

# Iraqi Shiites and Iran: The Bush Administration's Failed Predictions about the Iraq War

Rachel Roberts  
December 11, 2016  
Political Science 118P

## Introduction

Middle East strategist David Wurmser was a major influence on the Bush administration's decision to go to war in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> In 2000, Wurmser wrote his treatise *Tyranny's Ally*, a work that "presaged the U.S obsession over the coming decade of isolating, weakening, and overthrowing the Islamic Republic of Iran."<sup>2</sup> In *Tyranny's Ally*, Wurmser argues that toppling Saddam Hussein would lead to the downfall of Iran's theocratic regime. Wurmser believed that the key to destabilizing Iran was to free the city of Najaf, where Iraqi Shiite clerics reject the Supreme Leader's authority over the world's Shiites.<sup>3</sup> According to the Bush administration, the Iraqi Shiite population, once freed from Saddam's suppression, would be ready and willing to oppose the Iranian state.

The Iraq War exemplified the divisions within the Bush administration over Iran. Many conservative strategists, like Wurmser, argued that overthrowing Saddam Hussein would weaken Iran. Others, along with Israel and the Arab states, argued that "Iraq's Shiite majority would closely align with Iran after Saddam's fall –which is, in fact, what happened."<sup>4</sup> How did Wurmser and others in the Bush administration so fundamentally misunderstand the Iraqi Shiites? Why did Iraqi Shiite groups align with Iran instead of the U.S. after the fall of Saddam Hussein?

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon, Jay. 2016. *The Iran wars: spy games, bank battles, and the secret deals that reshaped the Middle East*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Wurmser, David. *Tyranny's ally: America's failure to defeat Saddam Hussein*. American Enterprise Institute, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Solomon, Jay. 2016. *The Iran wars: spy games, bank battles, and the secret deals that reshaped the Middle East*.

In a report for the *Washington Institute*, Mehdi Khaliji states that a “lack of clarity about the nature of the Iraqi Shiite religious authority, ... its political capability, and its relation to the Iranian clerical establishment and government has caused various problems for U.S. policy in Iraq.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in this paper, I will argue that Iraqi Shiite groups aligned with Iran instead of the U.S. for three main reasons. First, a common Shia identity bound Iraqis and Iranians together. Second, Iran exercised a great deal of control over the clerics at Najaf, making it nearly impossible for quietist Shiite leaders to challenge Iran. Third, Iran had the intelligence and militias on the ground in Iraq to actually influence the political situation, whereas the U.S. relied on advisors who had no real influence. This analysis reveals that Wurmser and the Bush administration made the grave error of reducing the complex, multi-faceted relationship between Iraqi Shiites and Iran down to one theological difference.

#### Theocratic Ties Between Iraqi Shiites and Iran

A common Shia identity accounts for the closeness between Shiite groups in Iraq and Iran. Iraq’s majority Shia population “shares with Iran centuries of deep-rooted cultural, historic, and religious ties.”<sup>6</sup> Najaf and Karbala, two of the holiest pilgrimage sites and centers for Shia scholarship, are located in Iraq. Because many Iranian religious leaders study in Iraq, connections between the two Shia communities are close.

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<sup>5</sup> Khaliji, Mehdi. *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*. Washington Institute for Near East policy, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Salamey, Imad, and Zanoobia Othman. "Shia revival and welayat al-faqih in the making of Iranian foreign policy." *Politics, religion & ideology* 12, no. 2 (2011): 197-212.

Shia ties between Iraq and Iran were strengthened during Saddam Hussein's repressive regime, under which Iraqi Shiites suffered violence, persecution, and exclusion from power.<sup>7</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini shared the political consciousness of the Iraqi Shiites. Saddam Hussein had expelled Khomeini from Iraq fifteen years before the revolution, after the Shah had complained about his revolutionary activities. Khomeini thus understood the concerns of the Iraqi Shia population and had "made it his mission to avenge Shia victims of Baathist repression."<sup>8</sup>

After the revolution, Khomeini sought to export his Islamic revolution to Shia communities in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Because of Khomeini's unique relationship to Iraqi Shiites, it was "only natural for the Iranian revolution, if it was to be expanded or exported, to find in Iraq a host group to support its ideological zeal."<sup>10</sup> Some scholars even argue Khomeini's insistence on exporting his revolution to Iraq was the primary cause of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.<sup>11</sup>

Under Khomeini's doctrine of the *Vilayat-e Faqih*, the Iranian government "consolidate[s] Islamic leadership within the one supreme leader –the *faqih* –with vested power to guide the Muslim world through its plight and to achieve Islamic rule."<sup>12</sup> According to this hierarchy, "the Supreme Leader is to reconcile communities'

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Cockburn. "Iraq's Oppressed Majority." *Smithsonian*. December 2003. Accessed December 5, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Karsh, Efraim. "Military power and foreign policy goals: the Iran-Iraq war revisited." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*64, no. 1 (1987): 83-95.

<sup>9</sup> "The Shia Arabs: Questions of Citizenship and Identity." Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. February 2016. Accessed December 4, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Salamey, Imad, and Zanoobia Othman. "Shia revival and welayat al-faqih in the making of Iranian foreign policy." *Politics, religion & ideology* 12, no. 2 (2011): 197-212.

<sup>11</sup> Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. "An unnecessary war." *Foreign Policy* 134 (2003): 50.

<sup>12</sup> Salamey, Imad, and Zanoobia Othman. "Shia revival and welayat al-faqih in the making of Iranian foreign policy." *Politics, religion & ideology* 12, no. 2 (2011): 197-212.

political and spiritual divisions and achieve its emancipation.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, by attempting to rally Iraq’s Shia communities against Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini reinforced his role as protector and unifier of the world’s Shias. Khomeini’s quest to gain the support of the Iraqi Shia population legitimated his rule and reinforced the power of the *Vilayat-e Faqih*.

Denied a political voice under the Baathist regime, Iraqi Shiites founded a number of underground political organizations that “quickly became a means for the expression of “Shia Anguish” (*muhrumiya*, or “sense of deprivation” in Arabic).”<sup>14</sup> Many of the most powerful Iraqi Shiite militias were founded by expatriate Iraqis living in Iran, where they could be free to advocate for Shia causes. These political organizations played an outsized role in the post-2003 Iraqi government, helping to explain Tehran’s influence there. For example, the leadership of the Shiite Dawa party, founded in 1957, fled to Iran after a crackdown by Saddam Hussein in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> Leader Nouri al-Maliki, who “shares a general affinity with Tehran’s Shiite Islamist worldview, [although] not its doctrine of clerical rule,” became Prime Minister of Iraq in 2006.<sup>16</sup> Maliki used his position to empower the Dawa party and expand his power base throughout Iraq’s government and army.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “The Shia Arabs: Questions of Citizenship and Identity.” Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. February 2016. Accessed December 4, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ali Latif. “The Da’wa Party’s Eventful Past and Tentative Future in Iraq.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed December 4, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

Similarly, expatriate Iraqis in Tehran founded the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (SCIRI) in 1982.<sup>17</sup> After the fall of Saddam Hussein, SCIRI moved its base from Iran to Iraq. SCIRI's militia, the Badr Organization, helped to train Iranian troops during the Iran-Iraq war and has longstanding ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guard (IRGC). Another major Shiite militia, the Sadr organization, "embraces a variant of Iran's doctrine of clerical rule" and seeks to establish an Iraqi clerical government that "fuses elements of Hezbollah with the Iranian model of clerical rule."<sup>18</sup>

Along with the militias, "many Iraqis who appeared in the 1970s as underground anti-regime activists in Iraq and in the 1980s as exiled anti-Saddam insurgents in Iran have emerged in the past decade as politicians ... in post-Saddam Iraq."<sup>19</sup> Saddam Hussein expelled thousands of Iraqi Shiites to Iran during his Arabization campaign in the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> During the Iran-Iraq war, many of these "returnees from Iraq" joined the Revolutionary Guard, eager to seek revenge on Saddam Hussein and the Baathist government. Now, these same men, like senior officials at Qom and seminary leader Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Taskhiri, "have returned to Iraq to rebuild an Iranian presence, laying claim to the property they lost, which was often given to Sunni families."<sup>21</sup>

According to Vali Nasr, author of *The Shia Revival*, these Iraqi Shia leaders are dedicated to reestablishing Iran's cultural influence in Shia Iraq and to erasing the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Nasr, Vali (2007-04-17). *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (Kindle Locations 2889-2891). W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

vestiges of Baathism. “They hope that things can go back to the way they were when large communities of Iranian clerics and merchants lived in Najaf and Karbala, and Shia identity tied Arab and Iranian Shias together in ways that secular nationalism could not touch,” says Nasr.<sup>22</sup> He asserts that Iran uses these “returnees” to channel funding in Iraq and strengthen connections between Iraq and Iran.

Anti-Americanism is integral to the identity of these Iraqi Shiite groups. While Iran supported Iraqi Shias during Saddam’s oppressive reign, the U.S. sided with Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war. During the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein committed countless atrocities against the Iraqi Shia population. Iraqi Shias also remember George H.W. Bush’s abandonment of them in 1991. At a campaign stop, President Bush called upon “the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside.”<sup>23</sup> The Shiites rose up in revolt, but President Bush, wary of becoming embroiled in a conflict, stood by and allowed Saddam to crush the rebellion. Thousands of Shias were murdered and thrown into mass graves.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, after the U.S. deposed Saddam in 2003, “in every Shiite seminary, clergy and students asked specifically why they should ever again trust the United States after the 1991 abandonment. They accuse the White House, the State Department and the Defense Department of persistent bias.”<sup>25</sup> Because of the legacy of 1980 and 1991,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Rubin. “Why Najaf Matters in Post-War Iraq.” Washington Post. August 27, 2010. Accessed December 4, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

anti-Americanism permeates the Shia identity, causing the Iraqi Shia population to be distrustful of the American government in Iraq.

#### Iran's Goals in Iraq

The downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 provided Iran with an unprecedented opportunity to increase its influence in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> The Iranian regime believes that a Shia-controlled government in Iraq would increase its security. According to one Iranian commentator, "just as they say that 'democracies don't fight democracies', we believe that Shiites don't fight Shiites."<sup>27</sup> President Ahmadinejad and the members of the IRGC who fought in the Iran-Iraq war, now "see Iraq's pacification under a Shia leadership as a strategic objective: what they were not able to win in the Iran-Iraq war, they can now get courtesy of coalition forces and the Shia government in Baghdad."<sup>28</sup> A Shia neighbor would function as a bulwark of security for Iran and recompense for years of hostile relations with Iraq under the Baathist regime.

Given the vulnerability of its nuclear program in 2003, Iran also viewed the implementation of a Shia regime in Iraq as a part of its defense strategy. By generating a collective sense of Shia identity in Iraq and other countries, Iran hoped that fellow Shia communities would rise up and support Iran in the event of a Western military attack on its nuclear program.<sup>29</sup> "There are two things that all grand Ayatollahs care about —

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<sup>26</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> "Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?" International Crisis Group. March 21, 2005. Accessed December 6, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Nasr, Vali (2007-04-17). *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (Kindle Locations 2889-2891). W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Slackman. "Iraqi Ties to Iran Create New Risks for Washington." *New York Times*. June 8, 2006. Accessed December 4, 2016.

preventing chaos and making sure the people are as secure as possible," said one of Iran's central security planners. "If the United States hits Iran, other players will come in."<sup>30</sup>

However, Iran also sought to weaken Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. A strong, neighboring Shia state could undermine the authority of Iranian clerical rule and challenge Iran's hegemony in the region. Therefore, "Iran has used ... longstanding ties with key Iraqi politicians, parties, and armed groups ... to weaken the central government, expand its own influence, and establish itself as a key power broker in Iraq."<sup>31</sup> An ideal Iraq, from the point of view of Iran, would take the form of a loyal and malleable neighbor, weak enough to remain under Iran's authority, yet strong enough to support Iran's security.

#### Iran's Suppression of Iraqi Clerics

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most powerful *marja*, or source of emulation, for the quietist school of Shia Islam, has hundreds of thousands of followers worldwide.<sup>32</sup> Although Wurmser correctly observed that al-Sistani and other clerics like him oppose the *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Bush administration misunderstood the "religious authority, social influence, [and] political capability" of the Najaf Shiite groups.<sup>33</sup> According to Mehdi Khalaji of the *Washington Institute*, "what has become known as "the Shiite

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*. Washington Institute for Near East policy, 2006.

clerical establishment” is mainly under the Iranian regime’s control.”<sup>34</sup> Iran now dominates the Shia clerical apparatus, relegating other Shia factions to the sidelines.

Importantly, Wurmser failed to take into account Tehran’s efforts to “co-opt the transnational Shiite clerical network based in Najaf.”<sup>35</sup> Aided by Saddam’s oppressive policies towards the Iraqi Shiites, Tehran attempted to shift the epicenter of Shiite religious activity from Najaf to Qom. Without political or religious freedoms, Iraqi clerics abandoned Najaf for Qom, leaving the seminary in the hands of a small group of students and low-level clerics.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the Najaf seminary almost ceased to function under Saddam.

Additionally, the Baath regime placed Ayatollah al-Sistani under house arrest for eleven years and forced him to stop teaching.<sup>37</sup> While the Najaf seminary was stifled, the Qom seminary flourished under the political and financial support of the Iranian government. "Najaf was a very important and pivotal center for Shia studies, but it was ruined by Saddam," said al-Sistani’s information center's chief administrator. "Qom is the same now. The motherland of Shiism is here in Qom."<sup>38</sup>

In Iran, a campaign to silence any cleric who opposed *Velayat-e Faqih* has been ongoing since the revolution. The Iranian government leveled a mass propaganda

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*. Washington Institute for Near East policy, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Slackman. “Iraqi Ties to Iran Create New Risks for Washington.” *New York Times*. June 8, 2006. Accessed December 4, 2016.

campaign against Sayed Kazem Shariatmadari, a senior *marja* who criticized the doctrine of clerical rule.<sup>39</sup> The regime accused Shariatmadari of planning a coup and forced him to confess on state television. After the fall of Saddam, the Islamic Republic undertook a prodigious campaign to fund the Qom clerics in order to outspend the seminaries in Najaf.<sup>40</sup> Iran coupled this funding offensive with a religious propaganda campaign intended to drown out the influence of the Najaf *marjas* and promote clerical rule in Iraq.

Ayatollah Khamenei, in particular, redoubled Tehran's efforts to stifle the Najaf clerics. Khamenei instituted mechanisms of censorship and financial control that made it nearly impossible for clerics to defy Tehran. He established a Statistics Office to oversee the finances of all the clerics in Qom, including Ayatollah al-Sistani.<sup>41</sup> The Statistic Office determines if a cleric is eligible for a pension based on two main criteria. First, the cleric must be obedient to the ideology of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Second, the cleric has must actively oppose Westernization and secularism. Support for an American-installed government in Iraq ostensibly violates the second requirement.

To ensure that clerics meet both of these criteria, the Statistics Office collects records of clerics' sermons and published writings. If a cleric is found to be non-compliant with Tehran, the Management Center can deny him a pension, revoke his educational certificates, bar him from getting a passport or traveling outside the

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<sup>39</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*. Washington Institute for Near East policy, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*. Washington Institute for Near East policy, 2006.

country, and sentence him to imprisonment or execution.<sup>42</sup> Because of the fear this system creates, *marjas* who receive any funding from Tehran face restrictions on their ability to support any ideology that challenges the *Velayat-e Faqih*.

Therefore, Khaliji concludes that “wherever he might hail from, the aspiring Shiite cleric simply cannot become powerful if he is separated and disconnected from Qom ... Iraq’s clerics ... cannot afford this confrontation with the Islamic Republic, especially given their current vulnerabilities.”<sup>43</sup> The control Tehran exerts over the Iraqi clerics likely explains why Ayatollah Sistani has been reluctant to criticize the Islamic Republic or its politics in Iraq.<sup>44</sup> If al-Sistani undermined Tehran, he would be “denied a major source of income and influence.”<sup>45</sup> It would also be impossible for al-Sistani to continue his activities, since his operations are based in Qom.

In order to further undermine al-Sistani, Iran has provided his rival, Sayed Muqtada al-Sadr, with financial and military support for his militia.<sup>46</sup> Sadr advocates a version of clerical rule in Iraq, with an Iraqi leader at the helm instead of an Iranian cleric. Al-Sadr’s father, the prominent cleric Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, was assassinated by Saddam’s regime. Muqtada al Sadr “jealously regards al-Sistani as a rival who has eclipsed his family’s influence, and he seeks to restore it.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, “the return of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. "The Iranian Clergy's Silence." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 10 (2010): 42.

<sup>44</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. "The Iranian Clergy's Silence." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 10 (2010): 42.

<sup>46</sup> James Phillips. "Iran’s Hostile Policies in Iraq. Heritage. April 30, 2007. Accessed December 3, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Muqtada al-Sadr to Iraq may be part of this long-term effort to co-opt the Najaf [seminary] and bring it closer to Iran.”<sup>48</sup>

Najaf is also particularly vulnerable to Iranian influence because its most influential clerics are dying. Ayatollah al-Sistani’s powerful mentor, Ayatollah al-Qasim al-Khoei, led most of the Shia world until his death in 1992.<sup>49</sup> In 2010, the powerful Najaf-trained Lebanese cleric, Grand Ayatollah Hussein Fadlallah, died.<sup>50</sup> Al-Sistani himself is now elderly and in bad health. As the older generation of Najaf clerics pass away, Tehran’s grip on the seminaries will increase. There may not be another generation of influential quietist *marjas* to replace al-Sistani and his colleagues.

#### Iranian Political and Military Influence on the Ground in Iraq

Perhaps the main reason that Iraqi Shia groups aligned with Iran instead of the United States in 2003 was that Iran had the political know-how to become a major power broker in Iraq. While Iran had real political influence in Iraq, the United States relied on advisors like Ahmed Chalabi who had limited power on the ground.

The Bush administration’s reliance on Chalabi epitomized its ignorance about the political climate in Iraq. An expat banker and businessman, Chalabi preached a vision of a secular, pluralist, and pro-Israel Iraq to the Bush administration.<sup>51</sup> However, after Saddam was removed, it became clear that Chalabi did not have the influence in Iraq to head the new government. Spurned by the United States, Chalabi turned to Iran for

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<sup>48</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. "The Iranian Clergy's Silence." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 10 (2010): 42.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Romesh Ratnesar. "From Friend to Foe." *TIME*. May 22, 2004. Accessed December 5, 2016.

power in Iraq; American intelligence had failed to unearth Chalabi's numerous ties to the Revolutionary Guard. Chalabi is now suspected of passing on high-level U.S. intelligence to Iran,<sup>52</sup> and his stories about Saddam Hussein's covert weapons programs have been proven to be completely fallacious.<sup>53</sup> The United States' chief Iraqi advisor may have been working for Iran on the side the entire time.

By contrast, Iran had both the intelligence and the military muscle on the ground to take advantage of the situation in 2003. Iran had been arming, training, and funding its Shiite militias in Iraq for decades.<sup>54</sup> Michael Rubin, an Iran and Iraq policy advisor the Bush administration, concludes that "the Iranian security apparatus was well-prepared to challenge the US in Iraq."<sup>55</sup> Iranian intelligence thus orchestrated a "well-organized, highly effective infiltration of Shia into Iraq."<sup>56</sup>

After failing to secure the border between Iran and Iraq, the United States was powerless to stop thousands of Iranian businessmen, clerics, and spies from flowing into the country.<sup>57</sup> Armed with weapons from the IRGC, units of Badr corps poured into Iraq from SCIRI's base in Iran. Rubin, who was in Iraq at the time working for the Coalition Provisional Authority, noted that Iranian products had beaten American ones to the shelves in Iraq, and that Iranian media had begun sharing Khamenei's speeches. Rubin

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Cockburn. "The Trail to Tehran." *The Guardian*. May 25, 2004. Accessed December 5, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Rubin. "Bad Neighbor." *The New Republic*. April 26, 2004. Accessed December 5, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Solomon, Jay. 2016. *The Iran wars: spy games, bank battles, and the secret deals that reshaped the Middle East*.

attended a town hall in the Iraqi city of Nasiriyya, where "local politicians had complained of a "hidden hand" that was dictating events in their town."<sup>58</sup>

Rubin wrote back to Washington, saying "people are simply afraid to come out and criticize Iran ... they realize that the Iranians do not hesitate to use violence, and the U.S. has proven itself unwilling or unable to defend the border and the local Iraqi population."<sup>59</sup> Polling consistently shows that the majority of Iraqi Shiites believe that Iran has a negative effect inside Iraq.<sup>60</sup> However, given current levels of corruption and violence, public opinion has little influence over who holds power in Iraq.

In *Iran Wars*, Jay Solomon argues that Iran practiced a "two-pronged strategy" inside Iraq.<sup>61</sup> First, Tehran allowed exiled Shiite parties, like Dawa and SCIRI, to come to power in Iraq. While the Bush administration spent billions of dollars trying to "democratize" Iraq, Iran used the American-installed elections to dominate the post-2003 political arena. Iran ordered SCIRI, Dawa, and the Sadrists to run in every single election on a single list, the United Iraqi Alliance.<sup>62</sup> Unifying the Shia parties ensured that the Shia vote would not be split among competing parties. The UIA earned the majority of the vote in the 2005 elections, and "consequently played a major role in

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Solomon, Jay. 2016. *The Iran wars: spy games, bank battles, and the secret deals that reshaped the Middle East*.

<sup>62</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

framing the Iraqi constitution and the governments that were formed following these elections.”<sup>63</sup>

Through American-implemented “democracy,” Iran became a major power broker in Iraq. One example of how Iran has co-opted the Iraqi government to serve its own interests can be seen in a 2008 security agreement between Iraq and the United States. At the behest of Iran-backed politicians, the Strategic Agreement includes the explicit request that Iraq “not be used as a springboard or corridor for attacks on Iran.”<sup>64</sup> The agreement also recognized an official timeline for a U.S. military withdrawal, as stipulated by Iranian demands. Iran consequently used its power in Iraq to negotiate with the U.S. on Iranian security issues.

As for the second part of Iran’s strategy in Iraq, Iran authorized the Qods force and its leader General Soleimani to fund a network of terrorist organizations that could continuously harass the US military and prevent the Bush administration from establishing a pro-American regime.<sup>65</sup> This militia network also made “Iran the ultimate arbiter of any political evolutions and alignments on the ground.” In one particularly effective tactic, Iran ordered its militias to stoke sectarian violence and then used its military weight in Iraq to “resolve” these outbursts of violence, “thereby burnishing its image as an indispensable partner for Iraq.”<sup>66</sup> For example, in 2007, Iran allegedly orchestrated attacks on Shiite targets and framed al-Qaeda for the violence. The Mahdi

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Solomon, Jay. 2016. *The Iran wars: spy games, bank battles, and the secret deals that reshaped the Middle East*.

<sup>66</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-government Approach*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011.

Army claims that the IRGC paid factions of its militia to commit atrocities against fellow Shiites to ignite animosity towards Sunnis.

Outnumbered, American troops were unable to stop the activities of the Iraqi Shiite militias.<sup>67</sup> The Iraqi Security Forces, which were supposed to aid U.S. reconstruction efforts, were completely infiltrated by Iran. Between 2003 and 2005, sixteen thousand Shiite militia-men joined the Iraqi Security Forces, particularly from the Badr organization.<sup>68</sup> The lines between Iran-backed militias and legitimate Iraqi forces were blurred. The American military presence was entirely subsumed by Iran, leaving Iraqi Shiites on the ground little choice but to align with the most powerful force in the country: Iran.

#### Conclusion

David Wurmser's prediction that Iraqi Shiites would join forces with the United States in Iraq and challenge Iran overlooked three important political realities. First, bound by a common Shia identity, Iraqi Shiites had historic and theological ties to Iran. The Iran-Iraq war and decades of Shia oppression in Iraq had given rise to covert Shia militias, funded by Iran, and a generation of Iraqi Shia leaders who were loyal to Iran and despised the United States. Second, Wurmser and other Bush administration strategists failed to acknowledge the control Iran exerted over the seminaries in Najaf. Third, while Iran used its powerful militias to shape the political situation in Iraq, the U.S. relied on advisors like Chalabi who had no real authority on the ground. American

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

attempts to democratize Iraq instead empowered Iran-backed Shiite militias to subsume the new government.

The Bush administration's failed predictions about Iraq exemplify problems with broader U.S. policy in the Middle East. Wurmser made a sweeping prediction about what post-Saddam Iraq would look like based on one issue: the theological divide between Iraqi Shiites and Iranian Shiites. Indeed, the United States frequently operates on a simplistic understanding of the Middle East by building its policies around one issue—a despotic leader, a terrorist group, a rogue nuclear program—without an appreciation for the other factors at play.

Republican and Democratic administrations alike have made egregious mistakes by approaching a complex issue in the Middle East with a one-dimensional lens. For example, President Obama sought to eliminate the leadership Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with his drone program in Yemen. Yet the Obama administration unwittingly radicalized thousands of civilians from the local communities targeted by the drone strikes.<sup>69</sup> AQAP now has a new base of willing volunteers to recruit from.

Edward Said might argue that American simplification of the Middle East has Orientalist underpinnings; that U.S. policy-makers oversimplify the Middle East because they perceive Arabs and Persians themselves to be inferior, primitive peoples in need of Western rescue.<sup>70</sup> Yet this attitude has wasted trillions of American tax dollars to create chaos in the Middle East. Unless U.S. policy makers attempt to account for the full

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<sup>69</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan. "In Yemen, U.S. Airstrikes Breed Anger, and Sympathy for Al Qaeda." *Washington Post*. May 29, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 1979.

complexity of conflict in the Middle East, tragic and expensive failures in policy will  
continue.