



[USIPeace Briefing](#)

A Critical Triangle: Iraq, Iran and the United States

By Courtney Rusin
September 2005

[Iranian and Iraqi relations are the best they have been in decades.](#)

[Shia are divided, as are Iraqis.](#)

[The U.S. must gain insights into the policies of Iran's new administration.](#)

[Iran and the U.S. need to talk.](#)

A weak, transitional government and continuing insurgency have left Iraq vulnerable to sectarian tensions and external influence. This has led to a closer relationship between Iraq and Iran, posing new challenges to U.S. relations with both countries.

To examine these emerging dynamics, the U.S. Institute of Peace convened a meeting of the Iraq Working Group and Muslim World Initiative on September 14, 2005 to discuss, "[A Critical Triangle: Iran, Iraq and the United States.](#)" Moderated by Daniel Serwer, Vice President and Director of Peace and Stability Operations at the Institute, the panel included [Daniel Brumberg](#), Special Advisor to the Institute of Peace's [Muslim World Initiative](#); Geoffrey Kemp, Director of Regional Strategic Programs at the Nixon Center; Kenneth Pollack, Director of Research at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution; and [Babak Rahimi](#), Senior Fellow at the Institute of Peace.



The panel discussed the interests driving both Iranian and American engagement in Iraq as well as the sectarian dynamics already at work within the country. This USIPeace Briefing, prepared by Courtney Rusin of the Institute of Peace, is based on the panel's presentations and does not represent the views of the Institute, which does not take positions on policy issues.

Iranian and Iraqi relations are the best they have been in decades.

An anti-Iranian posture has been at the crux of Iraqi foreign policy for the past 50 years. But the elections in January 2005, when the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) captured the majority of seats in Iraq's Transitional National Assembly, led to a dramatic improvement in relations between Baghdad and Tehran.

Led by Shiite cleric Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim, the head of the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and endorsed by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the UIA has close ties with Iran. Moreover, Iraqi and Iranian governments have signed agreements on border security, energy cooperation and tourism since the elections, Kemp asserted. Sistani, who is considered to be one of the most powerful figures in Iraq, met with the Iranian Foreign Minister last year but not with the U.S. Secretary of State or the U.S. Ambassador. As Kemp notes, "this is the axis of evil dealing with the country [the U.S.] has just liberated."

The historical relationship between Iraq's Shia and Shia-majority Iran is evident in the southern Iraqi cities of Basra, Najaf and Kabala. On his recent trip to Iraq, Rahimi visited a police station in Basra—a city with a strong Sadrist following—where there is prominent display of pictures of Moqtada al-Sadr, his uncle, and father together with pictures of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran at the time of the Iran-Iraq War. Rahimi observed that the Badr Corps, the armed force of SCIRI which was funded and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) in the 1980's and 1990's, was “basically controlling” Najaf.

Close relations have made it relatively easy for Iran to establish a varied presence and prepare itself to influence Iraq's future political landscape. Pollack noted that this presence includes not only religious clerics and pilgrims, but also Ministry of Intelligence and Security officials and Qods forces of the IRGC. Kemp described three scenarios that Iran has positioned itself in post-Saddam Iraq to prevent: Iraq as an American puppet and surrogate of American military power; an Iraq that has evolved into a secular Western democracy with good relations with the West, including the U.S. and perhaps even Israel; and an Iraq that has descended into chaos and civil war. Iran may not be able to prevent the third scenario, but it has still positioned itself to influence the outcome. Pollack asserted that Iran is setting up safe houses, arms caches, and communications networks, “doing everything that they will need to do if they want to either wage some kind of clandestine war in Iraq or support various factions within Iraq.”

Shia are divided, as are Iraqis.

Iraq's Shia are seen by many, including Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds, as proxies of Iranian leadership, but **divisions within Iraq's Shia** complicate their relationship with Iran. The disparate interests of Iraq's indigenous and diaspora Shia movements, respectively under the leadership of Moqtada al-Sadr and SCIRI, are emerging. Tensions erupted in late August of this year when Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Corps engaged in violent clashes over constitutional issues. These militias have continued to gain influence in South and Central Baghdad as they are organized and share common goals. As Pollack notes, in the short term, they have been able to create a better sense of security for Iraq's public than the official Iraqi security forces. Their confrontations, however, threaten to break down the Shia political dominance that has been in Iran's interest to sustain.

The dynamics leading to a civil war in Iraq may then include not only inter-sectarian conflict among Kurd, Sunni, Shia but also intra-sectarian conflict within the Shia. If civil war emerges, all of Iraq's neighbors, with Iran leading the way, will have an interest in moving and influencing the outcome. Iraq's neighbors who fear Shia dominance—the Saudis, Syrians, Jordanians, and Turks—will look after their own proxies. Pollack asserted that “Iran's decision about civil war in Iraq could be the single most important decision in post-Saddam Iraqi history. If the Iranians decide to move, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy—they will kick off the civil war that they are trying to win because the moment they move, the Sunnis have to move, the Kurds have to move and all of Iraq's neighbors also have to move immediately.”

The U.S. must gain insights into the policies of Iran's new administration.

It is not clear, however, what may trigger Iran to go beyond its current involvement and signal full engagement nor what this engagement would look like. Deployment of the Iranian army is unlikely, as it would draw disapproval from much of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's conservative support base, which has memories of fighting in the Iran-Iraq War. The pressure of domestic politics as well as the prospect of meeting the U.S. military in convention have thus far dissuaded Iran from jumping with full force into the Iraqi imbroglio.

There is a close if not decisive link between Tehran's approach to the nuclear question and Washington's evolving position in Iraq. Indeed, as Kemp points out, since the invasion in 2003, Iran's willingness to cooperate on the nuclear debate has been directly related to the success of the U.S. military campaign in Iraq. A stable Iraq and a fall in oil prices would encourage Iran's leaders to cooperate with the U.S. and Europe. But if the situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate and oil remains in short supply, Iran will be

less inclined to compromise.

In fact, the victory of Ahmadinejad might very well signal an end to Iranian flexibility, particularly when it comes to issues which for all Iranians are matter of national “dignity,” such as Iran’s quest for nuclear energy. Under the influence of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, as Brumberg notes, the previous Iranian administration approached the question of proliferation pragmatically, using it as leverage in negotiations with the U.S. But Ahmadinejad and his allies seem far more ideological and thus far less inclined to see the pursuit of a nuclear fuel cycle as a bargaining chip in relations with the West and the U.S. Thus it has asserted an absolute right to pursue nuclear enrichment activities despite—or indeed precisely because of—mounting pressures against it.

The U.S. should consider giving a bit on the nuclear issue in order to get something on Iraq. Force is not a serious option for dealing with Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Both the U.S. and Israel believe the operation would be difficult and its outcome highly uncertain.

Iran and the U.S. need to talk.

The current Bush administration—not to mention Washington’s European allies—hoped that the reformist Rafsanjani would win the Iranian Presidential election and thus open the door to continuing American coordination with Europe and proxy negotiations with Iran. But the victory of Ahmadinejad has consolidated the power of a conservative clerical establishment whose very successes can be partly attributed to the Bush administration’s public efforts to link its campaign to bring democracy to Iraq to its struggle against the Islamic Republic.

An atmosphere of growing militarization and anti-Americanism in Tehran spells trouble for Washington because the deteriorating situation in Iraq has undermined the Bush administration’s leverage in dealing with Iran on the nuclear issues and on the question of Iraq itself. This development has unfolded in tandem with rising prospects for full-fledged civil war in Iraq, a development that raises the prospects for a direct (or indirect) US-Iranian confrontation in the region.

The single most important factor that might work against such a confrontation is the shared interest that both Iran and the U.S. have in preventing a civil war and the ensuing dismemberment of Iraq that would surely follow such a war. Indeed as Pollack pointed out, it is precisely this common interest, combined with the benefits that Tehran has reaped from the emergence of a Shiite government in Baghdad that has thus far encouraged Tehran to play a relatively positive role in the struggle to create a sustainable political order in Iraq.

A civil war in Iraq represents a lose-lose outcome for both Tehran and Washington (as well as Baghdad). However, Iran and the U.S. have few if any open diplomatic channels to provide a way out of a drama with all the trappings of a Greek Tragedy, said Brumberg. At the very moment that Washington might benefit from both dialogue and political leverage, it lacks the institutions to achieve the first and the political (and perhaps military) resources to exercise the second. But unless both sides find the political will to reengage, the politics of confrontation might prevail.

Related Resources

[Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Baathist Iraq](#)

USIP Event, September 2006

[A Critical Triangle: Iraq, Iran, and the United States](#)

USIP Event, September 2005 (Audio)

[Iran and Iraq: The Shia Connection, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Factor](#)

[Iraq and Its Neighbors Series: Turkey and Iraq: The Perils \(and Prospects\) of Proximity](#)

[Iraq Before the Election: Constructing a National Narrative](#)

[The Role of Religion in Iraqi Politics](#)

This USIPeace Briefing was written by Courtney Rusin, Operations Coordinator in the **[Peace and Stability Operations](#)** program at the Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies. For additional information about this USIPeace Briefing or other Institute activities, please contact the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs at publicaffairs@usip.org or at (202) 429-3832.

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent international conflicts, promote post-conflict stability and democratic transformations, and increase peacebuilding capacity, tools, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts around the globe.

[See our complete list of USIPeace Briefings.](#)

United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)