



## **Iran's Triumph in Iraq**

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### **Executive Summary**

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### **About ISPSW**

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## Analysis

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After nearly a month of raw pressure, manipulations, special operations, threats and cajoling - Iran has effectively won the struggle for the future of Iraq against the Shiite Arab populace. This victory is a major step in Iran's determined effort to consolidate the on-land corridor to the Mediterranean. The Iraqi election of 12 May 2018 - the catalyst for the Iranian intervention - was but the harbinger of a greater threat looming. Thus, even as the final results are still being challenged, calculated, manipulated and abused - the key outcome is clear. Any future government in Baghdad will be dominated by pro-Iran Shiites. Moreover, Iraq's complex election procedures that are based on showing at the Province-level and the national-level create a discrepancy between the overall numbers of votes a party or movement gets and its number of seats in Parliament.

Three Shiite parties made discernable showing in the May election. The two victorious parties are Moqtada al-Sadr's Al-Sayirun (Marching [Toward Reform]) Alliance of populist Arab Shiites and the Communist Party, and Hadi al-Amiri's Al-Fatih (Conquest) Alliance based on the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units or People's Mobilization Forces) that distinguished themselves in the fighting against Sunni Jihadists throughout al-Jazira (that is, both in Iraq and Syria). Both alliances received about 30% of the popular votes each. The third party - Haider al-Abadi's Nasr (Victory) Coalition - that is affiliated with the political establishment in Baghdad won about 20% of the votes.

All the other parties - mainly Kurdish and Sunni Arab, but also the Shiite Nouri al-Maliki' State of Law Coalition, Ammar al-Hakim's Al-Hikma (Wisdom) Front and Ayad Allawi's Al-Wataniya (Patriotism) Party - had lower showing, reflecting the declining demographic power of their constituencies and the evaporating faith and interest in the all-Iraqi political system of their core followers. Thus, the tabulation of the numbers of seats in Parliament boosts the smaller parties and therefore only partially reflects the grassroots dynamics. On 21 May, the initial distribution of seats of the main parties was as follows:

- Sayirun (Sadr) - 54 seats
- Fatih (Amiri) - 47 seats
- Nasr (Abadi) - 42 seats
- KDP (Barzani) - 26 seats
- State of Law (Maliki) - 25 seats
- Wataniya (Allawi) - 21 seats
- Hikma Front (Hakim) - 19 seats
- Qarar (Nujaifi) - 19 seats
- PUK (Talabani) - 17 seats

All the other parties won five or less seats each.

However, the actual numbers of votes received by the main parties reflect the irreconcilable polarization of the Shiite population. There is an almost equal division between Shiite Arabs who are anti-Persian, and Iran-dominated pan-Shiite Arabs. Both population groupings are extremely hostile toward each other to the point of fratricidal fighting. The Sadr-led camp appeals to the downtrodden impoverished Shiite masses whose ancestors borne the brunt of the fighting against Iran in the 1980's, and who have been neglected by, and did not benefit from, the US- and Iran-sponsored economic programs. The Amiri-led camp appeals to the radicalized Shiite youth who yearn for revenge against the Sunni world and who joined the Iran-controlled militias in order to fight against Sunni Jihadists and for the ascent of Shiite Islam. Abadi's camp appeals to the



Shiite urban elites that largely support Shiite Arabism, while Maliki's camp appeals to the Shiite urban elites that largely support pro-Iran pan-Shiism.

Rhetoric in Western media notwithstanding, there are no "nationalist Iraqis" anywhere to be found. Nor are there any "pro-American" politicians in position of power and influence. Thus, the results also mean that the several tens of millions of dollars (from the US taxpayers and the Saudi royal family) distributed in recent weeks by "al-Mukhabarat al-Amriki" (American Intelligence) as bribes in order to tilt the election in favor of the ostensibly pro-US candidates failed to deliver.

Significantly, this polarization is deeply rooted, has been intensifying for at least a year and is yet to climax. At the core is the inclination of Shiite leaders to acknowledge the break-up of Iraq in order to secure the survival and empowerment of Iraq's distinct Shiite Arab population, and thus achieve freedom from the stifling Iranian embrace and de-facto annexation. These leaders are convinced that the fate of Baghdad and the Shiite Arabs will be determined by the success of their desperate efforts to prevent the Iranian de-facto annexation and Persianization of Shiite Iraq. Tehran is cognizant of the fateful struggle unfolding in Shiite Iraq and is committed to preserve its gains virtually at all cost. Indicative of the importance of this struggle are the leading role of the Pasdaran's Jaysh al-Qods and particularly Chief Commander Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani and his right-hand man Brig. Gen. Iraj Masjedi who, since April 2017, is also Iran's Ambassador to Iraq.

After numerous and frequently contradictory political maneuvers, Sadr announced on 7 June a tentative fragile coalition effort. There would be "a political alliance" between Sadr's Sayirun, Hakim's Hikma and Allawi's Wataniya - a total of 95 seats. Meanwhile, anti-Shiite terrorism, especially in Sadr City and the greater Baghdad area, continued to escalate - hurting Sadr's core constituents. As well, pressure mounted on Sadr to form a coalition with Amiri and other Iran-dominated parties. Most significant was the appeal of Grand Ayatollah Kazem Hussein Haeri (Sadr's revered Marja al-Taqlid) who favored the cooperation with Amiri and Hakim. Other Qom notables known for their support of the Najaf Marja'iyya also implored Sadr to reach out to pan-Shiite powers.

On the morning of 10 June, the heated struggles over the corruption of the elections culminated in the arson-caused burning down of the ballot box storage site in Baghdad. The damage makes it impossible to carry out the manual recount favored by Abadi and many politicians considered pro-American. However, Sadr was the most adversely affected victim of the fire.

Within hours of the fire, Soleimani and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's powerful son Mojtaba Khamenei (the de-facto chief of Iran's foreign intelligence and security forces) arrived in Baghdad as guests of Ambassador Masjedi. "Soleimani has come to end tensions between Shia political blocs and the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias," explained Shiite seniors. Tehran is alarmed by the specter of a widening crisis with Sadr's supporters. "The crisis has taken a new turn as there are accusations of a [pro-Iran] Shia group being involved in the fire, especially because most of the burnt ballot boxes were from area won by Moqtada al-Sadr," the seniors elaborated. "Sadr was likely the target of the incident and his supporters are promoting this theory." That night, Masjedi organized a special Iftar Dinner in honor of Soleimani and Khamenei that was attended by Maliki, Amiri, as well as numerous pro-Iran Shiite notables, officials and politicians. The conversation around the Iftar table focused on the imperative to form a solid Shiite "majority bloc which will be tasked to shape the upcoming government" irrespective of differences among its members. Soleimani and Khamenei stressed that Tehran expected all Shiite allies to reach out to Sadr in order to exclude Abadi, Sunni Arab and Kurdish leaders from the government, as well as negate any calls for repeat elections.



Meanwhile, Sadr was cognizant of the escalating crisis. The next day, 11 June, he warned that Iraq remained in a fragile state on the verge of a civil war if the crisis was not defused. "Iraq is in danger," he stated, because the arsonists "are trying to drag Iraq into civil war."

Throughout, the Iranians and their allies continued to pressure Sadr and his allies to form an all-inclusive Shiite coalition that will be beholden to Tehran. On 12 June, Sadr capitulated and announced an alliance with Amiri and the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi. "An alliance has been formed between the Sayirun alliance and Fatih to create the largest bloc," Sadr said. "This move comes from a spirit of patriotism." Sadr explained that after meeting in Najaf with Amiri, they agreed that it was imperative "to end the suffering of this nation [Ummah] and of the people. Our new alliance is a nationalist [Qaumi] one." Amiri's spokesman Ahmad al-Assadi added that the new alliance will "not to exclude anyone, it will become a basis to form a national government based on service."

Sadr clarified that his earlier alliance with Hakim and Allawi remains in effect. This means that the new coalition has 141 seats - Sadr 54, Amiri 47, Hakim 19, and Allawi 21. To form a new government, a coalition requires 165 seats out of the 329 members of parliament. Maliki has the missing 25 seats to reach a total of 166 seats. Back on 10 June, Soleimani and Khamenei promised to deliver Maliki. Indeed, Maliki tacitly promised to join Sadr and Amiri on 13 June. However, Sadr remains interested in some Sunni Arab and Kurdish token presence that Allawi can deliver. Thus, Iraq is about to have a de-facto Shiite Government that is beholden to Iran and inherently hostile to the United States and the West. This Shiite Government, however, only tapers over the profound crisis dividing the Shiites of Iraq - that between Shiite Arabs and pro-Iran pan-Shiites.

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The roots of the crisis are in a quintessential issue of far greater importance than political power and influence in Baghdad. Najaf and Karbala were the dominant centers of Shiite Islam between the second half of 7th Century and 1979 when the Shiite leadership was massacred by Saddam Hussein and the survivors (except for the Sadr family who stayed put) accepted the invitation of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (who himself was sheltered in Najaf from the wrath of the Shah of Iran between 1964 and 1978) to escape to Iran. Consequently, Qom has become the center of Shiite Islam with Iranian clerics, all devotees of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, assuming prominence. Since 2004, the leadership in Qom resisted all efforts to revive the prominence of Najaf and Karbala. In Summer 2017, the crisis reached a critical point with the impending death of Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Hosseini Sistani - the extremely popular spiritual leader of Shiite Iraq who is now 88 years old and in failing health. Hence, Qom and Tehran resolved to empower an Iran-controlled cleric as Sistani's successor in Najaf.

Desperate, Sadr traveled in Summer 2017 to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He advocated an all-Arab unified front against the Iranian onslaught and called for ending the sectarian schism - Sunni vs Shiite - in favor of reviving the heritage conflict between Arabs and Persians. Alarmed, Iran increased pressure on Sistani and his inner-circle to accept and legitimize their selected successor - Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. In September, Shahroudi traveled to Iraq and was rebuffed in a most insulting manner. First, Sistani would not accept the message from Tehran and refused to meet with him. As well, Sadr refused to meet, citing the issue of improper Iranian intervention in Iraqi political affairs. Consequently, Shahroudi also failed to meet with the other four leading religious authorities in Najaf.



Abadi was cognizant that Tehran would avenge the humiliation and rejection of Shahrudi. Hence, he appealed in early October to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for help against Iran, citing the conclusions of Sadr's visits. King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud responded quickly and invited Abadi. By the time Abadi arrived in Riyadh on 20 October, Iran-sponsored Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces under the command of Soleimani and Amiri took over Kirkuk and other key Kurdish sites - ostensibly in the name of Baghdad.

Having realized the enormity of the Iranian challenge, Riyadh decided to bring in the Trump Administration in order to foster a stronger alliance against Iran. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson rushed to Riyadh as Abadi was asked to wait for him. Upon arrival, Tillerson would not listen and only made demands. Trump insisted, he said, that it was imperative to sustain a unified Iraq with a centralized government even if this was the Iranian primary instrument for crushing Shiite Arab identity and aspirations. He demanded the unilateral disbanding of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi oblivious to the fury of Iranian reaction. He also instructed Riyadh to compromise with Qatar. Tillerson then left for Qatar - further infuriating the Saudis. Petrified by the US hostility toward their initiatives, Saudi leaders told Abadi they would not help Baghdad against Tehran.

Browbeaten, Abadi decided to travel to Amman, Ankara and Tehran in order to gain their instructions and blessing for Baghdad's next moves. In Amman, he summoned Sadr for urgent consultations. Sadr was very pessimistic given the Iranian audacity and high-profile presence in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. The next day, Abadi had to break his trip and return to Baghdad to deal with a surprise visit by Tillerson. Tillerson reiterated the "reaffirmation of US support for a unified Iraq" and did not criticize Abadi's acknowledged subservience to Iran. Contradicting Tillerson, Abadi insisted that the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi "is part of the Iraqi institutions" and not an Iranian proxy. "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi fighters should be encouraged because they will be the hope of the country and the region."

Abadi resumed traveling in late October. In Ankara, Erdogan and Abadi agreed on joint "political, economic and military measures" to suppress the Kurdish challenge. In Tehran, all the leaders reiterated Iran's commitment to a strong central Shiite government and promised support for Abadi's "efforts to boost national unity." Khamenei demanded that "Iraq should not rely on the United States" in its fight against both Sunni Jihadism and Kurdish secessionism. The Shiite brotherhood of Iranians and Iraqis was the key. "[Shiite] Unity was the most important factor in your gains against terrorists and their supporters ... Don't Trust America ... It will harm you in the future," Khamenei told Abadi.

Khamenei, his closest assistants and the IRGC High Command did not trust Abadi. Tehran notified Masjedi and other stalwarts in Baghdad. On 1 November, Amiri went to the Marja'iyya (the Shiite highest religious jurisprudence) in the holy city of Najaf in order to receive a religious edict and guidelines for managing the enduring conflict with the Kurds. All future negotiations must abide by the strict interpretation of Shiite jurisprudence - a constraint aimed to stall any meaningful discussions. The edict effectively deprived Abadi of power to manage Iraq's crises.

By now, official Baghdad had to cope with the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and their Iranian patrons. By mid-December, Sistani, Sadr and Abadi urged all Shiite militias to continue fighting for Iraq while under the authority of the state. Amiri concurred that in the long term they must be both under the Iraqi state and with a say in the governing of the Iraqi state. Sistani reacted with fury, stating that it was "wrong" for the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi to participate in any elections. Tehran correctly interpreted Sistani's statement as criticism of the growing Iranian influence in Iraq.



Abadi, however, could not survive a direct confrontation with Tehran and launched complex negotiations with Amiri and, in reality, Soleimani. In mid-January 2018, Abadi announced that in the May election he would be heading a coalition bloc comprised of his old followers and the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Abadi's announcement was harshly criticized by Sadr and his supporters. The next day, Abadi reversed himself and announced that Al-Hashd al-Shaabi will run separately in the May election because he and Amiri disagreed on the conditions for a coalition. Amiri hardened his position on instructions from Soleimani.

Still, Abadi could not afford to completely alienate the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and their followers. Hence, in early March, he signed a decree that formalized the integration of the force into the Iraqi Armed Forces. That would also put the force under the command of Abadi in his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Soleimani would have nothing of this. A few days later, the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi spokesman Naim al-Abudi formally thanked Abadi for his good will but stated that they "will not be merged into any of the country's security institutions." Abudi reminded that Al-Hashd al-Shaabi was 140,000-strong, including 122,000 fighters.

Meanwhile, the Shahrودي issue became irrelevant on its own. Back in fall 2017, soon after his return from Iraq, he started complaining about weakness and his health. He was diagnosed with "a relatively endemic gastronomical disorder" - that is, cancer. In mid-December, he was sent for specialized treatment in a private hospital in Hannover. However, German politicians demanded his arrest for crimes against humanity. In early January 2018, Shahrودي fled on an Iran Air flight from Hamburg to Tehran. By then, his medical treatment was far from over. Although Shahrودي resumed his role as the Chairman of the Iranian Expediency Council - his health has continued to deteriorate.

Hence, in the months leading to the Iraqi election, Tehran focused on undermining the Arab Shiite identity (the Sadr camp) and the Iraqi political-economic elites (the Abadi camp). Tehran was able to exploit the popular glory of the triumphs over the Kurds and Sunni Jihadists, the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (the Amiri camp) and the immense profits of Shiite elites from relations with Iran (mainly the Maliki camp but also the Hakim camp). Hence, by the time the election took place in mid-May - the Iraqi Shiite population was broken and polarized. The non-Shiite population - mainly Sunni Arabs and Kurds - have long been completely alienated from the concept of Iraq and the legitimacy of Baghdad. The popular grassroots giving up on the entire concept of Iraq the state also manifested itself in the dramatic drop of voters' participation from over 60% in previous elections to 44.5% in the May 2018 elections.

As the results of the election were becoming clear, Sadr started to discuss the formation of a government. Sadr does so from the unique position of the undisputed political-religious leader of the Shiite Arab camp while not a candidate for Prime Minister or any other official position (since he himself did not register as a candidate and thus did not run in the election). This distinction gives Sadr moral authority in the complex negotiations. Rhetoric notwithstanding, it was clear to all that the new government will be Shiite dominated. On 20 May, Ammar al-Hakim predicted the forming "in the next 72 hours" of a coalition government comprised of Sadr's Sayirun, Amiri's Fatih, Abadi's Nasr, and Hakim's own Hikma blocs. Amiri rushed to call the claim "baseless." However, Sadr and Amiri held lengthy meetings on the joint formation of what Sadr called "an inclusive government," "a paternal government," and a government that "must include the participation of all the winning blocs." Amiri expressed his support for the principles raised by Sadr and urged that the forming of government be sped up.

As the results of the election were becoming clear, Brett McGurk, the US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, rushed to Baghdad to try and salvage the US standing after the millions of CIA





bribes did not deliver electoral triumph for Abadi. He met with several Iraqi politicians who impressed the imperative of a Sadr-influenced Shiite-dominated government, the extent of Iranian influence, and the irrelevance of the US. Having failed to convince the key Shiite parties to empower Abadi as the anti-Sadr/anti-Amiri leader - McGurk traveled to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in order to convince the Kurds, who had declared boycott of Baghdad politics, to change their mind and join an Abadi-run coalition. McGurk's heavy-handed intervention, coming on top the CIA's bribes and pressure, further infuriated the entire Shiite Arab elite.

All this expedited the success of the other foreign intervention in Baghdad - that of Iran. Qassem Soleimani also rushed to Baghdad once Sadr's victory was confirmed in order to salvage Iran's preeminence. Together with Masjedi, he met repeatedly with all the Shiite leaders including Sadr and Abadi. Sadr stressed the crucial significance of retaining Iraq's unique identity. He also thanked Iran for its help against the Sunni Jihadists and expressed hope for a marked improvement of economic and religious relations. Abadi effectively raised hands as to confronting Iran's dominance and so acknowledged to Soleimani. Talking to confidants, Abadi expressed little hope that the US would remain in Iraq and somewhat balance the Iranian overwhelming influence.

The Shiite leaders are in agreement that Soleimani and Masjedi were extremely knowledgeable, forthcoming and ready to listen to their interlocutors. At the same time, Soleimani was very self-assured and conveyed Tehran's supremacy. He told all the Shiite leaders he met in the second half of May that Tehran would accept and support any government in Baghdad provided it was Shiite-dominated, supported the Iranian regional strategy, and was not an American puppet. None of the Iraqi leaders objected.

The resignation, at least to some extent, of the Shiite leadership to subservience to Iran does not mean the disappearance or resolving of the profound differences within Shiite Iraq. Nor is there any acceptance of Iran's role among the Sunni Arab, Kurdish and other minority communities. On the contrary, the pressure wrought by Iran and its key proxies - from the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi to key segments of Iraqi Intelligence - only heightens the anxieties of the traditional Shiite Arab communities. The recognition that there is no escape from the Iranian predominance given the refusal of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Sheikhdoms to help adds to the despair of Shiite Arab leaders. And hovering above all is the inevitable core crisis over Sistani's succession when the vital core interests of the pan-Shiites and Shiite Arabs will clash and prove irreconcilable.

All of these dynamics lay the ground to an eruption within the Shiite community. Hence, Kurdish senior intelligence officials warned already in mid-May, "Iraq is on the brink of civil war". Such a civil war is virtually inevitable because of the grassroots rejection of "the empowerment and presence of Iranian commanders and leaders within Iraqi politics." Moreover, any inner-Shiite conflagration will expand into a wider civil war where the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds will exploit the chaos to free themselves from the Iraqi Shiite and Iranian yoke. There is widespread conviction among the Sunni Arab, Kurdish and other minority communities that fateful fighting over their own self-identities and survival are imminent. Co-existence between the Shiites and the Kurds and Sunni Arabs broke down when the active presence of Iranian-affiliated militias in Iraq became the main instrument for oppressing the non-Shiite minorities. In the coming weeks, as the Shiite pro-Iran character of the new government in Baghdad becomes pronounced, "Iraq will witness more escalations, and the sectarian tensions will further increase in many cities across the country." The civil war Iraq is on the brink of will benefit Iran, warned the Kurdish officials.

In the month following the election, the slide toward a Sadr-led Iranian-dominated new government only hastens the polarization within, and fracturing of, Iraq's Shiite populace, as well as alienates the Kurds, Sunni Arabs and other minorities. Smarting from the recent US betrayals of both the Syrian Kurds and the Iraqi



Kurds, as well as from Baghdad's ignoring and rejection of their offers to join a new Iraqi government, Kurdish leaders resume the quest for stronger self-rule. Given the repeated violent clashes with Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces since late September 2017, the prospects of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi having a central role in a government in Baghdad terrify all Kurds. Kurdistan anticipates renewed confrontation, and even military clashes, with Baghdad.

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Meanwhile, neither Iran nor Turkey accepts a Kurdish entity and a loss of dominance along their borders with Iraq. Both have committed to intervening in order to suppress the ascent of any Kurdish entity. In early June, Kurdish leaders anticipated "a major conflict with Turkey" very soon. A senior PKK leader warned of the "hot summer" ahead. "There are increasing signs of an imminent full-scale invasion of Iraqi Kurdish territory, including the mountainous Qandil region of northern Iraq, in an attempt to further encircle and strangle the only place of freedom in the region," he said. The outcome of this drive will determine the future of not only Iraq - but of the greater Middle East. This is because the entire Bilad al-Sham is ready for a widespread eruption of violence - and any insurrection or conflagration in Iraq will provide the sought-after spark.

In early June, Turkey markedly escalated its foray into Iraqi Kurdistan, ostensibly in pursuit of the Kurdish PKK. Turkish forces seized vast tracks of land inside northern Iraq. On 2 June, the Turkish forces were already 26-27 km deep inside Iraqi territory. Over the next week, they seized several villages and the entire tri-border area with Iran. On 7 June, Ankara announced that the main objectives of the offensive were "the PKK headquarters" in the Qandil Mountains near the Iranian border. The Turkish army was already holding about 400 square-km, having captured the Bradost region and entered the Barazgir valley - the gateway to Qandil. The Turkish forward bases established some 30 km inside Iraqi Kurdistan were defined as the "First step toward Qandil." Meanwhile, the Turkish military also established 11 bases along the 23 km-long-border in order to prevent possible infiltration into Turkey. On 8 June, Ankara committed to "clearing the PKK from Qandil, Sinjar and Makhmour with an extensive military operation."

On 11 June, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the launch of "anti-terror operations deep inside Iraqi territory" in order to finally resolve the PKK problem. "We've started anti-terror operations in Qandil and Sinjar," Erdogan declared. "Qandil will not be a threat, a source of terror for our people any more. We will drain the terror swamp in Qandil as we did in Afrin, Jarablus, Azaz, al-Bab [in northern Syria]. ... Our goal is to drain the biggest of the swamps." Erdogan vowed that the Turkish flag will be flying over Qandil on the Turkish election day - 24 June 2018.

From the very beginning, Baghdad gave its consent to the Turkish incursion with some Iraqi generals cheering the destruction of the Kurds that they themselves can't accomplish because of lack of military capabilities. Official Washington also endorsed the Turkish incursion. "Operations by Turkey in Iraq are done through close cooperation with the government of Iraq," explained Colonel Sean Ryan of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). "Turkey is a close ally ... and the Coalition does not foresee conflict with our mission to defeat Daesh."

Most important for Ankara has been Tehran's understanding of, and support for, the anti-Kurdish operations. "The second phase [of the Turkish incursion] is a Qandil operation to be carried out in cooperation with Iraq and Iran," Turkey stressed on 7 June. Ankara is looking anew at a regional operation stretching from the Mediterranean to the Iranian border. "Manbij is set to be the first step in establishing the 'safe corridor' that will encompass eastern Euphrates regions in Syria at a depth of 30-40 kilometers along Turkey's southern





borders ... until it converges with the safe zones created in northern Iraq.” On 12 June, Turkish Defense Minister Nurettin Canikli noted that Iran declined to join the Turkish operations but was supporting the Turkish offensive against the PKK including the operations in the Qandil Mountain range near the Iranian border. “Our offer to Iran was to carry out the operation together. Iran, in its remarks at least, has voiced very important support,” Canikli stressed.

The Kremlin, on the other hand, is most alarmed by these developments. Any eruption in Iraq - be it a Shiite civil war or escalation of the clash with the Kurds - will set the entire region aflame. Such violence will inevitably reverse the strategic achievements and vital interests of Russia. Therefore, Russia initiated an effort to improve the military coordination and cooperation of Syria, Iraq and Iran in order to reduce the chances for accidental eruption. On 14 June, senior military commanders from Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Russia met in Baghdad “to discuss regional security and their continued cooperation in the battle against terrorism.” Russian senior officials noted that “the representatives of the four countries emphasized the need to continue and expand cooperation in [the] fight against terrorism.” The Kremlin hopes that the Russian military retains sufficient influence to restrain the local forces from escalating localized conflagration, as well as guarantee their abiding by Russia’s understandings with other neighboring countries.

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By mid-June, the crisis in Baghdad was far from over. However, it became clear to all that the new government will be predominantly Shiite, Iran-dominated and anti-American. Karim al-Nuri, a senior leader at the Fatih Alliance and the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, noted the new coalition “conforms with Iran” and “serves the interests of all stakeholders, including Iran.” The Iraqi Communist Party, part of Sadr’s Al-Sayirun Alliance, issued a communique explaining that the alliance with the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi was agreed to in order “to help prevent the country from being exposed to serious dangers that would intensify conflicts across Iraq.” The Communist Party’s communique contrasted Sadr’s conciliatory move with “some Iraqi political parties” that keep “resorting to measures that would endanger the country in an attempt to prevent conditions for a smooth and peaceful transition of power.”

The Communist Party’s communique hinted at outgoing Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi who was still trying to propose a coalition in which he will be the compromise Prime Minister in order to deprive both Sadr and Amiri of power. Initially, Abadi believed that the US would support his initiative if only to block the ascent of both Sadr and Amiri. However, by mid-June Abadi realized that there was no chance to prevent the Iran-supported Shiite bloc from rising to power. Hence, on 14 June, Abadi urged all key leaders to convene after the 20th and bring the crisis to an end. “I extend an invitation to political blocs to hold a high-profile meeting after the end Eid al-Fitr feast, at a place to be named based on consultations to protect the homeland and citizens, ensure the soundness of the political process and democratic gains and to agree on specific mechanisms to hasten the formation of constitutional institutions in the best form possible,” he wrote to Sadr, Amiri and other leaders. Abadi called for a “unified stance” of all pertinent leaders in order to adopt “the next program to govern the country.” Tehran tacitly endorsed the initiative only if it leads to the consolidation in power of the Shiite bloc.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



## About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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