

US Attempt to Fuel Iraq-Iran Rift Backfires

Baghdad reacts violently to US demand that "Iranian militias" should evacuate the country

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Featured image: Iraqi militias driving on Kirkuk

*The US project to create rift between Iraq and Iran backfired just a couple of days of its launch from Riyadh on October 22 by the US **Secretary of State Rex Tillerson**.*

Washington effectively sought out Saudi Arabia to project itself as counterweight to Iran in the Iraqi theatre, predicated on the presumption that Riyadh's offer to extend funding to 'rebuild' post-ISIS Iraq will be found irresistible by Baghdad.

Washington fancied that Iraqi **Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi** is looking for ways to push back at Tehran, as his dependency on Iran's military support is diminishing with the defeat of ISIS.

Tillerson travelled to Riyadh in the weekend to be present as a special guest at the first inaugural meeting of the so-called [Saudi Arabia-Iraq Coordination Council](#). Things seemed to go well and Tillerson's remarks to the media exuded optimism.

At a press conference in Riyadh, he said that the Saudi largesse will "strengthen Iraq as an independent and whole country... (and) this will be in some ways counter some of the unproductive influences of Iran inside of Iraq." Tillerson then [came to the point](#):

"Certainly, Iranian militias that are in Iraq, now that the fight against Daesh and ISIS is coming to a close, **those militias need to go home.**

Any foreign fighters in Iraq need to go home and allow the Iraqi people to regain control of areas that had been overtaken by ISIS and Daesh that have now been liberated, allow the Iraqi people to rebuild their lives with the help of their neighbors.

And I think this agreement that has been put in place between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iraq is a crucial element to assisting the Iraqi people to do that. ([Transcript](#))

The reference was to the Shi'ite militia groups funded, trained and deployed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, which literally bore the brunt of the fight against the ISIS in the recent years. Washington is particularly incensed over the [lead role by the Shi'ite](#)

[paramilitary groups in seizing Kirkuk](#) recently from the Kurdish Peshmerga who are US' allies. (See my blog [Kirkuk bells also toll for US strategy in Syria.](#))

Evidently, Tillerson crossed the red line. The point is, these Shi'ite groups, collectively known as Popular Mobilisation Forces and several tens of thousands strong, are probably going to be designated as part of the Iraqi armed forces. **Abadi's office in Baghdad came out in no time with a stinging rebuke** – “No party has the right to interfere in Iraqi matters” – and called the Shi'ite paramilitary groups as “patriots.”

The next day, when Tillerson showed up in Baghdad for a meeting with Abadi, the latter was fairly explicit. Abadi said the Popular Mobilisation Forces form “part of the Iraqi institutions” and they will be the “[hope of country and the region.](#)”

Later, in an interview with the American press, **Abadi retorted:**

“We would like to work with you (US)... But please don't bring your trouble inside Iraq. You can sort it anywhere else.”

Abadi then began suggesting a US troop withdrawal from Iraq. He said that US air power won't be needed anymore and Iraqi requirement will be henceforth on intelligence sharing and help to train Iraqi forces. The way things are shaping up between Washington and Tehran, continued US military presence in Iraq may become problematic in a near future.



Iraqi militias of Kata'ib Hezbollah

Meanwhile, having gambled on the independence referendum only to lose oil-rich Kirkuk, Iraqi [Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani is suing](#) for ceasefire and talks with Baghdad. **The US is urging Abadi to respond to Barzani's overture and engage with him in discussions.**

The Trump administration has secured strong Congressional support for its demands on Abadi. Signaling the seriousness of the demands, On Wednesday, **House Speaker Paul Ryan**, House Intelligence Committee Chairman **Devin Nunes**, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman **Ed Royce**, and House Armed Services Committee Chairman **Mac Thornberry** issued the following **statement to pressure Baghdad:**

Ongoing clashes between forces aligned with the Iraqi government and Kurdistan Regional Government are undermining hard-fought gains in the fight against ISIS, and threatening to plunge Iraq into a new wave of sectarian violence. The bloodshed must stop immediately. We support a united Iraq under the federal government in Baghdad, and we support the Kurdistan Regional Government.

To that end, we welcome today's reports that the Kurds are offering to suspend results of their recent referendum in return for a ceasefire and negotiations with the central government. **Baghdad should accept this offer and enter into meaningful discussions that address long-term Kurdish concerns** about autonomy, share of the national budget, and oil revenues.

Meanwhile, **it is critical that the Iraqi government heed Secretary Tillerson's concern about the role and activities of Iranian-backed Shia militias.** We are very concerned about Iranian involvement in recent operations. **These forces** have been responsible for horrible abuses, including the deaths of Americans. They **have no place in** a peaceful, united, and stable **Iraq.**

But Abadi is parrying. He visited Ankara on Wednesday to consult **President Recep Erdogan.** ([Rudaw](#)) The latest reports suggest that the Iraqi forces with the support of the Shi'ite forces might go for the jugular veins of the Iraqi Kurds.

Baghdad will want to drive home the advantage that the Kurds are not cohesive and are split 3-way with the PUK (which was led by late Talabani) inclined to cooperate with Baghdad and Tehran, thereby isolating Barzani who is reduced now increasingly as a US-Israeli proxy. (Turkey has also become hostile toward Barzani following his push for the Kurdish independence referendum.)

The Russian news agency Sputnik reported today as 'breaking news' that Iraqi troops and Shi'ite militias had been pulling heavy artillery and tanks close to Peshmerga positions near Zummar and shelling their positions. ([Sputnik](#)) If a flare-up ensues in coming days, US will be in a tight spot, apart from the breakdown of ties between Washington and Baghdad.



Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah militia with the US-supplied Abrams tank

The US' problem, quintessentially, is that its intentions are suspect in all three key regional capitals confronting the Kurdish question – Ankara, Baghdad, Tehran. At a recent meeting with US ambassador **Douglas Sliman**, Iraqi **Vice-President Nouri al-Maliki** said with brutal frankness,

“We will not allow the creation of a second Israel in northern Iraq.”

Last week's events underscore three things. **One, the US does not intend to end its military presence in Iraq (and Syria),** although the pretext of the war against the ISIS is no longer there. **Two, US is planning to turn Iraq into a major theatre of confrontation with Iran.**

A US control of Iraq puts it in a position to pile pressure on Iran from different directions — interfering with Iranian supply routes to Syria and Lebanon; playing itself back to regain a role in the Syrian settlement; having a say in Iraq's rising oil production and staging covert cross-border operations to destabilize the Iranian regime. Indeed, with the open-ended US military presence already in place in Afghanistan, the intention is to squash with a similar western neighbor under American tutelage.

Three, fundamentally, it becomes all too obvious that the US-Saudi alliance in regional politics is very much alive and kicking, and any reports to the contrary are greatly exaggerated. The US' return to the centre stage in Iraq to challenge Iran's regional influence will give much verve to the US' alliance with Saudi Arabia.

Interestingly, the [Saudi establishment daily Asharq Al-Awsat reported](#) last week that the

Pentagon is planning to boost deployments to the Middle East specifically to counter Iran. The report cited **General Joseph Votel**, commander of the US Central Command, as saying,

“The United States wants to help the Arab countries deal with Iranian threats. The Pentagon is working to achieve that desire and ensure its effective implementation. That includes the establishment of US military battalions sent as missions to the region and be designed specifically to provide advice and assistance.”

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