After Assad’s fall, Iraq may break free from Iran’s grip

written by Elie Klutstein | 26.12.2024

The fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria surprised the leaders of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” who lost a significant part of the fire ring they had built around Israel. The influence and even control over different parts of Syria had allowed Iran land access to Lebanon and the Golan Heights, which is now partially severed. However, the reality in the Middle East often surpasses imagination, and it seems that the leaders of the Islamic Republic are now facing another headache: the concern that their hold on Iraq will continue to weaken.

Baghdad has been at the center of regional attention in recent weeks, as it finds itself at a crossroads: will it disengage from Iran’s grip and use the new circumstances to develop sovereignty and independence, or will it do the opposite—leverage Iran’s need for it to secure a closer embrace from Tehran? For now, before it becomes clear which path the Iraqi leadership will choose, the two contenders for its loyalty are working to position themselves more favorably to influence Baghdad’s decision-making.

For instance, about a week and a half ago, outgoing US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited the city and held a deep discussion with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. According to senior American officials familiar with the content of the conversation, Blinken explained to the prime minister that Iran is currently at its lowest point of weakness and that this presents an opportunity for Iraq to reduce the Islamic Republic’s influence in the country.

A senior official said that during the discussion, Blinken also asked al-Sudani to prevent the transfer of Iranian weapons to Syria via Iraqi territory and promised to work with Baghdad’s leadership to prevent the rearming of the Islamic State and its fighters in the country. Additionally, it was reported that Blinken urged the Iraqi government to shut down the offices of the Houthi outpost in the country. Ultimately, in order to combat Tehran’s influence in Iraq, the Secretary of State asked Baghdad to act to disarm the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.

In the past year, these militias have gained notoriety for launching drones toward Israel as part of the "Resistance Axis" operations against us during the war. But even before that, they had carried out terror attacks against US forces stationed in Iraq, causing injuries among American soldiers. Thus, when the State Department spokesperson was asked whether the US was working to dismantle the militias, he did not attribute the motivation for the move to the influence struggle with Iran but rather to the fact that the militias pose a threat to American troops. This distinction is significant because, according to him, the US desire to dismantle the militias is not new, as Washington has always acted against those who attack it, and therefore its actions now are not tied to the unique circumstances that have emerged in the Middle East.

However, it seems that this time the US is indeed trying to promote an unconventional initiative. Among other things, it was reported that the Americans held two meetings with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shiite authority in Iraq and possibly worldwide, to urge him to issue a religious ruling calling for the disarmament of the militias. The elderly Ayatollah refused the American request, and according to a report in Iran, he also recently declined to meet with a representative of the UN Secretary-General who sought to discuss the same issue.

As a result, it seems that the Americans are directing most of their pressure toward the Iraqi leadership, devoting special attention to the matter. American concerns are heightened by the fact that the government in Baghdad has demanded the international coalition, led by the US in the fight against ISIS, to withdraw from the country by the end of next year. The Americans are certainly not eager to leave Iraq, where approximately 2,500 soldiers are currently stationed, leaving the stage to other actors. Still, they are mainly worried about the possibility that Iran and its militias will exploit the vacuum that will be left in the country to solidify their control. From Iraq, the Iranians could also once again destabilize the new regime in Syria and try to increase their influence there as well. Among other concerns, there is a fear that militia members who fled Syria after Assad's fall may join armed groups in Iraq and continue their activities from there.

A temporary lull

The Iraqis are well aware of the pressure being exerted on them to change the balance of power in the country. Ibrahim al-Sumidei, an advisor to Prime Minister

al-Sudani, said last week after Blinken's visit: "To be honest, we need to reassess the current situation." According to him, Iraq can no longer remain tied to the "Axis of Resistance," as he put it, after the fall of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Assad in Syria. Al-Sumidei added that unlike in the past, now "if we don't comply, it will be forced upon us." He concluded by noting that talks on disarming the militias have begun with some of them, including the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades and members of the Popular Mobilization Forces ("al-Hashd al-Shaabi"), and that these talks are in an advanced stage.

Another senior advisor to al-Sudani, Hussein Alawi, also confirmed the Western demand from Baghdad, stating that the disarmament of the militias is "a key to Iraq's national security." These statements can be interpreted as more than just an American demand—they amount to a threat, coupled with the clarification that failure to comply will result in enforcement.

On the other hand, another close associate of the prime minister, Baha al-Araji, who previously served as deputy prime minister in Baghdad, argued that fears of changes in Iraq's political or security situation are unfounded. He also stated that the existence of armed militias is a product of the "occupation," which is also the reason for their continued presence.

Yet despite these denials, this week, it appears that the seeds of American pressure have borne fruit: on Monday, it was reported that at least some militias have reached an agreement with the government in Iraq to stop firing on Israel. A leader in the pro-Iranian al-Nujaba militia confirmed that, at the government's request and following the events in Syria, there was a consensus to avoid dragging Iraq into a scenario worse than Assad's ousting, which could plunge the country into chaos and terror. A spokesman for another militia, Kata'ib al-Fartusi, tied the attacks on Israel to Hezbollah's activity in Lebanon, claiming that once a ceasefire was agreed upon with the organization in the Cedar State, militia activity in Iraq ceased.

However, before the recent report, it appeared that the Iraqis had already halted their attacks, likely around the same time as the ceasefire in Lebanon. According to available information, Iraqi militias have not claimed responsibility for drone launches toward Israel for over a month, since November 24. The ceasefire in Lebanon took effect two days later, on November 26.

Still, despite the declaration of a ceasefire, it is worth paying closer attention to the statements of al-Fartusi, who represents the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades. On Sunday, the day before confirming that his organization had ceased firing at Israel, he declared that the militias "have neither abandoned nor will they abandon" the principle of unifying the fronts against Israel, which calls for coordinated attacks from various directions, including Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere—even if, due to a combination of internal and external circumstances, the militias temporarily suspend their activities. According to him, this principle is "a matter of doctrine and is unrelated to losses or defeats."

This statement underscores the worldview driving many militia members. They are not fighting solely for interests but are driven by ideology and a comprehensive vision of opposing Israel, the West, and liberalization. This shared vision with Iran and its strategic plan means that even if the militias temporarily cease their attacks on Israel, it is difficult to say they are likely to give up their weapons entirely or willingly reduce their influence in Iraq. Nor can it be assumed that they will participate in an overarching effort to oust Iran's interests from Iraq while simultaneously allowing for increased American influence and abandoning their "resistance" against Israel.

This likely explains earlier statements from al-Nujaba militia two weeks ago when they strongly condemned "foreign forces plotting to destabilize Iraq." Similarly, on December 10, the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades claimed there was a conspiracy to overthrow the Baghdad government, alleging an "Anglo-American plot," with Turkish and Israeli support, to sow chaos in the country. Such statements reflect the pressure the militias are under—fearing that in the struggle against their Iranian patron, they might be forced to surrender their weapons, diminish their influence, or even face existential threats.

Iranian setbacks

Another interesting question relates to the Iraqi government's interests: why would it comply with American pressure to remove Iranian influence from the country, even at the risk of confrontation with armed militias—a scenario that could spiral out of control into open conflict? After all, US troops are set to leave the country soon, and it seems unlikely—despite the fears of some militia members—that the Americans would launch airstrikes on Baghdad.

There are several possible reasons for this:

First, there are many Iraqis who do not wish to see continued Iranian influence in their country and even openly call for Baghdad's "liberation." "The new map of the Middle East will not be complete without Baghdad being set free," wrote Farouk Yousef last week. "It's time to free it from Persian occupation, just as Beirut has nearly been rescued and Damascus was indeed liberated from Assad's claws after he burned it down—not before he fled."

Another reason might be that the government in Baghdad wants to avoid turning Iraq into a battlefield between Israel and the militias, thereby exposing itself to the kind of damage and destruction seen in other states like Syria, Lebanon, or Yemen. On November 20, Al-Hadath reported that Washington had sent a message to Baghdad's leadership, warning that the US could no longer prevent Israel from striking militia targets within Iraq and that only government action could avert such attacks. Prime Minister al-Sudani reportedly informed all political factions in the country of this danger. Just days later, drone launches from Iraq ceased and have not resumed since.

Iraqis also need to dedicate their full attention to developments in Syria: there is a deep concern in Iraq that instability during Syria's transition period, including attempts by groups such as ISIS to exploit the leadership vacuum, could reignite a bloody civil war. A potential Turkish invasion of Syria would only exacerbate tensions. In such a scenario, Iraq fears that unrest will spill across the border, accompanied by terrorist groups seeking to provoke chaos on both sides and draw other actors into the conflict.

This concern has already prompted various Iraqi actions in recent weeks: halting oil exports to Syria due to fears of instability, repatriating thousands of Syrian soldiers who fled into Iraq, and monitoring smuggling along the border. Iraqis have been particularly encouraged by reports of a significant drop in attempts to smuggle Captagon pills across the border following Assad's fall—a trade long controlled by the Assad family, particularly the former president's brother, Maher.

In the meantime, as the situation remains unclear, Iraq is examining the new regional order and seeking to score diplomatic points, achievements, and fresh connections. Leading this effort is al-Sudani himself, who may see distancing Iraq

from Iranian influence as a way to cultivate a new image in the West—as a key player shaping the new regional reality. At the same time, to maintain appearances, Iraq continues to emphasize its commitment to resolving the Palestinian issue, perhaps echoing Saudi Arabia's rhetoric. Notably, al-Sudani met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman last week to discuss regional developments.

From Iran's perspective, if the militias indeed agreed to lay down their weapons, this represents a tremendous setback and disappointment. Another part of the fire ring built by the infamous Qassem Soleimani has crumbled, leaving Iran with only one remaining proxy actively targeting Israel—the Houthis. The only other group that hasn't ceased its attacks is Hamas, the organization that initiated the current war, though its capabilities have significantly diminished since October 7.

However, Tehran is unlikely to give up so easily. Iraq remains a strategic geographical asset for Iran: aside from bypassing the Turkish border, which is not always a reliable route, Iraq serves as a crucial land corridor back to Syria. Furthermore, it offers a path to another target Tehran has identified for expanding its influence—Jordan.

Iran's calculations

Iran is recalibrating its strategy following Assad's fall, attempting to restore confidence among its proxies and supporters. Tehran's leadership fears a domino effect: after the significant blows suffered by Hezbollah and Hamas, and following the collapse of Assad's regime in Syria, Iraq is seen as the next potential domino to fall. Pro-Iranian forces in Iraq have essentially already declared their submission, raising the stakes for Tehran. The final target on the axis of resistance could ultimately be the Iranian regime itself.

This concern drives Tehran to consider how to preserve its interests in Iraq and prevent further losses for its regional axis. It may even seek to tighten its grip on Baghdad as compensation for the loss of Syria. Analysts point to three potential paths Iran might pursue:

1. Increase its influence in Iraq, even at the cost of alienating local populations and damaging the government.
2. Loosen its hold on Baghdad as a signal to the West of a willingness to

negotiate in the Trump era.
3. Maintain a modest but stable presence, hoping to consolidate its position in the future when circumstances become more favorable.

In the meantime, Tehran is using its media outlets to remind Iraqis of the positive role played by the Popular Mobilization Forces and other militias in defeating terrorist groups such as ISIS—the same forces that the Americans are "maliciously" trying to dismantle. "This is a grassroots resistance organization," read one Iranian article, "which, alongside the Iraqi army, has become a powerful tool against terrorism and continues to safeguard Iraq's security."

References in Iranian media also hint at broader fears, often invoking the name of Abu Mohammed al-Julani, leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria. Once a jihadist fighting with al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Julani's rise is framed as a warning to Iraqis: the choice isn't merely between the West and the militias—it's between forces like al-Julani, who brought devastation to their land and overthrew Assad's regime in Syria, and the militias that "protected" Iraq from similar fates.

Will Iraqi residents and leadership be swayed by such arguments? For now, it seems that even in this, Tehran is facing yet another defeat.

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