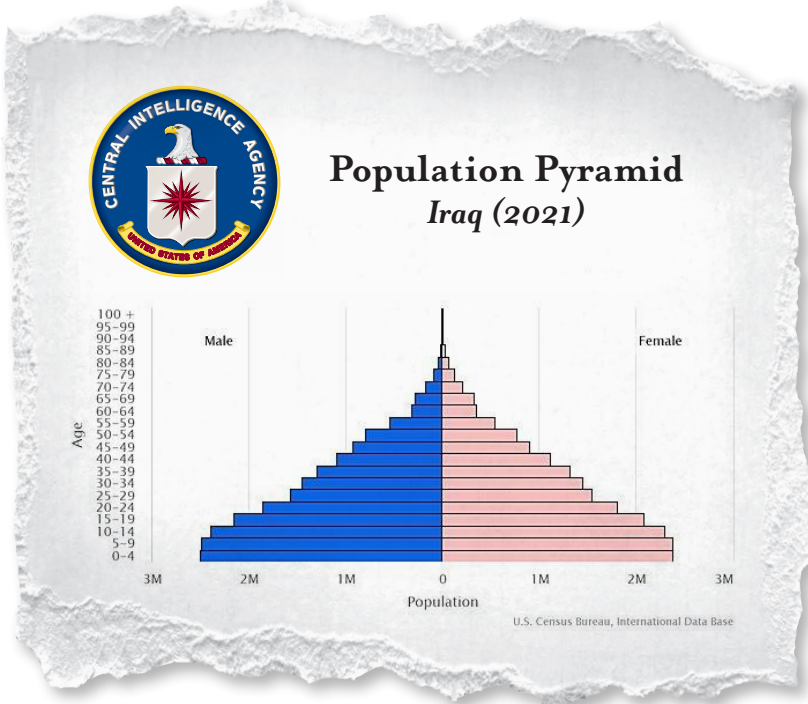
- **Alternative Scenarios**: Iraq could postpone early elections until they are constitutionally required in spring 2022. Entrenched parliamentary elites who do not anticipate electoral gains will likely call for postponing elections due to security crises or alleged voter fraud, likely of their own making. Postponing early elections would not improve the prospects for independent candidates and would provide more time for entrenched elites to intimidate their competition. Iraq is highly unlikely to postpone elections past the constitutional deadline.

  Indicators that elections may be postponed include major militia-triggered or invented security crises, discussions from militias or Iraqi Security Forces of foreign or ISIS threats to the polls, and discussions by non-Shi'a

parliamentarians and Iran-backed Shi'a groups on a refusal to dissolve Parliament, a prerequisite for elections. However, Iraq's prime minister and president can constitutionally dissolve Parliament and force early elections with the support of only one-third of parliamentarians. They will likely maintain that support. The strongest leading indicator of postponed elections would be a call by the notoriously mercurial Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who controls the largest parliamentary bloc following the 2018 elections with 55 seats, for a postponement. Sadr supports October 2021 elections at the time of writing.

Newcomers to the political scene, particularly reformists in Shi'a-majority areas, will remain mostly boxed out by age restrictions, expensive candidate fees, gerrymandering, and direct intimidation by politically powerful militia groups. The new elections law does create new opportunities for politically connected independents who already enjoy local influence, like religious and tribal leaders, to take office themselves or by proxy, rather than working through pre-existing political blocs.

- **Young people and many protesters will be unable to participate as candidates but may turn out to support independents**. The minimum age for candidacy under the new electoral law is 28, an improvement from the previous minimum of 30. However, Iraq has a dramatic youth bulge, with roughly 56 percent of Iraqis being under 25.[7] Many of the reformist protesters who ousted former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi's government are teens and recent graduates who will be unable to put forward their peers as candidates. The candidate nomination fee of 2 million Iraqi dinars (about $1,371) may also have reduced participation by independent candidates without established party funding.[8]

- **New sub-provincial districts do not reflect demographic realities and are likely gerrymandered to the benefit of pre-existing political elites**. Iraq has not held a credible census since 1957 and has witnessed large-scale

Population Pyramid
Iraq (2021)

U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base

unidentified gunmen, but also as unexplained IEDs and grenades in residential areas, forced disappearances, and unexpected withdrawals of independent candidates seeking election. Activists who have connections to powerful networks or influential local leaders—and activists who limit their critiques to specific parties—may be allowed to participate with minimal intimidation. Shi'a activists will likely fare the worst; Sunni activists will likely face less intimidation but remain more focused on reconstruction and humanitarian aid to their home communities than on overhauling the political system through electoral success. Kurdish reformist parties have historically fared poorly in national-level elections and will continue to face both kinetic intimidation and media silencing in the increasingly authoritarian Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[10]

Low voter turnout, whether due to organized boycotts or general voter disenchantment with the system, will empower Iraq's entrenched political elites. Political elites will effectively turn out their networks of social influence to contest desired seats while attempting to suppress wider voter turnout. Iran-backed groups will attempt to recreate the record low turnout that propelled them to electoral success in 2018 to ensure that reformist votes do not dilute the groups' smaller but better-organized social bases.[11] Iran-backed parties, particularly those that currently make up the Conquest Alliance, will likely discourage participation by protesters and reformist voters while simultaneously mobilizing their social bases, which are invested in the status quo patronage system.[12] In 2018, many participating voters were part of those social networks who rely on political parties for jobs for themselves and their families, leading to the overrepresentation of militias and the Sadrist movement in Parliament.[13] However, those social bases are unlikely to grow substantially; Sadr's network of social followers is primarily inherited from his father's pre-2003 base, while the social bases of various militia groups are limited in scale by the size of their budgets and the number of jobs they can provide.[14] Higher turnout may therefore

demographic change since then.[9] Iraq's new electoral districts as proposed by Parliament often fail to fairly account for local conditions like neighborhood demographics or tribal competition. In diverse cities like Baghdad, Shi'a parliamentary elites likely broke up some Sunni-majority neighborhoods, folding them into mixed districts and rendering those areas more competitive for Shi'a candidates. Accurately assessing which specific districts have been gerrymandered nationwide is not possible without more reliable demographic data. Furthermore, candidacy under the new electoral law does not require recent residency in the district. Candidates must simply be "from" the district, enabling party-promoted outsiders unaligned with local interests to swoop in and claim seats in areas in which those elite-backed candidates might not live.

- **Reformists, activists, and independent candidates without political, religious, or tribal connections will likely be intimidated out of running or assassinated before elections are held**. This intimidation campaign will likely manifest as assassinations by

dilute the votes of militia-affiliated networks and create space for locally influential candidates like popular activists and religious and tribal leaders. Many of those tribal and religious leaders maintain close ties to establishment political parties.

Political elites are likely attempting to engineer a reformist boycott of elections to ensure low voter turnout and the continued overrepresentation of elite interests in Parliament. Militias are likely conducting inflammatory assassinations of activists in order to trigger protests and a view that the system is irreconcilable, leading to boycotts. For example, likely Iranian proxy militants assassinated prominent Karbala activist Ihab al-Wazni on May 9, 2021, driving protesters to set fire to the Iranian consulate in Karbala.[15] Several activist parties have already said that they will not participate in elections that would perpetuate an unsafe, corrupt, and unrepresentative system; calls for boycotts by reformist, protester-led parties increased following the Wazni assassination.[16] Widespread boycotts will ensure that the votes of the small but dedicated electoral base for Iran's militia proxies are not diluted by widespread voter participation. Militias and entrenched political elites may also attempt to infiltrate the protest movement or activist parties and call for boycotts from within in order to produce similar results to 2018. Tracking the origins of boycott movements as they emerge will be difficult in the open source, but worth documenting and publicizing in the lead-up to elections.

- **The higher the turnout, the better for Iraq's future**. Increased voter turnout would not change the fundamental character of the system but would limit the power of malign actors and may allow for incremental progress toward needed reform. Unfortunately, entrenched political and militia elites will try to prevent that scenario from taking place.

Political fatigue and voter mistrust are even more likely than a protester-organized boycott to undercut the legitimacy of elections. Polling of Iraqis in 2021 shows that 70 percent believe that elections will not change how the government is run. That same poll reports that 74 percent do not believe that the IHEC can administer fair and impartial elections, and 77 percent of Iraqis (including 76 percent in Shi'a areas) believe that impartial elections are impossible so long as Iran-backed militias dominate the political scene. Many Iraqis will therefore not vote in 2021, despite their overwhelming desire (90 percent) to bring down the ethno-sectarian quota-filling system.[17] That system currently underpins Iraqi governance and enables Iraqi corruption. Recent polling indicates that Iraqis' trust in their government is at an all-time low; 22 percent of Iraqis and just 17 percent of Shi'a respondents expressed trust in the government as of April 2021. Of Shi'a respondents, 60 percent said that they are unlikely to vote in the October elections.[18]

Sectarian violence, inter-tribal conflict, and a splintering of the reformist movement are all likely in the lead-up to elections.

- **Low-level clashes between militias and their competitors will continue but remain below the threshold for open confrontation over territorial control**. Iran-backed Shi'a extremist social control groups like Rab'Allah will likely increase their attacks on businesses and homes affiliated with their political competition in mixed districts, especially in Baghdad, Sinjar, Mosul, and other disputed areas.[19] Followers of nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who currently make up the largest parliamentary bloc, may exchange inflammatory remarks or assassinations with Iran-backed Shi'a groups belonging to the Conquest Alliance, which is currently Parliament's second-biggest coalition. Both sides will most likely fall back on their shared interest in preserving the current Iraqi system before tensions can escalate to larger-scale conflicts.

Many Iraqis will not vote in 2021, despite their overwhelming desire (90 percent) to bring down the ethnic-sectarian quota-filling system that underpins Iraqi governance.

- **Sub-provincial district boundaries appear to be drawn in ways that do not respect the local demographics, risking an uptick in inter-tribal and localized violence.** Iraq's province-wide districts previously diluted local-level conflicts to the provincial level and allowed for local elites to affiliate with party lists, ensuring that tribes each received a slice of a given province's electoral pie. New, smaller districts may spark conflict between neighboring tribes competing for control of the same 3-5 parliamentary seats in their district(s) of influence.

- **ISIS and Iranian-backed militias will likely intimidate Sunni and noncompliant Shi'a civil society leaders ahead of elections.** Militias will intimidate Sunni leaders in mixed or disputed areas to gain an electoral advantage for Shi'a or allied candidates. Militia groups will also likely target Shi'a candidates and activists who oppose their political interests. ISIS is likely to layer on top of these efforts to stall the realization of a popular, non-extremist Sunni bloc in Iraq's government. Sunni civilians may lose additional trust in the parliamentary process, and a small proportion would be more easily radicalized as a result.

- **Iraq's already splintered reformist protest movement will be increasingly split and co-opted by political elites before elections but may still spur wider turnout.** Some Shi'a protesters have attempted to form political parties to contest the elections; militia intimidation has already forced many to leave their homes and their electoral chances behind. The remaining candidates are connected enough to the current system to benefit from the elite pact that protects its participants; they are less likely to call for complete overhauls of the system and more likely to support incremental reform. That gap in expectations will likely alienate large swathes of young or revolutionary protesters. Other ostensibly youth-led parties will in reality serve as youth wings for pre-existing political blocs. For example, Harakat al-Waei, on the surface a new youth party that

frames itself as an alternative to the status quo, was founded by the former office director of Shi'a cleric and Iraqis Alliance leader Ammar al-Hakim, likely at Hakim's request.[20] Other political elites formed youth wings of their own to take up the rhetorical mantle and potential electoral momentum of reform without risking reforming themselves out of a job.

> **After Elections**: Elections will likely produce a weak prime minister whose elevation reaffirms the political status quo, providing short-term stability but failing to address the structural defects that threaten Iraq in the long term.

Early elections will not substantially alter the political status quo and will further elite interests, not the interests of the Iraqi people. Political elites will co-opt or stonewall newcomers to the political scene, who will remain a minority. Some activists and reformists will gain seats, but will reflect the piecemeal, localized nature of the protest movements they represent. The specific gains of pre-existing political elites are less important than the overall preservation of elite interests, which is almost inevitable this cycle.

Corrupt parliamentary elites will retain control over provincial governments, perpetuating protests over localized grievances. Local elections have been postponed since 2013 and are unlikely to take place in the next two years. Parliament will therefore likely not restore provincial councils and will continue direct appointments of governors. An ongoing lack of local representation, accountability, employment, and service provisions will trigger new protest cycles in the coming years. These protests will likely be triggered by water and electricity shortages during Iraq's increasingly hot summers. However, these protests will likely remain localized by city or province, especially in the Shi'a south. Protests over localized services are unlikely to rise to a national level and will remain disconnected from one another.

Elites are not exclusively resorting to violent or corrupt measures to contest elections. Their ongoing buy-in to Iraq's political process is best

JUNE 2021

demonstrated by two blocs: Hadi al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance, which represents Iran-backed Shi'a militias and Iran's interests in Iraq's parliament, and nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Toward Reform, which represents Sadr's strong but static base of social followers and religious devotees.[21] Sadr and Ameri oppose the US force presence in Iraq, and generally also one another. Sadr has increasingly supported the US-backed Iraqi prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, to consolidate Sadr's authority and reformist brand. Sadr may be willing to compromise over a continuing small US presence in Iraq to thwart Ameri's ambitions and preserve a Sadr-friendly premier. Both groups will need to turn out their social bases in addition to their usual ballot-stuffing and vote-buying efforts to preserve the international legitimacy of the Iraqi government and avoid the allegations of fraud that plagued the 2018 elections.[22]

Elite buy-in to the current Iraqi system will build near-term resiliency. Sadr's Toward Reform and Ameri's Conquest Alliance each have strong militia support and previously fought against the United States, the Iraqi government, and each other. Yet they have so far chosen to settle their differences and demonstrate influence predominantly at the ballot box and through peaceful (though threatening) shows of force.[23] Their version of electoral participation will likely include direct and indirect intimidation of voters and opposing candidates and, in many areas, outright fraud. However, the fact that elites like Sadr and Ameri are contesting elections through grassroots organizing demonstrates that they increasingly view the electoral participation of their follower bases as equally valuable to their extra-governmental forms of influence like ballot stuffing and intra-militia violence. Their continued participation in democratic elections, however flawed, may build the Iraqi system's near-term resiliency but will not address the factors that are undermining Iraqi state credibility.

Parliament is most likely to select a weak technocratic or compromise candidate as prime minister, furthering the slow deterioration of the Iraqi state.

Government formation will be slow and painful but will likely eventually reaffirm the status quo if Parliament returns with a similar balance of political power. Parliament is most likely to select a weak technocratic or compromise candidate as prime minister, furthering the slow deterioration of the Iraqi state. Parliament will likely return with a similar composition to its post-2018 electoral makeup, based on findings from ISW's workshops. Sadrists and Iran-backed groups will gain an approximately equal number of seats, with Sadr coming out slightly ahead, and will each attempt to put forward their own candidates. One or more attempted government formations may fail to gain parliamentary approval. This process will likely take around six months and induce protests and low-level violence between the armed wings of various political blocs. Shi'a leaders will eventually compromise and choose a weak and constrainable candidate in the mold of former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi (though likely not Mehdi himself). This premier will most likely be a little-known technocrat without a political base or formal affiliation with a party. He will not be explicitly Iran-aligned and may even be US-supported, but will be too weak to resist either the Iranian-driven co-optation of the Iraqi state or pressures by other Iraqi political elites. He is unlikely to implement major reforms or to unilaterally expel US forces from Iraq. His election would be a firm continuation of the corrupt status quo that may eventually bring down the current Iraqi system. That collapse will likely not come in his four-year term barring increased foreign intervention, economic collapse, or a large-scale natural disaster.

Current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi could also win re-election if Sadr chooses to support him. Barring a more dramatic change in the electoral balance of power, however, a second Kadhimi administration would not have the capacity to move Iraq away from this trajectory.

- **Alternative scenario: The death of Iraq's highest Shi'a religious authority, the 90-year-old Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, could alter the process of government formation in mostly minor ways**. As the head of Najaf's religious establishment, Sistani's influence is difficult to overstate. He has long enjoyed an informal veto power over proposed premiers and a mediating role in Shi'a political disputes.[24] Sistani appears to be in good health, but, given his age, the fallout from his death must be considered when forecasting the next 18 months. Sistani's replacement following his death is likely to be a cleric with a very similar ideology and approach to politics, but Najaf's choosing of a replacement could be a process of years.[25] If Sistani passes away before Parliament approves a new premier, competition over the selection between the United States and Iran, who also usually have an informal veto power, may become increasingly fierce. The risk of intra-Shi'a political violence could also increase as politically minded clerics like Moqtada al-Sadr, Qais al-Khazali, and Ammar al-Hakim attempt to fill parts of the power vacuum that Sistani's death would leave behind. The potential for Iranian domination of Iraq's political process will also likely increase in the immediate wake of Sistani's passing. Sistani's death will also have larger regional and global implications for the future of Shi'a Islam and of the Iran-Iraq relationship that are unlikely to become immediately apparent in the time period covered by this paper's forecast.

No electoral outcome will solve the structural economic problems that plague Iraq. Iraq's bloated public sector, dramatic overreliance on oil revenues for 90 percent of state revenue, and entrenched corruption spell eventual, but likely not immediate, doom for the spoils-based Iraqi system.[26] However, high oil prices will likely allow the Iraqi state to remain solvent. No political actor with the will to reform Iraq's financial system is likely to gain sufficient support to do so in the next election. Few Iraqi politicians leave the political scene once they enter it, and all of them understand that attempts

to reform the system or cut public-sector salaries that account for 25% of Iraq's GDP would likely be politically suicidal. International pressure in the form of loans conditioned on severe anti-corruption and austerity measures could compel positive change on this front if a collapse is imminent, but such conditions are unlikely to be accepted so long as oil revenues remain sufficiently high.

- **Alternative Scenarios: Should oil prices collapse at any time in the next 18 months, the Iraqi state will likely follow**. Any substantive fall in oil prices below the $45 per barrel planned for in the 2021 budget would render the Iraqi state unable once again to pay public-sector salaries. Delays in salary payments inevitably trigger protests and unrest. As Kenneth Pollack and Farhad Alaaldin outlined in December 2020, "The upshot is that Baghdad needs $5 billion every month to pay direct salaries and pensions, as well as another $2 billion to cover essential services and operating costs, much of which constitutes indirect forms of support to the population." At May 2021 prices of $62.50 a barrel, Iraq's oil ministry generates about $5.525 billion in revenues, running a predicted monthly deficit of around $1.5 billion.[27] Under the 2021 budget, Iraq plans to run an estimated $19.79 billion annual deficit, chipping away at its already depleted currency reserves.[28]

Barring a dramatic international intervention, Iraq would burn through its hard currency reserves within months, further devalue the dinar, and go into financial freefall in the event of another price collapse.[29] Without salary payments to Iraqi Security Forces and bureaucrats who administer public services, armed groups would likely fall back into violent competition over resources like oil fields, ports, farms, and generators. The country could easily slide back into widespread conflict that would likely trigger sectarian conflict and foreign interventions. Iran would fund and arm its militia groups to maintain control over Iraq as a captive market. Turkey would likely consider protection missions for ethnic Turkmen in Ninewa

or Kirkuk, triggering Iran-backed Shi'a militia backlash. Saudi Arabia may attempt to fund Sunni armed groups to deter Iran-backed militia encroachment on Saudi interests. And Israel may calculate that its security needs are more important than the risk of a collapsed or collapsing Iraqi state and resume its airstrikes on Iran-backed assets in Iraq.

Security Drivers

Iran-backed Militias: Iranian proxy militants will continue to pose a substantial threat to Iraqi elections and domestic reform through their pursuit of increased domestic influence, Shi'a dominance of the Iraqi state, and the ouster of US forces from Iraq.

Iran-backed PMF groups will focus on regional and domestic objectives to the detriment of the counter-ISIS fight. Redeployments of PMF forces to further Iran's regional objectives may leave gaps in disputed areas in which ISIS can reassert itself. Militia attempts to alter electoral outcomes in mixed or disputed areas will alienate Sunni communities, radicalizing small numbers of Sunnis and reducing trust in the government. Militias may occasionally disguise their electioneering and ethnic displacement campaigns as ISIS attacks, confusing attribution and deepening sectarian divides.[30]

Iraq's Shi'a militias have not coalesced around another Muhandis-like figure and may still be divided by domestic competitions and intra-militia disagreements. Militia groups still largely follow the directives of Iran's IRGC Quds Force, but the absence of the leadership once provided by IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and the Popular Mobilization Forces' operational head and Kata'ib Hezbollah founder Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis is evidenced by periodic surges in intra-militia insults and squabbles over tactics and timelines.[31] Kata'ib Hezbollah views itself as entitled to the PMF leadership positions and influence that Muhandis held, which other groups dispute. These disagreements could come to a head in the lead-up to the next elections if groups do not deconflict

where they run candidates. Those militias with pre-existing political wings like Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq may run into particular trouble. Iran-backed groups may also clash with Sadrist militias and candidates.

Armed competition between Sadrists and Iran's proxies poses the greatest endogenous risk to Iraqi stability in the next 18 months but will most likely remain limited to assassinations, threats, and shows of force rather than all-out conflict or civil war. Sadrists and Iran-backed parties are ultimately reliant on the preservation of the corrupt, non-representative Iraqi system that gives them power and are likely unwilling to destroy that system so long as profits remain available for both sides. This elite pact that protects beneficiaries of the system will also provide a de-escalation mechanism before such a conflict gets out of hand, with other political elites serving as mediators between Sadr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali or other Iranian proxies.

- **Alternative scenarios**: Iran will likely order its proxies to take a more direct role against Sadr as Sadr's interests increasingly align with those of Iran's regional competitors, including the United States.[32] Iran can likely bully Sadr back into an acceptable range of disobedience without resorting to outright conflict; his famously mercurial nature leads to regular shifts in position that do not alienate his religious or political followings.

  Indicators of an Iranian or proxy attempt to bring Sadr back in line include assassinations of Sadrist officials, support for Sadrist defectors, and more overt threats, like the 2019 drone attack on Sadr's home in Najaf. Iran could also invite Sadr to "study" in the Iranian holy city of Qom, where he would functionally be under house arrest. Sadr could be cowed by this behavior and go into hiding as he did in 2019. He could also decide to mobilize his forces against his opponents, risking Iraq's descent into a civil war. Sadrist and Iranian decisionmaking around this conflict are among the most likely spoilers of near-term domestic

Iraqi stability, but a continuation of the status quo balance remains more likely.
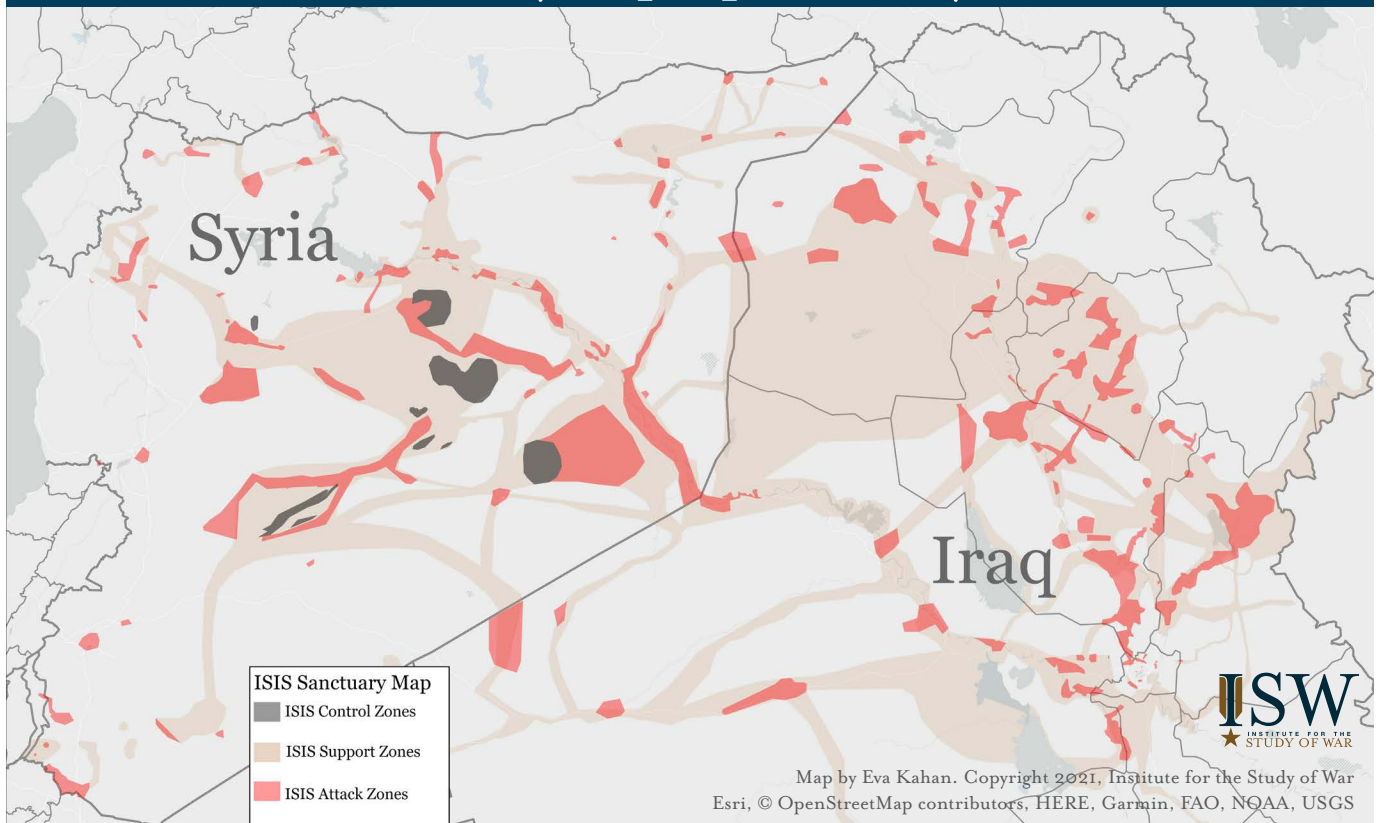
> **ISIS**: ISIS militants will focus on expanding rural support zones to reconstitute their strength, posing a low-level threat to Iraqi stability and US interests over the next 18 months that will likely be contained by a continuation of current levels of counter-ISIS activity

ISIS has weighted its effort towards maintaining and expanding rural support zones when possible to facilitate training and mitigate threats posed to ISIS forces by Iraqi security efforts. ISIS maintains small, rural support zones from which it resists Iraqi Security Forces' activity, including occasional Counterterrorism Service (CTS) clearing operations and minimal Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Iraqi Army operations. ISIS is rebuilding complex explosives networks in rural areas and has deprioritized complex urban attacks except during high-profile attack campaigns like

Ramadan. ISIS does not pose a substantial threat to US forces in Iraq.

The effectiveness of US and coalition military support to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the degree of competition between Iran-backed militias and the rest of the ISF are the two primary variables that will shape the trajectory of ISIS' future campaigns in Iraq. US and coalition military support guarantees intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to the ISF and provides rapid air support that the Iraqi Air Enterprise cannot provide, both of which are essential to the continued suppression of ISIS. Meanwhile, Iran-backed militia campaigns to replace ISF and gain influence in cities and mixed areas undermine the counter-ISIS effort. Militia expansion forces the ISF to take a two-pronged approach towards countering ISIS and militia overreach. Barring dramatic changes to either US and coalition support or intra-ISF competition, ISIS will likely continue to focus on maintaining rural support zones to reconstitute itself and is unlikely to pose a major security threat in the next 18 months.

ISIS Sanctuary Map, updated May 2, 2021

ISIS Sanctuary Map
- ■ ISIS Control Zones
- ■ ISIS Support Zones
- ■ ISIS Attack Zones

Map by Eva Kahan. Copyright 2021, Institute for the Study of War
Esri, © OpenStreetMap contributors, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS

Displaced Persons Forced to Leave Displaced Persons Camps in Iraq before March 2021

SYRIA

Urmia

Ras

Zanjan

Mosul

Erbil

Sanandaj

Kirkuk

Hamadan

Kermanshah

Khorramabad

Baghdad

I R A Q

Ahvaz

Arar

Al Basrah

Sakakah

Miles

0   30   60   120   180   240

Kuwait

KUWAIT

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Map by Eva Kahan. Copyright 2021, Institute for the Study of War.
Data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).
Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS
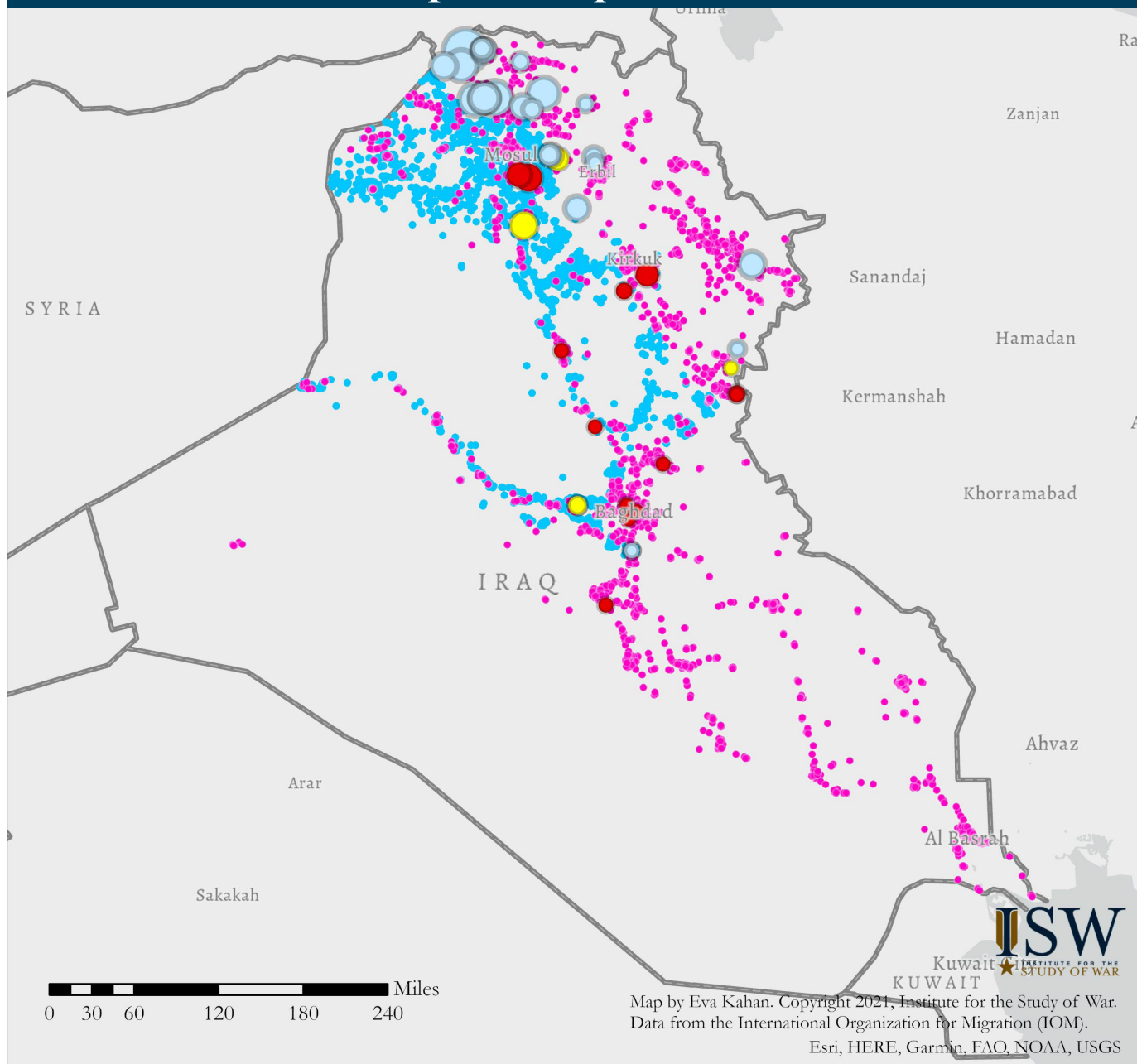
Camps still open in January 2021

Population

○ 100
○ 5,000
○ 10,000

Camps open (closure paused) in January 2021

Population

○ 1,000
○ 5,000
○ 10,000

Camps closed by January 2021

Population

● 100
● 5,000
● 10,000

● Displaced Persons (March 2021)

● Returnees (March 2021)

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) will face exploitation and ISIS infiltration of their camps, not resettlement in their home communities, in the coming months. IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq will likely remain in camps with minimal oversight and aid. Many IDPs in federally controlled Iraq will likely be forced out of their camps in the coming months. They will be unable to return to their places of origin due to the IDPs' perceived ISIS affiliations, ongoing insecurity, or militia occupation of their home communities. Those IDPs may seek out camps that remain open elsewhere in Iraq, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan, or relocate to regions of secondary displacement, including in the locations of closed camps. Militias are likely using the forced closures of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps to set conditions for electoral outcomes favorable to militias.[33] Sunni IDPs are likely to be left behind in voter registration and denied the right to vote in electorally disputed areas. Iraqi residents of al-Hol camp in Syria are also unlikely to be relocated to Iraq in the next two years.

External Drivers

Key Findings: Iraq is poised for incremental progress toward domestic political and security stability in the near term if left to its own devices. Unfortunately, regional powers will not leave Iraq alone. Iran's use of its Iraqi proxy network to target the United States or its regional competitors like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey is the most likely trigger for new, destabilizing inflections in foreign interference or intervention by those actors. Iraq's ongoing domestic fragility continues to create space for foreign actors to play out their proxy battles, exacerbating Iraqi and regional instability in a mutually reinforcing cycle.[34]

US-Iranian Competition

Iran's Iraqi proxies will continue regular attacks on US forces and facilities in Iraq, particularly if US forces do not appear to be on their way out. Iran-backed militias will regularly conduct rocket attacks on US forces and facilities and IED attacks on Iraqi-operated convoys contracted by the US-led Coalition to incentivize a complete US withdrawal from Iraq, a core Iranian objective. The lethality, frequency, and scale of these attacks will vary primarily based on US-Iranian tensions and the decision-making of the Iranian regime rather than due to that of Iraqi political or militia leaders. Iraqi militia groups may continue their tactic of creating supposedly new "resistance" militia front groups to increase plausible deniability in the public sphere for militia attacks and activities and to confuse attribution and retaliatory strikes.[35] They may also return to unclaimed attacks promoted by generalized militia media accounts to limit attribution of and retaliation for those attacks.

Attacks will likely continue to occasionally target the US Embassy and US presence at Baghdad International Airport and Ain al-Assad Airbase, as well as US contractor locations like Balad Airbase. Iran's proxies will likely increase attacks around new stages of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue and any decision points by the US or Iraqi governments regarding the ongoing presence of US forces in Iraq. As regional tensions between Turkey and Iran and domestic tensions between Shi'a militias and Kurdish Peshmerga forces increase, Iranian proxy attacks will increasingly target US and allied facilities in Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly with drones and longer-range rockets launched from the border of the Kurdistan region.[36]

Iranian proxy attacks on US assets in Iraq will likely increasingly rely on drones, increasing the accuracy and potential lethality of attacks that do occur. Iran has already provided advanced surveillance and kamikaze drone technology to its most trusted Iraqi proxies. Likely Iranian-backed militants conducted their first known drone attack on a US facility in Iraq on April 14, 2021; the non-lethal attack was likely intended to demonstrate the new capability rather than to cause extreme damage or casualties and targeted a hangar at Erbil International Airport.[37] Increased proxy use of UAVs could bypass US Counter-Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) systems as a double drone attack on a hangar at Ain al-Assad Airbase did on May 8, 2021.[38] Drones can target more accurately than rockets and are better able to bypass US air defenses, limiting the likelihood of these attacks unintentionally killing Iraqi Security Forces or civilians but increasing the threat to US forces or other intended targets. Attacks like the ones in April and May 2021 may attempt to degrade specific US capabilities, but are also intended to demonstrate the capability to conduct mass-casualty attacks should Iran choose to do so. The increased range and accuracy provided by advancing drone technology may broaden the targets of Iran-backed attacks to include facilities in Iraq that house US troops but have traditionally not been threatened by Iranian proxy rocket attacks. An explosives-laden drone crashed near one of those facilities, Harir Airbase in the far north of Iraqi Kurdistan, on May 11.[39] Future attacks launched from Iraq could threaten US facilities farther afield in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait.

If Iran assesses that the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue is unlikely to result in the withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq, it will likely order its proxy network to escalate the lethality of its attacks on US assets. The US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue has already led to the official ongoing withdrawal of all US combat forces from Iraq. Iran's Iraqi proxies demand the withdrawal of advisory forces as well and may assess that they can incentivize a complete withdrawal by threatening or inflicting greater US casualties, thereby raising the political cost of a US presence in Iraq.

Iranian proxy attacks from Iraq will likely extend to targeting US allies within Iraq and the region, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and the NATO training mission in Iraq (NTM-I). Increasingly anti-NTM-I rhetoric of Iran's proxies in Iraq demonstrates two trends: first, Iran's unwillingness to tolerate other foreign actors asserting themselves within Iraq, and second, the need of Iran's proxies to "resist" an "occupier." Iranian proxy groups have already launched drone attacks from Iraq into Saudi Arabia, targeting the royal palace in Riyadh and assorted Saudi oil facilities. Iran's proxies have also threatened attacks on the United Arab Emirates and claimed that UAE personnel are taking over Iraqi intelligence services.[40]

- **Alternative scenarios:** Iran may limit its attacks on US, NATO, and allied assets in Iraq and the region in response to potential diplomatic agreement, but Iran regularly increases its attacks in the lead-up to such agreements to build leverage or urgency in discussions. In the event of such an agreement, Iran may struggle to retain unified command and control over the less ideological and more nationalist components of its Iraqi proxy network like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which relies on the narrative of resisting the US "occupation" to justify its military and political existence. Any attacks carried out by members of Iran's proxy network without Iran's approval risk a dramatic and unplanned regional escalation cycle.

  Indicators that Iran does not approve of a given attack may include condemnation of the attack by Iran's most loyal proxies like Kata'ib Hezbollah and immediate de-escalatory visits to Baghdad by Quds Force leadership. They could also include intra-PMF crackdowns and arrests by the Kata'ib Hezbollah-led intelligence directorate.[41]

Saudi-Iranian Competition

Iran-backed Iraqi militants will use their increasingly advanced drone technology to target Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states from Iraqi territory in the coming months. Iran has already ordered its most loyal Iraqi proxy to conduct attacks coordinated with Iran and the Iran-aligned Yemeni al-Houthi movement. Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) is likely responsible for a May 2019 attack on oil infrastructure and for at least one attack on Riyadh in January 2021 attack. KH has likely conducted other attacks on Saudi Arabia that are less easily attributable from the open source. Kata'ib Hezbollah is seeking to assert itself as a regional power player in its own right, even as it continues to further Iran's objectives in the region. The establishment of a transnational, regional identity could help the group to survive even in the case of a US withdrawal from Iraq, a core Kata'ib Hezbollah objective that would nonetheless eliminate the group's original raison d'etre. Kata'ib Hezbollah's brand of "resistance" now transcends Iraqi considerations to include operations against Iran's enemies in Syria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Israel.

Iran-backed extremist attacks on regional actors will continue as Iran's Iraqi proxies improve their drone capabilities unless Iran and Saudi Arabia can reach some sort of reconciliation. Iran will increase these attacks to build leverage during any talks with Saudi Arabia, simultaneously denying responsibility for the attacks and promising to curtail them should Saudi Arabia acquiesce to Iranian demands.

- **Alternative scenarios**: Iran's Iraqi proxies could begin to target the United Arab Emirates as they have previously threatened, bringing the Emiratis more directly into the Iraqi space. Iranian proxy attacks from Iraq into Bahrain are also within the realm of possibility.

  Indicators of a coming attack include an uptick in messaging against the targeted country on Iraqi extremist channels, as was the case in the lead-up to the January 2021 attack on Riyadh. Iraqi groups also regularly cite mass-casualty ISIS attacks in Iraq as a trigger for threats against or attacks on Gulf states that Iraqi militias allege fund ISIS.

How ISW attributes attacks on Gulf states:

1. *Location:* Attacks into northeastern Saudi Arabia and Riyadh are more likely to come from Iraq or Iran rather than Yemen. This heuristic is not absolute; Iran has provided the al-Houthi movement with weapons that are capable of striking Riyadh and further targets, including the UAE, but Saudi air defense systems are more likely to intercept those attacks before they reach their targets.

2. *Coordinated messaging:* Simultaneous and immediate coverage by media channels affiliated with a variety of Iraqi proxy groups is a strong indicator that an attack was coordinated by Iran and carried out by its Iraqi proxies.[42] Iraqi media channels, particularly Shi'a extremist Telegram channels, rarely if ever cover Houthi attacks into Saudi Arabia. Iranian proxy channels will only provide coordinated coverage if directed to do so by Iran and will not cover Iraqi attacks that Iran does not want publicly discussed.

3. *Claims:* The Houthis have claimed some attacks in Saudi Arabia that were almost certainly carried out by Iran or its Iraqi proxies, including the September 2019 Abqaiq attack. Houthi claims of attacks that may have come from elsewhere should therefore be viewed with substantial skepticism. Houthi denials should be considered; the Houthis are more likely to make a false claim to generate renown than a false denial. The Houthi denial of responsibility in January 2021 likely reflected an Iranian request to highlight its capability to strike central Riyadh with advanced drone systems from Iraq, whereas the Houthi claim of the Abqaiq attack was likely intended to obfuscate Iran's role in the attack.

Iranian-backed missile and drone attacks on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (May 2019 - May 2021)
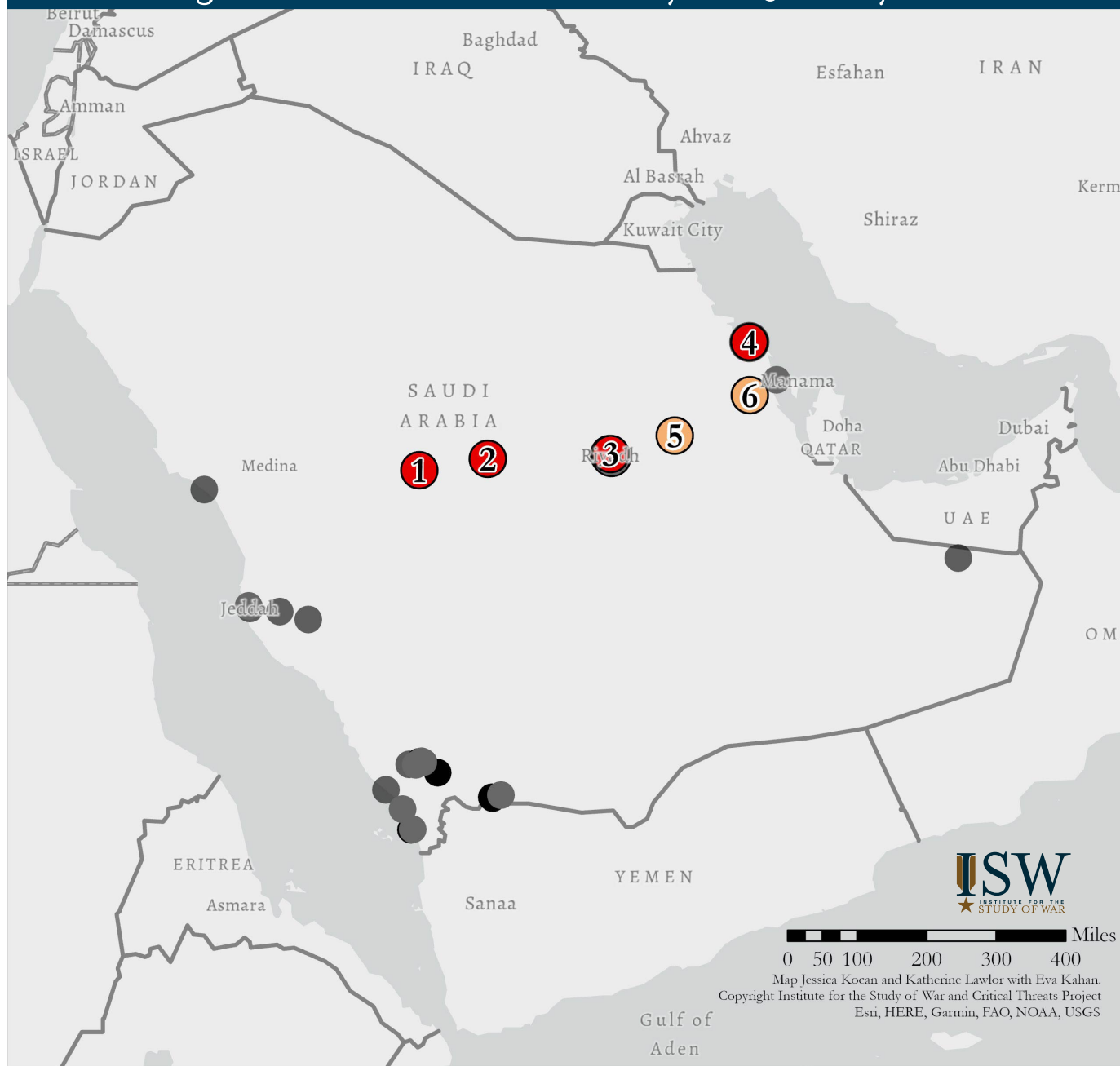
Kata'ib Hezbollah attacks on Saudi Arabia
1) May 14, 2019 attack on Dawadimi
2) May 14, 2019 attack on Afif
3) January 23, 2021 attack on Riyadh
4) March 7, 2021 attack on Ras Tanura
[low-confidence attribution]; April 11, 2021
attack on Jubail [low confidence attribution]

Iran-conducted attacks on Saudi Arabia
5) September 14, 2019 attack on Khurais
6) September 14, 2019 attack on Abqaiq

**al-Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia
(both claimed and confirmed)**

Israeli-Iranian Competition

Israel will likely continue targeting Iranian assets in Iran and Syria, rather than Iraq, in the next 18 months. However, Iran's Iraqi proxies may use Iraq to threaten Israel, risking Israeli retaliatory attacks that destabilize Iraq. Iran is increasingly using Iraq to build strategic depth and to maintain deterrence in the event of a conventional attack by Israel or others on Iran. Iranian proxies in Iraq maintain caches of short-range ballistic missiles, armed drones, and smaller-scale rockets. They build and run factories in Iraq under Iranian direction to produce Iranian weaponry and transport weapons from Iran through Iraq to Iranian basing in Syria. Iran's Iraqi proxies could launch some of these capabilities from Iraq or Syria to reach Israel.[43] Israel regularly conducts airstrikes against Iranian and proxy caches in Syria and conducted at least seven strikes against Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces weapons caches and weapons convoys in Iraq in the summer of 2019, killing and wounding dozens of civilians and undermining US-Iraqi relations.[44] Iran's Iraqi proxies will continue to rhetorically threaten Israel, but these groups will post a more direct threat to Israel from Syria.

- **Alternative scenario**: Israel will conduct additional airstrikes against targets within Iraq if it perceives a growing threat from Iran-backed Shi'a extremist groups in Iraq. This perception could arise from increased demonstrations of long-range drone capabilities by Iran's Iraqi proxies, the participation of Iraqi groups in anti-Israeli activities in Syria or Lebanon, or the departure of all US forces from Iraq. At the time of writing in June 2021, Iran's Iraqi proxies have leveraged the conflict between Israel and Hamas to enhance their domestic legitimacy, calling for volunteers to combat Israel and claiming responsibility for at least one rocket attack of Syrian origin directed at Israel. Iran's Iraqi proxy militias would take advantage of any resumption of Israeli airstrikes in Iraq to delegitimize the sitting government and escalate their attacks on US and allied forces and facilities. An Israeli-Iranian escalation in the Iraqi theater would dramatically destabilize the country and reduce future incentives for other powers to avoid playing out their regional conflicts on Iraq's proxy battlefield.
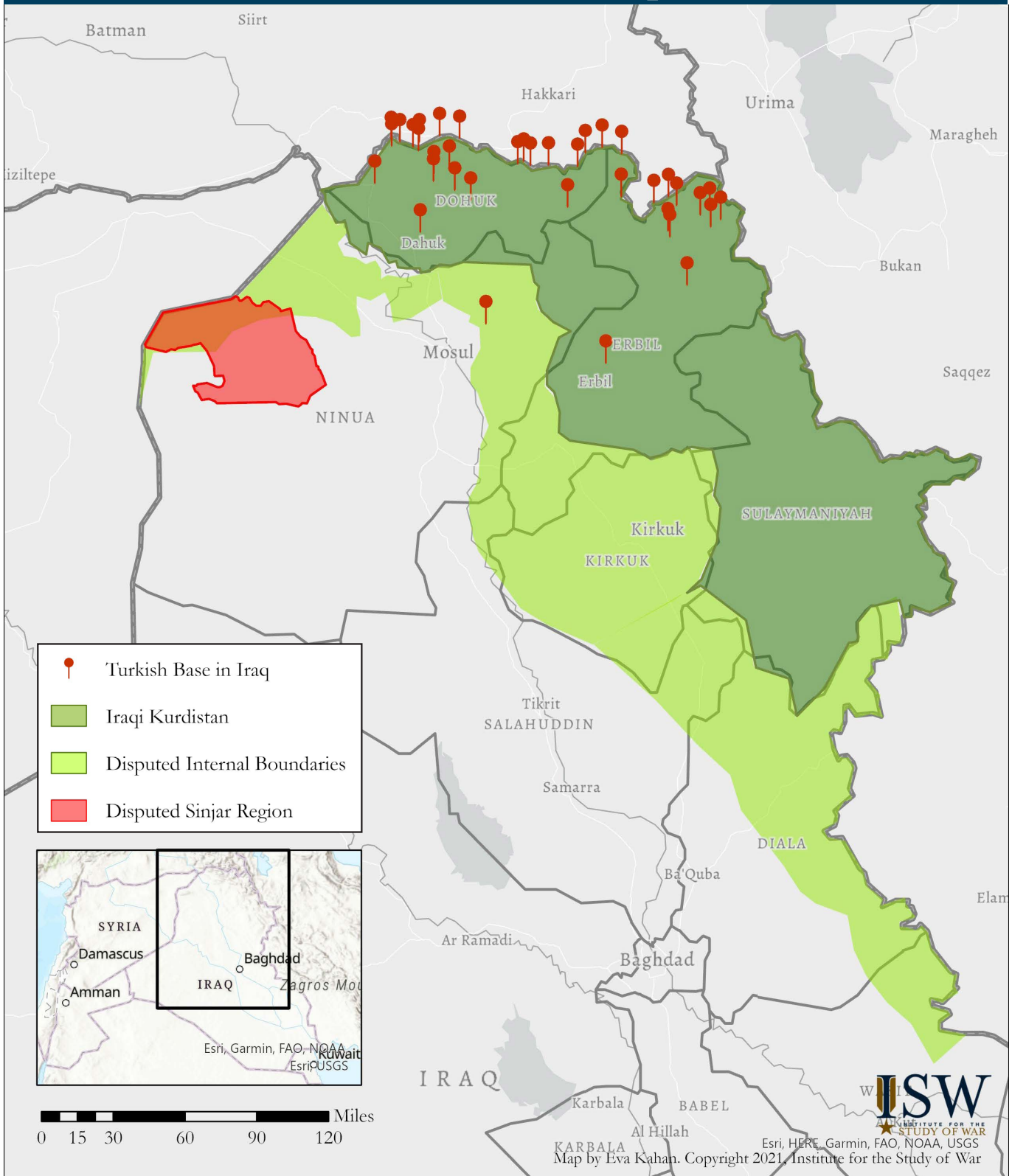
Turkish-Iranian Competition

Iranian proxy attacks on Turkish assets in Iraq will likely continue below the threshold of direct kinetic escalation but could heighten Iranian-Turkish tensions in other theaters. Iran's Iraqi proxies have increasingly aligned themselves with the US-designated terrorist organization the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Sinjar, Ninewa Province. Turkey views the PKK presence in Iraq, from which the PKK organizes its insurgent campaigns in Turkey, as a major threat to Turkish national security. Turkey consequently maintains dozens of small bases in Iraqi territory to disrupt the PKK ground line of communications between Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.

Iranian proxy alignment with the PKK fulfills several Iranian and proxy objectives that conflict with Turkey's and will likely spark conflict in the next 18 months: Iran seeks to counter any expansion outside of the usual reservoir of Turkish influence in Iraqi Kurdistan; to establish a redundant Iranian ground line of communication into northeastern Syria; and to prevent Iraqi Kurdish domination of the disputed Sinjar district, which would come at the domestic political expense of Iran's Iraqi proxy network. Turkey, meanwhile, seeks to oust the PKK from Sinjar District bordering the Kurdish northeast Syria and from northern Iraq through air campaigns, special operations, and encouraging the implementation of the October 2020 Sinjar Agreement between Baghdad and Erbil. If implemented, the Sinjar Agreement would oust all armed groups, including the PKK and Iran's proxies, from Sinjar and empower a member of the Ankara-aligned Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to administer the district, reducing Iranian influence.

Iran, its proxies, and the PKK will obstruct the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement, worsening Iranian-Turkish relations. Iranian proxy deployments to Sinjar thwart any effort by Ankara, Baghdad, or Erbil to implement the agreement; Turkey is unlikely to directly attack Iranian proxies

Turkish Bases in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Iraq

Batman   Siirt   Hakkari   Urima

Maragheh

iziltepe

DOHUK

Dahuk

Bukan

Mosul

NINUA

ERBIL

Erbil

Saqqez

Kirkuk

KIRKUK

SULAYMANIYAH

Legend:
- Turkish Base in Iraq
- Iraqi Kurdistan
- Disputed Internal Boundaries
- Disputed Sinjar Region

SYRIA

Damascus

Amman

Baghdad

IRAQ   Zagros Mou

Esri, Garmin, FAO, NOAA
Esri, USGS   Kuwait

Tikrit
SALAHUDDIN

Samarra

DIALA

Ba'Quba

Elam

Ar Ramadi   Baghdad

Miles
0   15   30   60   90   120

IRAQ

Karbala   BABEL
Al Hillah
KARBALA   Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS
Map by Eva Kahan. Copyright 2021, Institute for the Study of War

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within the Iraqi Security Forces, while the Kadhimi government in Baghdad is unable to force Iran's proxies to redeploy away from Sinjar. This stalemate will worsen relationships between Ankara and Tehran and between Erbil and Baghdad over the next year, exacerbating Iraqi instability. Negotiations for the original Sinjar Agreement did not include Iran, its proxies, the PKK, or Sinjar residents who had joined armed groups. The agreement's mandate to expel armed groups from Sinjar therefore will not be implemented barring renewed negotiations that include local stakeholders and receive approval from at least some of those armed groups.

Iranian and proxy rhetoric will increasingly condemn Turkey as one of Iraq's "occupiers" to be resisted, in line with the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. That rhetoric indicates a likely increase in proxy threats against or attacks on Turkish assets and pro-Turkish actors in Iraq. The apparent first known incident of Iran-backed Iraqi militants killing a Turkish soldier in Iraq occurred during an April 2021 rocket attack on a Turkish base in Ninewa Province. Turkey retaliated by proxy, likely pressuring Kurdistan Democratic Party-affiliated peshmerga forces to fire anti-tank guided missiles at two Iranian proxy positions in Ninewa the next day. The kinetic nature of this tit-for-tat escalation may prove to be a one-off; Iranian-Turkish escalation may remain primarily political and diplomatic in nature and could also present itself in non-Iraqi theaters in the coming months, possibly including Yemen, Libya, Syria, and the Caspian Sea.

If an Iranian-Turkish escalation by proxy does occur in northern Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan, both countries will likely compartmentalize the conflict to prevent the expansion of violence into other theaters. Iran has historically accepted the entrenched Turkish presence in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, but likely increasingly views Turkish

> *Iran has historically accepted the entrenched Turkish presence in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, but likely increasingly views Turkish incursions into Iranian-influenced Ninewa province as crossing an Iranian red line.*

incursions into Iranian-influenced Ninewa Province as a disruptive red line for Turkish interference in Iraq. Turkey's status as a NATO member could also serve as a deterrent against a wider escalation. Turkey appears to acknowledge Iran's red line and has toned down government rhetoric surrounding Sinjar. Turkey may therefore revert to limiting its ongoing anti-PKK campaign to the boundaries of Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkey's Operation Claw will likely resume in Summer 2021 and 2022, but its air and limited ground operations will likely avoid PKK and PMF positioning in Sinjar and Ninewa Province.

Turkey will likely seek to compartmentalize competing Turkish-Iranian interests in Iraq in a manner similar to how it compartmentalizes its competition with Russia in other theaters. Turkey will likely aim to highlight shared economic interests and security cooperation in its Iranian relations while attempting to mask the increasing impact of its Iraqi footprint. However, Iran likely perceives Turkey's challenges to the status quo in Iraq and Azerbaijan—two key fronts of Turkish-Iranian rivalry—as a threat to Tehran's interests in Iraq and the wider region. A change in Iranian perception of the security environment would lead to further Iranian or Iran-backed proxy escalation.

The Turkish-Iranian relationship will likely return to the balance of Turkish influence in northern Iraqi Kurdistan and Iranian influence in the rest of northern Iraq, with occasional flare-ups of proxy violence in response to regional competition, so long as Iranian perceptions of the Turkish threat remain constant.

- **Alternate trajectories**: Turkey and Iran could exchange additional blows in Iraq if Turkish-Iranian competition worsens in other theaters or if Iranian perception of the Turkish threat changes. An escalation would likely be carried out by proxy and may appear on the surface

to be a conflict between Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government and Iran-linked Shi'a militia groups in Iraq's disputed areas, particularly in and around Ninewa Province. Iran would almost certainly rely on its Iraqi proxies, whereas Turkey would rely on either drone strikes or peshmerga forces controlled by the Ankara-aligned KDP. Any such escalation would dramatically destabilize northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, damage US relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, and pit domestic Kurdish and Shi'a security forces against one another. Turkey is highly unlikely to launch a substantive ground incursion into Sinjar without backing from Baghdad or Erbil, particularly if Iran's proxies remain deployed in the area. However, Turkey's initial moves to disrupt the status quo of foreign influence in northern Iraq may alter Iran's perception of the threat Turkey poses to its interests in Iraq and elsewhere, triggering Iranian escalation to reverse Turkey's trend.

- **Indicators** of a more likely, Iran-driven escalation in Iraq would include rocket or IED attacks targeting Turkish basing in Dohuk, Erbil or Ninewa Provinces, threats against or attacks on the Turkish consulates in Erbil and Mosul, retaliatory attacks by KDP peshmerga or Turkish forces, and continued rhetorical conflation of Turkey and Iran's other regional enemies by Iran's Iraqi proxy network.

Indicators of a less likely, Turkey-driven escalation in Iraq would include signs of increased strategic or operational cooperation between Turkey and the Iraqi government, including Turkish concessions on Iraqi water rights, frequent visits to Ankara and Baghdad by corresponding senior security and military officials, and discussions of increased Turkish investments in Iraq. A Turkish escalation may also be presaged by a resumption of Turkish strikes in Sinjar that risk Iranian proxy casualties.

Synthetic Forecast

By October 2022, Iraq will most likely have a weak, technocratic prime minister hemmed in by Iranian proxies and foreign interference. This premier will be unable to stand up to Iran's infiltration of the Iraqi Security Forces but is also unlikely to expel the US and NATO forces from Iraq, thereby perpetuating the same stalemate of the last several years. Increasing elite buy-in to the corrupt Iraqi system will not improve the quality of life of the Iraqi people but will reduce the immediate risk of domestic political disagreements manifesting as large-scale violence or civil war.

This outcome will be presaged by a similar electoral balance of power to the 2018 election results. Iran's Iraqi proxies and other political elites have a vested interest in

Increasing elite buy-in to the corrupt Iraqi system will not improve the quality of life of the Iraqi people but will reduce the immediate risk of domestic political disagreements manifesting as large-scale violence or civil war.

ensuring low voter turnout, which would allow them to mobilize their bases without allowing the broader electorate to dilute the vote away from their chosen, less-popular candidates. Expect Iran-backed groups to conduct assassinations of prominent reformists or opposition candidates in an attempt to trigger electoral boycotts by reformist voters who know that their candidates of choice have been intimidated or killed. The lower the turnout on election day, the more likely and more dangerous this outcome becomes.

Continuing elite buy-in to the current political process and spoils system may preclude major near-term instability, but will not address Iraq's core governance flaws. The Iraqi

system's economic woes and inability to represent the needs of the Iraqi people mean that its potential collapse looms large over the country's future. But a collapse is not imminent. Following a flurry of intense post-election competition, the elevation of another status-quo, unempowered premier will temporarily stabilize the domestic situation during his term. However, reinforcement of the status quo will simultaneously reinforce the state's longer-term slide toward an economic or population-driven disaster.

There are two plausible domestic alternatives to the elevation of a weak, status-quo prime minister.

- _Most beneficial to US interests:_ **Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi returns for a second term or another reform-minded pragmatist is selected after the parliamentary elections, allowing for incremental, evolutionary reforms and an improved US-Iraqi relationship.** In this scenario, a US-friendly candidate like Kadhimi will retain the premiership. This outcome would likely require moderate to high voter turnout and minimal electoral fraud. Moqtada al-Sadr's Toward Reform bloc would need to retain its parliamentary plurality while reformists make substantive gains in other seats. Kadhimi could count on Kurdish and some Sunni support, as well as support from former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Shi'a cleric Ammar al-Hakim's political blocs. Iran-aligned politicians like Conquest Alliance leader Hadi al-Ameri or State of Law Coalition leader Nouri al-Maliki are unlikely to support a second term for Kadhimi. A second term is most likely if a majority of Iraq's political elites assess that Kadhimi or another reformist will be too weak to counter their interests and may harm their opponents, and will maintain Kadhimi's carefully balanced foreign policy objectives. Kadhimi regularly describes himself as an interim prime minister, a perception that may limit his will to pursue risky or dramatic change. A second-term Kadhimi or successor reformist may feel more empowered to challenge specific elements of Iraq's corrupt status quo and to make riskier decisions to that end,

particularly in the realms of curbing corruption and balancing foreign competitors against one another to mitigate foreign interference. However, no reformist candidate is likely to be able to substantially alter the corrupt and incoherent Iraqi system in the next two years.

- _Most dangerous to US interests:_ **Parliament could select an Iran-backed candidate who chooses to expel US forces from Iraq.** ISW's exercises determined that this outcome is less likely given widespread efforts to boost turnout and secure electoral integrity, but remains a concerning possibility. In this scenario, Iran-backed parties would expand their holdings through the co-optation of independent MPs and direct electoral victories (likely facilitated by low voter turnout, widespread ballot stuffing, and vote-buying). This scenario would likely be presaged by a large-scale voter boycott, ensuring that the votes of the Iran-backed parties' minority base are not diluted. Moqtada al-Sadr, the leader of Parliament's largest bloc following the 2018 election, would benefit from those same conditions of low voter turnout. Sadr would likely need to re-align himself with Iran's political proxies to bring them closer to the 165-vote threshold needed to select a new prime minister. Iran-aligned political parties could cobble together remaining votes through threats, bribes, and the provision of lucrative cabinet and civil service positions to political allies. Given a substantive electoral victory, Iran's proxy politicians would likely necessitate a promise from any premier candidate to expel US forces before allowing them to form a government. Iraq's prime minister has the sole and unilateral legal authority to expel US forces from Iraq, which would likely also necessitate the withdrawal of US forces from northeastern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. This outcome would be disastrous for the counter-ISIS fight and for US interests in the broader Middle East and a triumph for Iran's regional agenda.

  - **Legal context**: The ongoing US presence in Iraq is governed by an executive-level agreement between the Iraqi prime minister and

the US president. Then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki asked the United States for assistance combatting ISIS in 2014. Because this agreement was never formalized by the Iraqi Parliament, either the US or Iraqi executive can withdraw from the agreement at any time, necessitating the immediate withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Kata'ib Hezbollah, one of Iran's most loyal Iraqi proxies, intimidated a slim majority of present MPs into voting for a non-binding parliamentary resolution demanding the expulsion of all foreign forces from Iraq in January 2020 following the US killing of Iran's IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad.[45] Neither then-Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi nor current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi have acquiesced to the ouster of US forces despite constant threats and political pressure by Iran's Iraqi allies.

Foreign destabilization of Iraq will likely be driven by regional and global calculus, not by Iraqi decision-making or electoral outcomes. This unfortunate truth highlights the paradoxical weakness of the Iraqi system: until the Iraqi state can attain some degree of stability and sovereignty over its territory, it cannot prevent foreign conflicts from playing out on Iraqi soil. Those very conflicts further destabilize Iraq, preventing it from regaining full sovereignty. Iran's continued willingness to use the Iraqi theater as a proxy battlefield to counter the United States, NATO, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and increasingly Turkey will likely trigger destabilizing responses from at least one of those actors, derailing Iraq from its otherwise incrementally stabilizing trajectory. Iran views its influence and interests in Iraq as existentially important to its own security and will resist any other power being dominant there, including Iraqis themselves. Iran's Iraq policy is ultimately not US-centered, even though Iran views the United States as the current biggest threat to its Iraqi interests. Regional triggers

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could alter that calculus. The following destabilizing escalations are listed in the order of likelihood that they will occur before October 2022, as assessed during ISW's internal and external workshops.

- **Iran will continue its efforts to expel US forces from Iraq and the region; the degree of urgency it perceives will determine the frequency and lethality of destabilizing Iranian proxy attacks on US assets in Iraq.** If Iran calculates that inflicting US casualties in Iraq would render the ongoing US force presence politically untenable for the Biden administration, Iran will likely direct its proxies to conduct larger-scale and increasingly lethal attacks. Iran's proxies will increasingly use drones, allowing for highly accurate attacks that current US air defense mechanisms may be unable to counter. These attacks will most likely target Iraqi bases that house US forces or contractors. Proxy groups will also likely continue harassing attacks on logistics convoys contracted by the US-led Coalition to disrupt US supply lines from Kuwait. More dangerously, Iran's proxies will also increase attacks on US and Coalition forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, particularly Erbil. Attacks in Iraqi Kurdistan will be much more likely if tensions between Iran and Turkey or Iran's proxies and Iraqi Kurdish forces increase. Attacks could also extend to targeting NATO forces in Iraq, who are present in a non-combat advisory capacity. An end to the small US presence in Iraq would harm the professionalization of Iraqi Security Forces, the efficacy of the counter-ISIS fight, and the stability of the country as a whole. This outcome would increase the risk of resurgence of extremist groups and expand Iran's ability to directly threaten US regional allies, partners, and critical energy infrastructure.

- **Any regional Iranian-Saudi escalation will trigger increased Iranian attacks from Iraq into Saudi Arabia**

and possibly other Gulf states. Ongoing Iranian-Saudi talks in Baghdad could limit this possibility. Should those talks fall through, Iran will likely order Kata'ib Hezbollah and its other trusted Iraqi proxies to escalate their drone attacks on Riyadh and Saudi oil infrastructure. Iran may also direct its proxies to begin similar attacks on the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are unlikely to retaliate kinetically within Iraq but will attempt to pressure the Iraqi government into limiting the attacks. Gulf states will likely respond to attacks by curtailing their promised investments in Iraq's energy and private sectors and reversing the needed improvements in Iraqi-Gulf relations.

- **The threat of a regional Iranian-Turkish escalation is perhaps the most disruptive to Iraqi and regional stability**. The most likely trigger for such a conflict would be Turkey expanding its regional influence to the detriment of Iran's. Iran would likely respond with proxy attacks on Turkish and NATO assets in Iraq. Greater Turkish outreach to Central Asia or Azerbaijan, or an active Turkish presence to counter the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, would be likely to trigger Iranian retaliation. Domestically, Iran's efforts to restrain Turkey's Iraqi influence within the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan could also trigger a proxy conflict between Iran's proxy militias and the Turkish-backed Kurdistan Democratic Party peshmerga forces. This scenario is the most likely to cause widespread and dramatic domestic destabilization in Ninewa Province and Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries. In a most likely course of action, Turkish-backed peshmerga and Iran-backed militias would exchange attacks in Ninewa and Erbil provinces. Such an escalation would distract both groups from their counter-ISIS mission and allow ISIS additional space to reconstitute while eroding the traditional bastion of stability in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In a most dangerous scenario, Turkey could decide to send its own forces into Ninewa or Kirkuk provinces to protect ethnic Turkmen and solidify its claimed influence over northern Iraq. Such an incursion could easily devolve into a civil war between Iraq's Shi'a and Kurdish populations.

- **Any conflict between Iran and Israel in which Iran utilizes its Iraqi proxy network will likely trigger Israeli airstrikes targeting Iran's proxies within the Iraqi Security Forces**. Israel would likely try to differentiate between Iran's proxies within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and other, non-proxy Iraqi Security Forces. However, proxies within the PMF often co-locate their weapons caches and military bases with non-proxy forces, putting regular Iraqi Security Forces at risk. Israeli strikes that hit Iraqi Security Forces' assets could damage counter-ISIS efforts and likely trigger retaliatory proxy attacks against US and NTM-I assets in Iraq, which Iran's proxies equate with Israel. If the Iraqi government and its allies were unable to put a stop to an Israeli campaign, Iran's Iraqi proxies would likely leverage that weakness not only to justify attacks but also to delegitimize and destabilize the Iraqi government. The 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 did not trigger this scenario, likely because no proof of direct Iranian or Iraqi militia participation in the conflict surfaced. Some Iraqi militia figures called for patience and restraint even as they condemned Israeli retaliation in Gaza.[46]

Forecasting is not an exact science; the complexity of Iraq's political and security environment means that no single trajectory can be projected with high confidence. The base forecasts outlined above are merely the most likely trajectory barring a series of low-probability but dangerous inflection points in the coming 18 to 24 months. One or more of those low-probability inflections will likely come to pass. In the meantime, internal drivers will lead to incremental stabilization for Iraq in the near term. However, some degree of external meddling is likely to derail those positive developments without a concerted international effort to prevent foreign interference in Iraq.

Recommendations

Key findings: The United States should work toward a stable Iraq in four key ways: cooperating with US partners to limit foreign interference and proxy conflicts on Iraqi soil; continuing US and Coalition advice and training to the Iraqi Security Forces to maintain counterterrorism victories; encouraging and funding international support for Iraqi civil society efforts to lay the groundwork for a better political system; and building relationships between US, Iraqi, and international economic institutions to push for sorely needed economic reforms.

The United States should limit foreign interference in Iraq not only through disrupting and deterring malign Iranian activities, but also through helping regional partners to manage their conflicts with Tehran and Baghdad in ways that do not destabilize Iraq. Iran's regional project includes maintaining its stranglehold over Iraq's political, economic, and security sectors. Understandably, US partners threatened by Iran may seek to use Iraq to push back against Iran's behavior. That response must be well-calibrated. Instead, the United States should offer incentives to its regional partners to reassure them where it can while also formulating a more unified regional approach to the problem of Iran's malign activities.

The United States should encourage regional partners to provide economic, electoral, and reconstruction support in Iraq. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Egypt, and Jordan have all stepped up their diplomatic relations with and economic support to Iraq under Prime Minister Kadhimi. Saudi Arabia and Jordan in particular have promised investments into sectors where Iran currently dominates, like Iraq's beleaguered electrical grid. The United States should reward this and other good behavior by states who treat Iraq as a partner rather than a proxy battleground. The United States can also leverage its diplomatic and economic might to discourage US partners like Turkey or Israel who may otherwise be inclined to pursue more destabilizing activities.

Even as it encourages good behavior by regional partners, the United States should develop a specific policy for attributing and retaliating for Iranian proxy attacks on US and partnered forces and facilities in order to deter Iranian escalations. President Biden's retaliatory airstrikes against Iranian proxies who were likely responsible for the death of a contractor working with the US-led Coalition in February 2021 were a good start.[47] However, the Biden team must set, clearly articulate, and enforce red lines regarding the killing of US forces or contractors in Iraq and regarding attacks on US partners from Iraq. Specific US military threats against Iranian proxy assets have successfully deterred attacks on US facilities in the past (albeit temporarily).[48] Enforcement of red lines need not be exclusively kinetic in nature; economic and political leverage are equally important.

The United States, the US-led Coalition, and the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) should continue their advisory and training support missions to strengthen the organizational integrity and counterterrorism capability of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), preserving hard-won victories and preventing the emergence of new threats. ISIS is not currently a major threat to the stability and security of the Iraqi state. However, ISIS is working to reconstitute itself in rural or disputed areas across Iraq and Syria. US support to Iraq's ongoing counterterrorism effort and the ISF remains key to maintaining the enduring defeat of ISIS. US, Coalition, and NTM-I-training, professionalization, and advisory efforts

support not only that enduring defeat, but also regional security. An ongoing US presence allows for improved intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance of Iran's proxy network and improves US early warning capabilities to protect US and partner assets. Iran has bolstered its ability to threaten US partners from Iraqi soil through its infiltration of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). US security support counters elements of that expansion, which must not be allowed to continue, while supporting and improving more professional and reliable elements of the ISF like the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service.

US security assistance should also include the provision of advice, training, and equipment to help Iraqi partners better protect themselves from intimidation by militias. Iraqi reformists in power do not have the personal safety required to make choices that antagonize militia groups. If Prime Minister Kadhimi or another reformist retains the premiership following the 2021 election, he will still be constrained in his decision-making by a lack of personal security and the presence of armed and hostile militias in the heart of Baghdad's Green Zone, including around the prime minister's residence. The United States can provide training and equipment through the US Bureau of Diplomatic Security or other government entities to help partners in the Iraqi government protect themselves.[49] Additional funding and advice could help to secure the center of the Iraqi government from direct, physical intimidation by Iran-backed militias and politically motivated mobs alike. Helping the Iraqi government to achieve that security will allow future premiers to make difficult but necessary decisions including economic austerity measures, reigning in Iran's proxies, and holding government entities accountable for violence or corruption.

The United States and other Western embassies in Iraq must carefully calibrate how they publicize their successes to avoid undermining reformist objectives and providing justifications for militias to target activists.[50] The United States can advocate for protesters' demands to the Iraqi government while creating space for reformists to build their own resiliency and connections. US influence over

Baghdad is significant and multifaceted regardless of who holds the premiership; US provisions of electricity sanctions waivers and regular shipments of US dollars provide tremendous financial leverage over Iraqi politicians, Iran, and its proxies.[51] These pressure points provide US diplomats with leverage to push for accountability for previous government violence against protesters, for reduced corruption, for improved Iraqi sovereignty, and for free and fair elections. The United States must also publicly condemn human and civil rights abuses by Baghdad, Erbil, and Iranian proxies alike whenever they occur to help preserve the expansion of freedom of speech and civic participation that has sprung from the October 2019 protest movement.

The United States can incentivize international organizations to encourage voter participation drives, fund electoral security efforts, and send election observers. The United States should avoid the appearance of attempting to directly influence Iraqi elections or voters. However, US funding for reputable organizations that promote voter engagement and participation should pay for itself many times over in shoring up Iraq's political stability.

US projects that set conditions for long-term civic participation will likely have the most positive impact on Iraq's future. The United States can invest in non-controversial, apolitical endeavors like building and funding Iraqi schools and encouraging childhood education and literacy. Basic programs that encourage civic literacy and engagement early on can alter the relationship between a government and its constituents. The United States should consider supporting civil society efforts that promote student government, debate clubs, and civics classes to introduce the next generation of Iraqis to core elements of a participatory democracy. The United States and its partners can share frameworks for how civic education has flourished in other parts of the world. Implementation of such an effort would be best undertaken by a neutral international organization, like the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq or an Iraqi NGO, to avoid unfounded accusations of US indoctrination. Such programs can empower the next generation and counter some of

the insidious, Iran-backed programs indoctrinating vulnerable youths into extremist ideologies.[52]

The United States should build up relationships between US, international, and Iraqi economic institutions to push for desperately needed economic reforms while maintaining US economic and diplomatic leverage. Iraqi politicians who wish to have a political future cannot introduce needed austerity measures to reign in Iraq's bloated budget. In the near term, the United States can build financial incentives into aid packages from US and international organizations. Neither US partners within Iraq nor Iran's Iraqi proxies are interested in an economically unviable Iraq. When the next oil price collapse strikes, the United States can capitalize on Iraq's ensuing financial crisis to condition US and partnered support on extreme austerity and anti-corruption measures, major government spending cuts, and other US priorities, including cuts in

> *Iraq's concerning internal dynamics are overshadowed by larger and more threatening regional ones— its stability is, in many ways, outside its control.*

the budgets of Iranian proxy organizations like the Popular Mobilization Forces or the integration of militia members into the traditional Iraqi Security Forces. By leveraging these demands in a time of dire financial need, the United States can provide political cover for the reformists who would implement them. In the meantime, the United States can encourage smaller-scale reforms and the diversification of Iraq's economy.

Economics is yet another area in which US regional partners are key to Iraq's future stability. By encouraging regional partners to provide economic and reconstruction support in Iraq and rewarding those who do, the United States and its allies may stave off an Iraqi financial crisis. Investments into Iraq's nascent private sector and overburdened electrical grid can help it to build independence and reduce its dangerous overreliance on oil revenues and public sector employment.

Iraq is developing limited domestic political resiliency even as its system is hollowed out from within by the corruption and profiteering of its political elites. That phenomenon will widen the gulf between the government and the people as elites reinforce mechanisms to protect themselves and their profits, not their constituents' interests. Preservation of elite interest will not prevent the system from coming to an eventual crisis point but will provide continuity and short-term stability to the Iraqi state. The United States can quietly and tactfully support reformists and independents while creating space for the next generation of Iraqis to engage.

These concerning internal dynamics are overshadowed by larger and more threatening regional ones—Iraq's stability is, in many ways, outside its control. Regional conflicts repeatedly converge in the Iraqi sphere and will do so as long as Iran uses

Iraq as a base for its regional power projection and malign behavior.

US engagement in Iraq remains crucial to regional stability. The United States must not only push back against destabilizing Iranian interference in Iraq, but also help manage the potentially destabilizing actions of US partners and allies, particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Gulf states. If Iran's conflicts with any of those countries play out more substantially in Iraq, they could drive the fragile Iraqi state back to a crisis point, dragging the region with it. Some combination of an Iranian de-escalation with its regional competitors, the ascension of a reformist or US-friendly prime minister, an increase in electoral participation, and a stagnant or rising global oil price could create enough space for Iraq to remain on the path of incremental stabilization.

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