

# Iran - Iraq Relations

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With a conventional military and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat from Saddam Hussein's regime removed, Iran seeks, at a minimum, to ensure that Iraq can never again become a threat to Iran, whether or not there are U.S. forces present in Iraq. Some believe that Iran's intentions go far further; to try to harness Iraq to Iran's broader policy goals, such as defense against international criticism of and sanctions against Iran's nuclear program, and to enlist Iraq's help in suppressing Iranian dissidents located inside Iraq. Some believe Iran sees Iraq primarily as providing lucrative investment opportunities and a growing market for Iranian products and contracts.

Iran has sought to achieve its goals in Iraq through several strategies: supporting pro-Iranian factions and armed militias; attempting to influence Iraqi political leaders and faction leaders; and building economic ties throughout Iraq. It is Iran's support for armed Shiite factions that most concerns U.S. officials. That Iranian activity continues to be a threat to stability in Iraq, according to senior U.S. commanders, and positions Iran to pursue its interests in Iraq after U.S. forces leave Iraq by the end of 2011.

Many of Iraq's current leaders were in exile in Iran or materially supported by Iran during Saddam's rule, and see Iran as a mentor and an influential actor in Iraq. Even those who have longstanding ties to Iran have asserted themselves as nationalist defenders of Iraqi interests, but Iraq appears to be a clearly subordinate partner in the relationship. Perhaps resenting this relationship, many Iraqi citizens have appeared to reject parties and factions who accept preponderant Iranian influence in Iraq. This sentiment has caused Iran to suffer key setbacks in Iraq. The most pro-Iranian factions generally fared poorly in the January 31, 2009, provincial elections and again in the March 7, 2010, national elections for the National Assembly, which chooses the government. A political bloc that is decidedly against Iranian influence and which is supported by Iraq's Sunni Arabs won the most seats in the election, although no bloc has been able, to date, to build enough support among other blocs to assemble a government. Still, virtually all political blocs are consulting with Iran to try to gain its support for their inclusion in or dominance of any new government.

Also see CRS Report RL32048, Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses, by Kenneth Katzman.

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