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# Iran-Iraq Relations and Pan-Shia Strategies

Marie LADIER-FOULADI

## Abstract

Undoubtedly, the fall of Saddam Hussein and the collapse of the Ba'athist regime contented the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tehran's regime took advantage of the chaos and the power vacuum caused in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq to pursue its pan-Shiite. The Islamic Republic of Iran, which was able to consolidate itself thanks to the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) perfectly harnessed the situation of crisis and extreme tensions in Iraq to impose its hegemony. The theocratic state of Tehran, by resuming its diplomatic relations, established economic and trade relations and by offering its support to the new government dominated by the Shiites, thus ensured it would gain the upper hand over the Iraqi state. The Quds force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Army, also called *Pasdaran* (the Guardians), under the pretext of wanting to protect Shia Muslims, began to recruit among Iraqi Shiites to set up and train paramilitary groups and create the "Axis of Resistance" (*mehvar-e moghavemat*). However, this Axis by allowing them to strengthen their operational capacity by Iraqi non-state actors served mainly to defend the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Over the years, notably during the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-- or Daesh, Arabic acronym of *al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyyah fī al-'Irāq wa al-Shām*, also called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) -- the theocratic state of Tehran has continued to gain influence in Iraq, while inside Iran it was faced with an unprecedented serious political crisis sparked in the wake of the fraudulent presidential election of June 2009. It was in this context that Islamic Republic set itself an even more ambitious objective consisting in building itself as an unavoidable regional power. To this end, it has multiplied all kinds of maneuvers to strengthen its position in Iraq. Taking into account the major geostrategic importance that Iraq represents for the Tehran regime, it continues to deploy all the means possible and imaginable for Iraq to be a rear base of some sort to pursue its pan-Shia policy, and thereby to achieve its own strategic objectives in the region.

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## **Introduction**

The invasion and occupation of Iraq by the United States in March 2003 was undoubtedly beneficial to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Not only did it annihilate the Iraqi Ba'athist state, which had fought an eight-year-long war (between 1980 and 1988) against the Iranian theocratic state, but the event also paved the way for Iran's training and fortifying its Shiite

militias in Iraq, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon<sup>1</sup>, faithful to its ideology<sup>2</sup>. The Tehran regime, in trying to exploit the power vacuum and chaos resulting from the American occupation, was provided with the unexpected opportunity to consolidate its project, which arose following the advent of the *Velâyat-e faghih* regime (government of the religious jurisconsult) that has aimed to spread the “Islamic revolution” and establish a Shia frontline in the region. By launching the «Axis of Resistance» (*mehvar-e moghavemat*) in the wake of the American occupation of Iraq, the Islamic Republic of Iran, professedly for the sake of protecting Shia Muslims, strove above all to safeguard its interests and ensure its own protection from any hostile move likely to thwart its ambition to rise as an unavoidable regional power. While the Islamic Republic of Iran initially planned to pursue its pan-Shia policy with a view to gaining control over the Iraqi state, it then and in particular during the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also called Daesh or ISIS, set itself a new and more ambitious objective. This was a component of a strategic project that the theocratic state developed both to face the internal political crisis and to respond to strategic imperatives due to the rivalry for regional hegemony, as well as to the context of structural contentions it had entertained with its immediate neighbors. This project was hatched up at a time when the Islamic Republic had to endure a wave of protests erupted in the wake of the fraudulent presidential election of June 2009. This protest movement, the most important since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, called the «Green Movement», seriously questioned the regime’s legitimacy. To contain the Green Movement and particularly to hold the Iranian social body together, whose hostility and potential for mobilization the authorities perfectly comprehended, the theocratic regime of Tehran devised an unprecedented population policy.<sup>3</sup> Its goal was to radically change the course of fertility trends through both incentive and aggressive measures in order to boost the population up to 150 million people. By this new population policy, consisting of several closely intertwined strata of measures, the Islamic Republic of Iran, far from purely demographic reasons, aimed to achieve two latent strategic objectives.

First, to give birth to a loyal population, primarily in the hope that it would be numerous, and that it would substitute itself to that grown hostile to the regime. It would thus allow it to set up a new kind of control over the society and thereby regain its legitimacy. The second sought to completely reshape the demographic and ethnic composition of Iran’s border regions and, with a view to opening a corridor linking this country to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria, to create zones of influence, populated by Shiites who adhere to the system of *velâyat-e faghih*: the Islamic Republic would easily grant them the Iranian nationality. This second objective should enable

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas A. Heras, “Iraq’s Fifth Column. Iran’s Proxy Network”, *Middle East Institute Counterterrorism Series*, Policy Paper, 2017-2, p. 3-7

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran took an interest in Lebanon at a time when the civil war between rival factions, which had broken out in 1975, turned into a regional conflict with the intervention of Syria and Israel, which invaded the country in February 1982. Taking this context of tension and crisis as an opportunity to exert pressure on the supporters of its main adversary, Saddam Hussein, the Tehran regime, under the aegis of Khomeini, made every effort to found Hezbollah. For further information see: Paglia Morgan and Tourret Vincent, 2020, *L’Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient. Les défis de la guerre par procuration*, Études de l’IFRI, Focus Stratégique 95, Mars 2020, 56 p.

<sup>3</sup> Ladier-Fouladi Marie, *La République islamique d’Iran vue de l’intérieur*, Éditions du Croquant, 2020, 174 P.

the Islamic Republic to secure a hegemonic position in the region, which is essential for its political survival in the medium and long terms. It is against this backdrop that one must understand the crucial importance of Iraq for the Islamic Republic.

This chapter will present, first of all, the consequences of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) for the Islamic Republic and the link that it was able, on this occasion, to weave with some Iraqi Shiite opposition. It will then show how the theocratic regime of Tehran, by creating the Axis of Resistance and specifically by getting involved in the war against Daesh (ISIS), has managed to extend its influence in Iraq post-2003. Finally, it will examine the objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran's population policy in order to highlight the strategic stakes that Iraq represents for the targets of this project and, in particular, for the pan-Shia policy of the theocratic regime of Tehran so that it should emerge as a key regional power.

### **The Iraq-Iran War and the Emergence of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Iran**

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979, Khomeini did not lose time in publicly declaring his ambition to export the Islamic revolution into the wider Muslim world. This project, which aroused hostile responses from neighboring states and in particular Iraq, where a large Shia community lives, was to be as one of the main reasons for the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran. Contrary to the expectations of Saddam Hussein and his indirect American-European supporters, who thought they would soon defeat the Islamic Republic, this war strengthened it. This war, pitting Iraq against Iran for eight years between 1980 and 1988, not only enabled the theocratic regime in Tehran to develop non-elective political institutions and military instruments in order to consolidate itself, but also to implement its pan-Shia policy. Khomeini himself did not hesitate to enumerate the "benefits" of the war for the Islamic Republic and the Islamic revolution in a lengthy message he sent to all members of the Shiite clergy. This message, also called the "Charter of the Clergy", which may well be qualified as his will and testament, since it was written four months before his death, is edifying insofar as it allows us to not only know the lessons that the theocratic regime in Tehran drew from the context of the war and the crisis, but above all to trace the origin of the political orientation that his successor, Ali Khamenei, has since adopted. Here is a short extract that I have translated:

This war has every day brought a blessing (a divine favor), which we have appreciated in every field. This war has allowed us to: export our revolution to the world; to prove the aggression of the enemy and our status as a victim; come to the conclusion that we must count on ourselves, to reveal the hypocritical faces of the colonizers; to separate friends from enemies; to despise the greatness and arrogance of the two superpowers of the East and the West. It was during the war that we: strengthened the roots of our successful Islamic revolution; implanted in our people a strong feeling of brotherhood and patriotism; showed the peoples of the world, and in particular the peoples of the region, that all powers and

superpowers can be fought for many years. Our war has helped Afghanistan and will lead to the conquest of Palestine. Our war has made all the leaders of corrupt regimes feel humiliated by Islam. Our war has awakened consciences in Pakistan and India. It was during the war that our military industries have expanded greatly and, more importantly, it is the war that has ensured the continuity of the spirit of revolutionary Islam. [...] Our war was the war of Good vs. Evil and is nowhere close to be over. [...] Those who think that martyrdom, courage, self-sacrifice and greatness are pointless, because we have not reached our final goal on the front line are short-sighted. While the awakening of Islamism in Africa is linked to our eight-year war, the interest in Islamic Studies of the peoples of America, Europe, Asia and Africa, that is to say the whole world, is fueled by our eight-year war.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, The Iraq-Iran war, while providing an exceptional opportunity for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),<sup>5</sup> also called *Pasdaran* (the Guards), -- enthused as much as they were inexperienced -- to structure themselves rapidly. They were eventually reinforced with a fourth force, called the *Quds* Force (which refers to holiness, as well as to the city of Jerusalem) entrusted with carrying out, in diplomatic terms, «international missions», which in reality implied being commissioned to export the Islamic revolution and Shia Islam.

It was also during this war that the Khomeini's regime was able, by creating and training the first Shiite paramilitary groups, to implement its expansionist strategy. In 1982, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim -- exiled in Iran since the beginning of the war -- after endorsing the concept of the *Velâyat-e Faqih* (government of religious jurisconsult), founded, on the model of the Lebanese Hezbollah,<sup>6</sup> created earlier that same year, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (ASRII). Upon recruiting thousands of Shiite Iraqi refugees in Iran, he set up the «Badr brigade» in 1983.<sup>7</sup> Then, this first group of Iraqi Shiite militia was integrated into the *Pasdaran* and was to be involved in the onslaughts in the South, in 1983.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Message of Khomeini sent to clerics, religious authorities, teachers and students of theological schools, imams of Friday prayer and imams of congregations on 22 February 1989. In this long message, Khomeini tackled several issues. I have translated the section on "the benefits of the Iraq-Iran war". Source: Khomeini Official Website <http://emam.com/posts/plain/4169>

<sup>5</sup> Created on 6 May 1979 by a decree issued by Khomeini, its initial mission was devoted to home security, to collaborate with the Iran's regular army, to train its cadres from the moral, ideological, political and military points of view, and to support, under the supervision of the Guide aided by the government, all the revolutionary movements of the oppressed in the world. The Pasdaran were established by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic in order to continue their «mission to safeguard the Islamic revolution and its achievements» (principle 150). The Iran/Iraq War (1980-1988) transformed the Pasdaran into a full-fledged army, with land, air and sea forces, independent from the regular army yet better equipped.

<sup>6</sup> Let us bear in mind that the first intervention by the *Quds* force was in Lebanon, more specifically in Shiite villages in Bekaa, in 1982, to train Shiite Islamist battalions and provide inhabitants with financial support and basic social facilities. The birth of Hezbollah in 1982 (officially announced in February 1985) provided the *Pasdaran Quds* force with a matrix for organizing other Shiite militias in the region. On the emergence of Hezbollah see Chloé Berger, "Le Hezbollah héraut des ambitions régionales iraniennes ?", *Études de l'Ifri*, IFRI, May 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Luizard Pierre-Jean, « La communauté chiite, la première victime de l'implosion de la société irakienne », *Hérodote*, n° 124, 2007/1, p. 118-154.

<sup>8</sup> Paglia Morgan and Tourret Vincent, 2020, « *L'Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient. Les défis de la guerre par procuration* », *Études de l'IFRI*, Focus Stratégique 95, Mars 2020, 56 p.

Among those killed during the war, 4,565 were foreign fighters, some of whom were Iraqi Shiites, refugees or prisoners of war, who had been incorporated into the *Badr* brigade to fight Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the war, the Islamic Republic of Iran, for the purpose of safeguarding and maintaining its own security and in order to exert its influence in Iraq, launched a set of initiatives through its Shia networks. For example, in 1991, *Badr* brigade fighters played a significant role in organizing the Shiite uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime, while they endeavoured, at the same time, to return to Iraq. But the insurrection was fiercely repressed, and they had to withdraw. This defeat did not discourage the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (ASRII), still based in Iran, and they engaged in finding alternative channels to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. Thus, following the approval of the Iraq Liberation Act passed by Congress in 1998,<sup>10</sup> ASRII entered into a direct dialog with the Americans.<sup>11</sup> A strategic choice that would pay off.

### The Axis of Resistance and the Pan-Shia Strategy

The invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003 was therefore a boon for Tehran. All the more so because, on occasion of a gathering of Iraqi dissidents, (amongst whom Mohammad Baqr Hakim, the head of ASRII), organized by the Americans in London on 18 December 2002 to prepare the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's demise, Shiites came to be considered to form the majority of the Iraqi population.<sup>12</sup> While no census allowing to precisely establish the composition of the Iraqi population was and is not available in Iraq, this distribution, approved by the Iraqi opposition, was based on a «virtual census»<sup>13</sup> “that conceived of Iraq exclusively in ethno-sectarian terms, with ‘Shia Arabs representing 55 per cent of the population, Sunni Arabs 22 per cent, and Kurds 19 percent’.”<sup>14</sup>

As a result, on the basis of this hypothesis regarding the composition of the Iraqi population, the Americans, in view of the political reconstruction of Iraq approached the *Dawa* party<sup>15</sup> and

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<sup>9</sup> Ali Alfoneh, « Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions », *CARNEGIE Endowment for International Peace*, January 30, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 - Declares that it should be the policy of the United States to seek to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to replace it with a democratic government. See <https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/4655>

<sup>11</sup> Adel Bakawan « Les chiites au pouvoir en Irak : l'échec de la première expérience », Centre Arabe de Recherches et d'Études Politiques de Paris, (Carep) août 2020.

<sup>12</sup> 56 percent of the participants in this event were Shiites, See Adel Bakawan « Les chiites au pouvoir en Irak : l'échec de la première expérience », *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Dodge Toby and Mansour Renad, “Sectarianization and Desectarianization the Struggle for Iraq's Political Field”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18:1, 2020, 58-69 p.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Founded in the late 1950s, the *Dawa* party supported the Islamic revolution in Iran before some of its leaders withdrew from the *Velâyat-e faqih* regime. See : Luizard Pierre-Jean, « La communauté chiite, la première victime de l'implosion de la société irakienne », *op. cit.*

the ASRII,<sup>16</sup> both largely under the sway of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was, however, a paradoxical choice insofar as the previous year (in January 2002), George W. Bush had designated the Islamic Republic of Iran one of the three states forming the “Axis of evil.”

Seemingly, the American administration suffered from political blindness that rendered it incapable of foreseeing the consequences of its support for Shia political organizations allied with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In any case, because of its strong will to undertake a policy to “de-Ba’athify” Iraqi society, the American administration endorsed the informal vision of the *Muhasasa Ta’ifia* system” (sectarian apportionment or sectarian quotas) approved by the Iraqi opposition at a conference held in Salah al-Din, a city newly liberated from the regime of Saddam Hussien, in October 1992.<sup>17</sup>

However, this American strategy widely opened Iraq’s door to the Islamic Republic of Iran. It indeed immediately seized this unexpected opportunity to deploy its influence in Iraq through the Pasdaran, via the *Quds* Force.

On 9 May 2003, Paul Bremer landed in Iraq and took over as Director of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance instead of Lieutenant-General Jay Garner. In June, the Office was turned into the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and Bremer became the country’s chief executive authority. As the civilian administrator of Iraq, his mission was to manage the American occupation until the country may return be governed by the Iraqi people.

The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) was established by the Provisional Authority of the Coalition (CAP) in July 2003. Still based on a sectarian apportionment understanding of Iraqi society (*Muhasasa Ta’ifia*),<sup>18</sup> along religious and ethnic affiliations, the Council was composed of 25 members: 14 Shiites, 4 Sunnis, 5 Kurds, 1 Christian and 1 Turkmen.

Undoubtedly, the entry of several Shiite elites allied with the Tehran regime into this Council enabled the Islamic Republic to exert its influence in the political and administrative organization of Iraq. But it was after the formation of the interim Iraqi government in June 2004<sup>19</sup> and the 2005 parliamentary election, which were won by Shiites, that the influence of the Islamic Republic became more conspicuous. That was when the parliamentarians elected Prime Minister Ibrahim Al Ja’fari, a member of the *Dawa* party, who had spent in Iran half of his 20-year-long exile. He was forced to stand down in favor of Nuri-al Maleki, the party’s number two, in May 2006. Nuri-al Maleki, like his predecessor, had spent many years of exile in Syria then in Iran and was thus close to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, for his proximity to the theocratic regime of Tehran, it was under his two mandates that diplomatic, economic and technological relations between the two countries resumed and consolidated.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Doge Tobby, “Iraq and *Muhasasa Ta’ifia*; the external imposition of sectarian politics”, *The Foreign Policy Center*, November 12, 2018. <https://fpc.org.uk/iraq-and-muhasasa-taifia-the-external-imposition-of-sectarian-politics/>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> The CPA transferred power to the newly appointed Iraqi Interim Government on 28 June 2004. The CPA then formally disbanded after declaring their work ‘done’.

These relations, by making of Iran one of Iraq's major partners, offered Tehran means of influence within the Iraqi regime itself. However, the Islamic Republic did not content itself with holding such a privileged relationship with the Iraqi leadership. Given the context of violence and the outbreak of the civil war in Iraq, it did not hesitate to deploy considerable resources to train new Shiite militia groups, while supporting those already existing, with the aim of having at its disposal a host of influence levers.

With a view to creating the «Axis of Resistance», the *Quds* force, based on the example of the *Badr* brigade set up in 1983 in Iran, founded dozens of militia groups. I will dwell on three of them,<sup>20</sup> who played a decisive role in the political project of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Firstly, lest us evoke the *Badr* Brigade, i.e., the military arm of the ASRII. Upon its return to Iraq, following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, it changed its name to the “*Badr* Organization” as the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) sought to disarm the Iraqi militias. However, it immediately infiltrated the army and the police and did not conceal its ambition to play a political role in the new Iraq. Led by Hadi Al-Ameri, the Organization took part in quelling Sunni insurgent groups and, from 2009, clashed with the Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi), an armed movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr who had started distancing himself from the Iranian regime. The Organization relied on several thousand fighters and its stronghold was located in Diyala, the native province of Al-Ameri, where the majority of the population was Sunni before Saddam Hussein's fall. The *Badr* Organization progressively expelled the Sunni population so that the Shiites are the majority in today's Diyala.<sup>21</sup> This province is strategic as it borders the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kurdistan regional Government and the government of Baghdad. According to Adel Bakawan, the *Badr* Organization “having infiltrated all the institutions of the Iraqi State (elected representatives, ministers, ambassadors, chairmen, university presidents, businessmen) exerts an enormous clout over the country.”<sup>22</sup>

The *Kataeb Hezbollah* (Hezbollah Phalanges), founded in 2003, actively participated in the battles to push back the Americans. They are equipped with sophisticated weaponry, including missiles. The group is responsible for numerous attacks by means of mortar, rockets, remote-controlled RPG, as well as sniper operations against US and Iraqi forces. The *Kataeb* organization operates underground; however, Jamal al-Ibrahimi (aka Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis) was considered as its leader. Undoubtedly, the *Kataeb* are one of the most operational militia forces in Iraq. That is why they were added to the American list of terrorist organizations on 2 July 2009. For its close ties with Shia political leaders and strong support from the Islamic Republic of Iran, the *Kataeb* “are capable of threatening the President of the Republic and his Prime Minister if they become an obstacle for their actions on the field.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Adel Bakawan also retains, amongst dozens of them, these three groups that he believes “have the skills and capacities to act on the security, political, economic and geostrategic conditions of Iraq”, Adel Bakawan « Les chiïtes au pouvoir en Irak: l'échec de la première expérience », *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The organization of *Asayib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH) was born in July 2006 after seceding from Moqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army. The group was founded by Qais al-Khazali who pledged allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the concept of *velayat-faqih*. Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of the *Quds* Force, is deemed to have secretly engineered the creation of the group. The AAH was tasked with fighting both American occupation forces and the Sunni militias attacking the Shiites. The group had also to manage its rivalry deteriorating into armed skirmishes with the Sadrists, who accused Qais al-Khazali of high treason. The AAH is also close to Nouri al-Maliki.

The first Iraqi civil war that broke out in 2006 between Sunnis and Shiites ended in 2008 with the Shiite militias eventually prevailing. They took control of Baghdad and expelled most of the Sunni population from the capital, while Nuri al-Maliki formed a government for he was the head of the Shiite *Dawa* party. As for the Americans, they gradually disengaged and started to withdraw from Iraq following the agreement signed in 2008 between the Iraqi and American authorities. On 18 December 2011, American forces completed their withdrawal from the country initiated almost nine years earlier. This was considered by the Islamic Republic of Iran as its victory since the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq was entirely consistent with the regime's plan. Moreover, the theocratic regime of Tehran and the Iranian media have constantly emphasized this «victory» against the United States of America as that of Islamic Republic's pan-Shia policy.

Since then, the Islamic Republic of Iran keeps to reiterate its willingness to continue having a "constructive role" in Iraq by providing its political support and offering its participation to the reconstruction of the country. Thus, relying on the *Muhassa* system, it maintains its allies in power and firmly supports its loyal Shia militia groups, thereby establishing itself as an essential actor in the Iraqi crisis.

### **The War Against Daesh and the Consolidation of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Influence in Iraq**

In 2011, the popular uprising in Syria, in the wake of the "Arab Spring" that aimed to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and the entry of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also called Daesh, onto the Iraqi stage undoubtedly provided an unexpected opportunity for the Islamic Republic of Iran to extend its influence.

Damascus Baathist regime's harsh repression of the demonstrators quickly turned the protest movement into an armed rebellion. A civil war soon broke out involving various groups within the Syrian opposition. From the outset, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a steadfast ally of Syria, provided financial assistance and military equipment to the Syrian regime. But, following the serious situation on the ground which soon turned into a quagmire for the Syrian army, the *Quds* force had to step in. Under the pretext of defending the Shiite shrine of Sayyid Zynab (south of Damascus), it mainly dispatched Iraqi Shiite militias to Damascus and trained new

militias in Iraq, called the “Defenders of the Sanctuary” (Modafean-e-haram), to be later sent to the Syrian fronts.<sup>24</sup>

Taking advantage of the chaos in Syria, jihadist groups --mainly Sunni or Salafist-- such as Ahrar al-Sham (Islamic Movement of Free Men of the Levant), Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), or Jabhat al-Nosra (Front al-Nosra), affiliated with al-Qaeda, stepped in and swiftly managed to oust the other belligerents. From December 2013, the Sunni jihadi militias, the Iraqi Army of the Islamic State (ISIS, also known as Daesh), based in Raaqa (Syria) launched its offensive into western Iraq and seized several of the country’s cities. Fallujah fell and they soon established their control over much of the province of Anbar. In June 2014, Daesh attacked Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq hosting two million inhabitants. On 29 June 2014, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS – or Daesh), proclaimed the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

While the Iraqi army, greatly weakened since the American invasion, had experienced several defeats in the war against Daesh since December 2013, it appeared legitimate for the country’s political and religious leaders to mobilize Shiite militias to fight Daesh. Thus, on 13 June 2014, three days after Mosul had been seized, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani launched a call for jihad against Daesh.<sup>25</sup> Tens of thousands of Shiite volunteers enlisted in the Shiite militias. They immediately coalesced and created al-Hashd al-Shaabi (People’s Mobilization Force). It was composed of several militia groups including a large part of the pro-Iranian Shiites, such as the *Badr* Organization (the most important in terms of number and resources), Kataeb Hezbollah, Asayib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Saraya al-Khorassan, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Imam Ali Brigades, Kataeb Sayyed al-Shohada. More than 100,000 combatants were enlisted and large financial resources were mobilized, undoubtedly with the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in order to create new militia groups.<sup>26</sup> The *Quds* force forthwith entered,<sup>27</sup> also through its Shiite

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<sup>24</sup> The most important, who later joined the Hashd al-Shaabi coalition, are: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (created in 2013), Saraya al-Khorassan (created in 2013), Kataeb Sayyed al-Shohada (created in 2013) Harakat al-Abdal (created in 2014), Liwa al-Tafuf (created in 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Sheikh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala’i, the representative of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Kerbala, during the second prayer sermon on Friday, 13 June 2014, said: “[...] The nature of the dangers facing Iraq and its people today requires that we defend this nation, its people and the lands of its citizens, this defense is an obligation for citizens, a collective obligation ‘wājib’ [...]. Therefore, it is the responsibility of citizens capable of carrying arms and fighting terrorists to defend their country, their people and their holy places. It is their responsibility to join the security forces”. The French version that served for this translation was authored by Robin Beaumont for *Observatoire International du fait Religieux* (bulletin n° 12 – octobre 2017). Centre de recherches internationales, “L’appel des autorités cléricales chiites en Irak à la mobilisation armée contre le terrorisme et la légitimation du fait milicien ». Edited by Alain Dieckhoff and Philippe Portier. Paris: Centre de recherches internationales (CERI), 2017. <https://spire.sciencespo.fr/notice/2441/5tuhjf0r8r9tftp84q1k967ot4>

<sup>26</sup> Paglia Morgan and Tourret Vincent, 2020, *L’Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient. Les défis de la guerre par procuration*, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> In October 2014, Ibrahim Al-Jaafari, then the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, for the sake of justifying the presence of the Iranian military in Iraq, stated: “We will not deny that we have solicited our neighbor, Iran, in the war against Daesh”. *Le Monde*, 3 décembre 2014. [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/12/03/l-iran-en-pointe-dans-la-guerre-contre-l-etat-islamique-en-irak\\_4533729\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/12/03/l-iran-en-pointe-dans-la-guerre-contre-l-etat-islamique-en-irak_4533729_3210.html)

militias, the war against Daesh, which soon came to be considered as the second Iraqi civil war. The Islamic Republic even sent weapons to Kurdish fighters to combat Daesh.<sup>28</sup>

After almost four years of war characterized by extreme violence, Hashd al-Shaabi, Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish combatants, supported by the United States-led International Coalition in Iraq and Syria (also known as the Coalition Against the Islamic State or anti-IS coalition), won the war against Daesh. On 9 December 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the end of the war.

The highly active participation of the *Quds* Force in this war powerfully strengthened the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq. Its influence was also political. The integration of militias into the country's security forces, voted by Parliament in 2016,<sup>29</sup> implied that the Iraqi state recruited nearly 122,000 fighters, many of whom were pro-Iranian Shiites. Moreover, the Hashd al-Shaabi, since the defeat of Daesh, aspired to play a political role in the country. To do so, some of their leaders resigned from their positions in order to participate in the 2018 elections. They formed a coalition called *Itilaf al-fath* (Alliance of Conquest), composed mainly of pro-Iranian groups: the *Badr* Organization, Kataeb Hezbollah, Asayib Ahl al-Haq and the brigades of Imam Ali. On the occasion of the 2018 legislative election, *al-Fath* and the Sadrists secured a majority of the ballots cast and negotiated an agreement to form a coalition government. It was during this period that the *Quds* Force proved it had the capacity and skills to play a decisive role in Iran's foreign policy but also the ability to undertake "diplomatic missions". Therefore, Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of *Quds* Force, beyond his military missions, became a "shadow minister" of Foreign Affairs whose fields of intervention was more specifically the countries of the region in order to strengthen the Axis of Resistance. According to Dr. Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a former Iraqi national security adviser, quoted by Toby Doge, Qassem Suleimani was "undoubtedly the most powerful man in Iraq, he was in Baghdad and actively involved in the process of forming the government in 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018."<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the Islamic Republic of Iran did not hesitate to highlight the defeat of Daesh which greatly bolstered its expansionist policy. For example, on 4 December 2017, the weekly *Sob'he Sadegh* (Sincere Morning), close to the Pasdaran, published an article entitled: "The new Hezbollah and the extension of the Axis of Resistance", of which I here translate a short extract:

The most important outcome of this confrontation with Daesh is the Axis of Resistance's increased authority and deterrent power. In reality, let us remind that before Daesh, the

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<sup>28</sup> In August 2014, Massoud Barzani, leader of Iraqi autonomous Kurdistan and leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), at a press conference with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Erbil, said that Tehran was "among the first countries to send weapons to Kurdish fighters". The daily Le Monde of 3 December 2014. [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/12/03/l-iran-en-pointe-dans-la-guerre-contre-l-etat-islamique-en-irak\\_4533729\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/12/03/l-iran-en-pointe-dans-la-guerre-contre-l-etat-islamique-en-irak_4533729_3210.html)

<sup>29</sup> Paglia Morgan and Tourret Vincent, 2020, *L'Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient. Les défis de la guerre par procuration*, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Doge Toby, "Iraq and Muhasasa Ta'ifia; the external imposition of sectarian politics", *op. cit.*

second most effective force of resistance was Hezbollah but in recent years, the capacity of this resistance has reinforced itself and a dozen forces have organized to join this Axis. Under more ordinary circumstances it would have taken them twenty years to organize.

This speaks volumes about the importance of the defeat of Daesh as well as of the Axis of Resistance in the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. Clearly, the regime counts on the political and social instability in neighboring countries, the war and the devastation entailed to achieve its objective. It should not be forgotten that the Islamic Republic of Iran dispatched its militias from Iraq to support Assad's regime in Syria against the insurgents in 2011. The "new Hezbollah" mentioned above are intended to spread Iran's influence from Iraq to Lebanon and Gaza via Syria, on the one hand, and from Iraq to Yemen and the Gulf countries on the other. The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, himself has also repeatedly emphasized the crucial importance of the Axis of Resistance, as his speech to the families of the «defenders of the sanctuary» who died in Iraq and Syria reminds us:<sup>31</sup>

These martyrs have several honors: the first is that they defended the shrines in Iraq and Syria and thus fell as martyrs. The second is that your martyrs went to fight an enemy, if they had not taken the arms, that enemy would have entered the country. If the enemy had not been stopped, we would have been forced to fight them here in Kermanshah, Hamadan and other provinces. In fact, these dear martyrs sacrificed their lives to defend the country, the nation, religion and the Islamic revolution.

Iraq is therefore a major strategic asset for the Islamic Republic of Iran. It has succeeded in establishing itself as the key player in maintaining Iraq's stability or, conversely, its instability, according to the evolution of its interests.

### **Islamic Republic of Iran's Populationist Policy at the Service of its Pan-Shia Policy.**

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been steadfast in undertaking various initiatives to implement its pro-Shia policy. I argue that one of them is its new population policy, which aims to increase the Iranian population to reach 150 million inhabitants in the near future. Originally brought forward by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2010, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, endorsed the idea and made it a strategic project that a decree sanctioned in May 2014. This project, which I characterize as populationist, is labeled "General Policies on Population" and unfurls along fourteen articles. It aims to bolster population growth by all possible means.<sup>32</sup> However, the articles of the decree were drawn up in ambiguous terms leading to potential variable

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<sup>31</sup> Speech delivered on 25 January 2016. Source: Supreme Leader Khamenei's official website, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/print-content?id=32186>

<sup>32</sup> Marie Ladier-Fouladi, « The Islamic Republic of Iran's New Population Policy and Recent Changes in Fertility », *Iranian Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00210862.2021.1884970.

interpretations, depending on the context, with regards to the main aim of the theocratic regime of Tehran.

In particular, six articles reveal the ideological component of the recommendations: “promoting and institutionalizing the Islamic and Iranian way of life to counter aspects of Western lifestyles”; “reinforcing the components of the (Iranian, Islamic, and revolutionary) national identity”; “creating new settlement zones, particularly in the islands along the coast of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman”; “managing emigration and immigration along with general population policies”; “promoting consensus and social integration across the country, particularly in border zones and among Iranian expatriates”; and “encouraging Iranian expatriates to return and invest in the country and thereby benefit from their capabilities and skills.”<sup>33</sup>

These recommendations translate overarching political objectives rather than ambitions concerning the population *stricto sensu*. Indeed, given that the prominent family model in Iran is late marriage and have a small nuclear family, the regime’s policymakers are fully aware that the prospect of reaching a target population of 150 million in the near future is quite utopian. This, to my mind, is why the decree never explicitly mentions this target, while let read between the lines idea of peopling the entire territory by other means than merely raising the Iranian fertility rate. It is additionally a matter of encouraging Iranian expatriates, estimated by the Iranian authorities to number between 1 and 2 million, to return to the country and invest their capital there, and to encourage an unprecedented immigration policy. To this end, the Islamic Republic might even envisage including some two million Afghans living in Iran as long-term refugees and/or as “undocumented” migrants into the country’s population.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, since 2014 Afghans enlisted by *Pasdaran*<sup>35</sup> as militiamen to fight alongside the Syrian army have been granted Iranian nationality for themselves and their family. This policy of taking in massive numbers of immigrants may also concern Shiite militiamen recruited by the *Pasdaran* in Afghanistan and in Pakistan who battle alongside the same *Pasdaran* in Syria, or the pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiites. Integrating these Shiite populations, whom the Islamic Republic can easily grant Iranian nationality, is in line with what the decree recommended regarding the management of immigration and emigration and social integration, particularly in border zones. Given that the national identity which, according to the Supreme Leader, unfolds along three

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<sup>33</sup> Source: Supreme Leader Khamenei’s official website <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/>, 20 May 2014.

<sup>34</sup> In 2016, there were 1,242,332 Afghans according to the general population census (Statistics Center of Iran). These were Afghans recognized as refugees or documented migrants. But according to the Interior Ministry’s Bureau for Foreigners and Immigrants, nearly 2 million Afghans were living illegally in Iran in 2011. This latter figure corresponds to estimates by the Afghan Ministry of Emigration of the number of Afghans living in Iran in 2019: “at least 2,340,000 Afghans live in Iran either with or without official documents”. Sources: 2016 General census of the population and habitat, Statistics Center of Iran; website of the Iranian Interior Ministry <http://bafia.moi.ir/>, August 29, 2011; interview with the Afghan minister of immigration by the Turkish Anadolu information agency <https://www.aa.com.tr/fa>, February, 20 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Marie Ladier-Fouladi, *La République islamique d’Iran vue de l’intérieur*, *op.cit.* and Fauret Simon, “Le Corps des Gardiens de la révolution islamique iranienne”, *Les Clés du Moyen-Orient*, <https://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Le-Corps-des-Gardiens-de-la.html>, article placed online on June 19, 2015.

components: Iranian, Islamic and Revolutionary, these Shiite militias may very easily become full-fledged Iranian citizens.

Indeed, these Shiites may prove of interest if they settled in border provinces where the local Sunni, non-Persian speaking populations straddling the border are often in open conflict with the central state. It would thus be possible to transform the political and cultural identity of certain regions by populating these Shiites loyal to the values of *velayat-e faqhi* and defined as fully partaking in the renewed national identity.

These reasons, ingrained in ideology, expose the populationist dimension of the Islamic Republic of Iran's new population policy seeking to increase the number of people loyal to the Islamic Republic's values, irrespective of economic and demographic requirements and constraints, and, obviously, of Iranians' social expectations.

This populationist policy is, I believe, in line with the pan-Shia project of the Islamic Republic of Iran. By creating zones of influence populated by Shiites, it is seeking to establish, under its authority, a Shiite demographic power in the region. It is against this backdrop that we must analyze the arrival, in March 2019, of thousands of Shiite militias: Iraqi Hachd al-Chaabi, Afghan Fatemiyoun, Pakistan's Zaynabioun and Yemeni Huthis in various disaster areas in Iran to help flood victims. By organizing these multiple convoys, the *Quds* Force, under the command of Qassem Soleimani, sought to exploit the catastrophic and deadly floods for its own interests in view of creating solidarity between the victims and Shiite militias. Such links in the medium and long terms perfectly fit in the populationist policy of the regime. Again, along a process previously tested, the Islamic Republic is taking advantage of a crisis to achieve its goal.

## Conclusion

After Saddam Hussein's demise in 2003, the Islamic Republic of Iran has endeavored to take control of Iraq. The vacuum of power offered a unique opportunity it could not miss. Since then, seizing each and every coming opportunity, the regime, through the *Quds* Force, has sought to impose itself in Iraq. It was the war against Daesh and its defeat in 2017 that has enabled the theocratic regime of Tehran to establish itself as an inescapable player in the political trajectory of Iraq as well as to strengthen its influence in the country.

Nevertheless, three events subsequently weakened the hegemonic position of Tehran. In a chronological order:

1. The protests (2019-2021), on which occasion the demonstrators chanted, among other mottos, "No to Iran", "Iran out";
2. The deaths of Qassem Soleimani and Abou Mehdi al-Mouhandis, killed by an American airstrike opposite Baghdad airport, on 3 January 2020;

3. The electoral debacle of the pro-Iranian political parties in the early parliamentary election of October 2021.

Demonstrators composed especially of youths, while blaming the corruption of politicians, demanded the reform of the political system and the organization of anticipated parliamentary election.<sup>36</sup> Their aspiration echoed what “came through a series of mass demonstrations starting in 2009”<sup>37</sup>: by challenging the system based on sectarian quotas (Muhassa) according to ethnic and religious affiliation, a movement that seeks to develop an alternative national and secular model. Mass demonstrations throughout Iraq led to overthrowing the government. It was in response to these protests that a snap election was held in October 2021. Moqtada al-Sadr’s party came out first in the polls and obtained 73 seats in parliament. Having grasped the aspirations of Iraqi youth, he seemed to plan to break away from the system of denominational and ethnic distribution of posts, as well as with the tradition that all Shiite forces should partake a “consensus government”. Clearly, he was targeting the Islamic Republic of Iran and in particular the *Quds* force which, by relying on the Muhassa system, had until then secured that their allies were in power so that they could continue meddling in the internal affairs of Iraq.

Unquestionably, these events disrupted the Islamic Republic’s plan for Iraq. But, thanks to its 20-year-long presence in Iraq, it still has many levers to respond to these challenges. Pro-Iranian militia groups participated in the extremely fierce repression of the demonstrators resulting in hundreds of deaths and leaving thousands injured. Moreover, they did not shy away from using intimidation to neutralize the demonstrators. The scale of this protest movement against the country’s disastrous economic and political situation forced the government to anticipate the parliamentary election in October 2021. The outcome was undoubtedly a setback for Tehran’s protégés. But almost seven months after the polls, the new assembly, has so far failed to elect the President of the Republic.<sup>38</sup> As a result, on 12 June 2022, Moqtada al-Sadr ordered its 73 representatives to resign. The task of forming a government now falls to its rivals, the pro-Iranian Shiite parties united in a coalition.

Some believe that Soleimani’s demise may be the cause of the weakening of Iran’s hegemonic position in Iraq. Even though one should not neglect his role, it is fundamental to point out that these events occurred at a time when the American sanctions against Iran had already caused serious harm, in particular with regard to its resources, which has definitely crippled the Iranian economy. For the lack of the necessary financial resources, the clout of the Iranian regime had already started to decrease. In fact, this situation quickly had an impact on all of the *Quds* force’s intervention fields.

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<sup>36</sup> Dodge Toby and Mansour Renad, “Sectarianization and Desectarianization the Struggle for Iraq’s Political Field”, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59

<sup>38</sup> According to the rules, MPs must elect the President of the Republic. The latter will then have to appoint a Prime minister, chosen by the largest coalition. Once appointed, the Prime minister has thirty days to form a government.

At any rate, Esmail Qa'ani, Soleimani's successor, seems to have moved on to reviewing its strategy in the light of the new social and political context in Iraq. One thing is certain: given Iraq's geostrategic importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran, it will seek to increase the number of its trump cards to maintain and preserve its influence in this country.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has always taken advantage of crises or conflicts to consolidate or reconstitute itself. While many observers rightly believe that negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program are at a standstill and that this impasse is likely to undermine Iran's influence in the region, a new opportunity may well have materialized for the Islamic Republic of Iran: Russia's war in Ukraine. There is no doubt that the West's unprecedented sanctions aimed at isolating Russia and the potential embargo on its oil and gas, will cause serious economic problems, in particular, for Europeans who depend heavily on Moscow's energy supply. In order to find alternative oil and gas suppliers and, especially, to control rising energy prices, Western countries may re-turn to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Should it be the case, the agreement on the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program might well be quickly concluded and consequently the American sanctions on the sale of Iranian oil and gas would be lifted. This would allow the Islamic Republic of Iran to mobilize significant resources to tackle its many domestic economic difficulties as well as to finance its proxies in the region. This new, unexpected opportunity would allow Tehran's regime not only consolidate its power within the country but also to pursue its pan-Shia policy in Iraq as well as in other countries in the region.

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[https://books.google.fr/books/about?id=cdaTEAAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.fr/books/about?id=cdaTEAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)

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