

Iraq under US pressure: A test of government, sovereignty and factions



In mid-May, former CIA Director Gen. David Petraeus made a notable visit to the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, during which he held a series of meetings with senior Iraqi officials from the political, judicial and military spheres, without any prior announcement about the nature of the visit or the capacity in which he was traveling.

The visit opened the door to broad political and security interpretations, especially given its timing amid mounting US pressure on Baghdad to recalibrate its security and political course, foremost among them the issue of Iran-allied armed factions, which Washington now views as Tehran's most important remaining arm in the region and the one most capable of advancing its regional agenda after the recent shifts in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria.

Petraeus' visit was preceded by direct and public pressure from Donald Trump's administration regarding the shape of Iraq's next government and the identity of its nominee. The US president voiced clear objections to the nomination of Nouri al-Maliki, prompting Coordination Framework forces to recalculate and put forward Ali al-Zaidi instead, despite a prior consensus around al-Maliki.

These developments come as part of an intense wave of US pressure on Iraq, combining political, security and economic tools in an attempt to influence the balance of power and the course of internal decision-making. The danger of this pressure, however, lies in the way it deepens fears of the erosion of Iraqi national sovereignty, after Baghdad became one of the most prominent arenas of indirect confrontation between Washington and Tehran, and a central knot in the struggle for regional and international influence.

Why Iraq now?

Although Iranian influence in Iraq stretches back many years, the degree of US focus on the Iraqi arena at this stage appears striking and unprecedented, especially after the Gaza war and the broad escalation that followed against Iran and its allies.

At a regional moment in which Hamas suffered severe blows in Gaza, Israel's room for maneuver against Hezbollah in Lebanon widened, and Iran's presence in Syria receded after the collapse of one of Tehran's most important allies, Iraq emerged as the last arena still hosting the most complete and deeply intertwined network of Iranian influence.

From this perspective, one can understand the US escalation, along with some Gulf discussions, over the issue of Iraqi factions, as well as the appointment of a figure like Tom Barrack as special envoy to Iraq. The message here does not appear to be conventional diplomacy, nor is it merely about managing bilateral relations with Baghdad. Rather, it suggests that Washington sees Iraq as an arena for political and security reconfiguration, and perhaps the most sensitive link in the equation of Iranian influence in the region.

In this context, the United States is seeking to clip Tehran's wings inside Iraq by tightening the noose around the Popular Mobilization Forces factions and gradually stripping them of their political, security and military tools of power. From the US perspective, these factions are not merely local armed forces, but one of the last advanced layers of protection for the Iranian project after its proxies receded in more than one arena.

For that reason, the survival of Iranian influence in Baghdad poses a direct challenge to the US agenda in the Middle East and could significantly obstruct many of the goals Washington, and behind it Tel Aviv, seek to achieve in the post-escalation phase with Iran. Iraq, with its geographic, political, sectarian and security weight, is not a marginal arena in this conflict. It may instead be the penultimate link in the dismantling of Iranian influence before moving on to confront Tehran when it is more isolated and less able to maneuver.

This is precisely why intense US pressure on Baghdad has come at this

exceptional moment. The battle is no longer only about the factions, nor about the shape of Iraq's next government, but about Iraq's future itself: Will it remain an advanced sphere of Iranian influence, or will it become a major breaking point in Tehran's regional project?

Gateways of US pressure

It has become clear that Washington no longer views Baghdad as a limited security file, or as an arena tied only to the presence of US forces and the protection of interests and bases inside Iraq. The current US pressure has moved beyond that traditional framework and turned into a tool for recalibrating the political and security compass within the Iraqi state itself, reshaping the balance of power, and determining who holds decision-making authority and who manages the military and political scene, through systematic and effective instruments of pressure.

From this standpoint, Washington is moving along three main tracks. The first is the security track, which concerns attempts to strip the PMF factions loyal to Tehran of their sources of strength, whether by reducing their influence, controlling their weapons, or pushing them toward integration into state institutions as a disciplined force rather than an independent military actor. The US objective here is to gradually remove these factions from the political and military spheres, or at the very least turn them into a force that can be contained within the structure of the Iraqi state.

This track, however, runs into a complex dilemma. These factions are no longer a marginal or temporary entity; since 2016, they have become part of the network of power, governance and influence inside Iraq. As a result, responding to US conditions regarding curbing their role or disarming them appears extremely difficult, because any step in that direction could be read by these factions as an existential targeting rather than institutional reform, potentially opening the door to security and political repercussions that extend beyond Iraq to the region as a whole.

The second track is political, as Washington seeks to influence the identity of the figures stepping forward to run the state, so that they are not — if not close to the United States fully folded under the Iranian umbrella. This helps explain the US objection to putting forward Nouri al-Maliki for the premiership, despite his previous good relations with Washington. The issue is no longer tied only to personal relationships, but to the candidate's place within the balance of Iranian influence in Iraq.

The same applies to the factions, as Washington rejects integrating figures linked to them into the government or empowering them in sensitive positions within

the state.

The third track, and perhaps the most influential and visible, is the economic one. This track represents Washington's most effective stick for achieving its security and political goals, through leveraging banking relations, dollar shipments, the sanctions card, the release of frozen assets, and financial restrictions that can choke an important part of state and market activity in Iraq. The danger of this track lies in the fact that it does not pressure only one side, but affects everyone: forces close to Washington, forces close to Tehran, and the Iraqi state itself.

The government in a bind

Here, the Iraqi government finds itself facing an extraordinarily complex dilemma, perhaps even a near-impossible equation: How can it satisfy Washington without angering the Shiite house? And how can it reassure the factions without losing American cover and support? Between those two limits, al-Zaidi's government appears to be managing contradictions more than acting as an independent decision-maker capable of imposing its choices free from domestic and external pressure.

Politically, the deadlock over forming the government is no longer confined to Iraq's traditional internal balances between the Coordination Framework, Sunni forces and the Kurds. It has moved to a more sensitive level, where external pressure is now present in determining the nature of the figures nominated to enter the government, the limits of their closeness to or distance from Iran and the factions, and in pushing highly sensitive files onto the negotiating table.

This further complicates the formation process, prolongs it, and scrambles the calculations of Iraqi forces, which no longer operate within a purely national margin, but within a broader web of regional and international balances.

On the security front, the equation appears even more combustible. Any government push toward fully complying with US conditions, whether by clipping the factions' influence or stripping them politically and security-wise, could blow up internal balances and open the door to dangerous repercussions inside Iraq and perhaps beyond.

Conversely, ignoring these demands or dragging out action on them could expose Iraq to broader financial and political pressure and place the state as a whole — not just the factions — before a suffocating predicament.

A test of sovereignty at a sensitive time

There is no doubt that US pressure on Iraq carries clear weight and influence, and it can narrow the Iraqi government's room for maneuver. But exaggerating the scale of US influence beyond its actual limits could lead to an inaccurate

reading of the scene. Powerful as it is, that influence runs up against a set of factors that limit its ability to impose a complete course inside Iraq.

The first of these factors is that the factions loyal to Iran are no longer fragile or marginal entities that can be excluded by an external decision or a quick political settlement. They have become deeply embedded in the joints of politics, security and the economy, and they represent a formidable force in the Iraqi equation. Iran also still possesses deep tools of influence inside Iraq, making the uprooting of its influence nearly impossible, especially since any direct clash with these factions could open the door to broad security unrest, and perhaps a dangerous slide into internal confrontation of a sectarian nature whose limits and outcomes cannot be predicted.

These realities relatively reduce Washington's ability to fully impose its conditions and give the Iraqi government limited room for balancing and maneuvering, preventing it from fully capitulating to US demands. But at the same time, they do not grant Baghdad genuine independence in decision-making. Rather, they place it within a more complex equation, moving between escalating US pressure, entrenched Iranian influence and internal fears of explosion.

From here, the greatest danger to Iraqi sovereignty deepens. The problem lies not only in the existence of external influence, but in the fact that fateful decisions — such as forming the government, controlling weapons, and defining the shape of relations with Iran and the United States — have become governed by the logic of “avoiding explosion” more than by the logic of “state-building.” This means Iraq is not moving according to a purely national vision so much as it is managing accumulated crises among armed internal forces and conflicting external pressures.

In sum, it can be said that US influence, despite its weight and presence, does not appear capable on its own of redrawing the Iraqi map according to its approach and conditions in absolute terms. At the same time, however, it possesses enough political, security and economic tools to narrow Baghdad's options and push it toward forced revisions on highly sensitive files. On the other side, Iranian influence may no longer be able to protect its previous positions with the same solidity, but it remains sufficient to prevent any sharp and rapid shift against it within the Iraqi equation.

This is why the Iraqi government appears stuck in a complex gray zone. It neither has the luxury of full confrontation with Washington nor the ability to fully free itself from the weight of Iranian influence and the network of factions tied to it. That leaves it facing a test that goes beyond the idea of forming a new

government or distributing ministerial portfolios, to a deeper test related to the identity of Iraqi decision-making itself and the limits of its independence.

The real question is no longer only who will participate in the government. Rather, other questions now touch sovereignty first and foremost: Who chooses, on what basis, and according to what approach? Can Baghdad balance between Washington and Tehran without turning into an open arena for settling scores between them?

Or will escalating US pressure push the new government into an early confrontation with the forces that have, over the past years, helped shape a fundamental part of the equation of power and influence inside Iraq?

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