

# The Iran Cables Story

By The Intercept & NYT

## The Spy Complex

In mid-October, with unrest swirling in Baghdad, a familiar visitor slipped quietly into the Iraqi capital. The city had been under siege for weeks, as protesters marched in the streets, demanding an end to corruption and calling for the ouster of the prime minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi. In particular, they denounced the outsize influence of their neighbor Iran in Iraqi politics, burning Iranian flags and attacking an Iranian consulate.

The visitor was there to restore order, but his presence highlighted the protesters' biggest grievance: He was Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, head of Iran's powerful Quds Force, and he had come to persuade an ally in the Iraqi Parliament to help the prime minister hold on to his job.

It was not the first time Suleimani had been dispatched to Baghdad to do damage control. Tehran's efforts to prop up Abdul-Mahdi are part of its long campaign to maintain Iraq as a pliable client state.

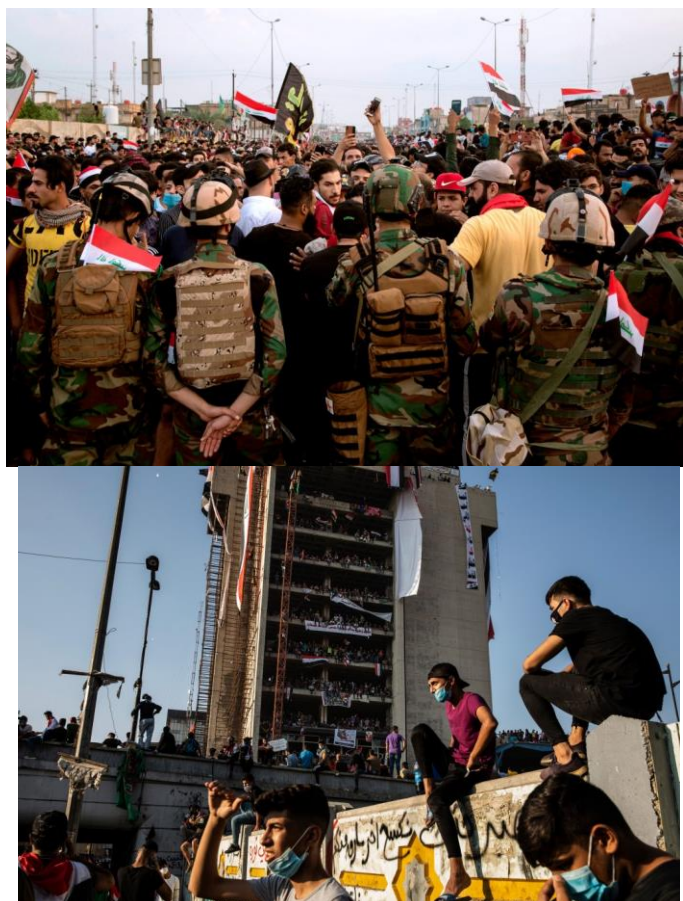


**Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, in Tehran in March 2015.**  
Photo: SIPA via AP

Now leaked Iranian documents offer a detailed portrait of just how aggressively Tehran has worked to embed itself into Iraqi affairs, and of the unique role of Suleimani. The documents are contained in an archive of secret Iranian intelligence cables obtained by The Intercept and shared with the New York Times for this article, which is being published simultaneously by both news organizations.

The unprecedented leak exposes Tehran's vast influence in Iraq, detailing years of painstaking work by Iranian spies to co-opt the country's leaders, pay Iraqi agents working for the Americans to switch sides, and infiltrate every aspect of Iraq's political, economic, and religious life.

Many of the cables describe real-life espionage capers that feel torn from the pages of a spy thriller. Meetings are arranged in dark alleyways and shopping malls or under the cover of a hunting excursion or a birthday party. Informants lurk at the Baghdad airport, snapping pictures of American soldiers and keeping tabs on coalition military flights. Agents drive meandering routes to meetings to evade surveillance. Sources are plied with gifts of pistachios, cologne, and saffron. Iraqi officials, if necessary, are offered bribes. The archive even contains expense reports from intelligence ministry officers in Iraq, including one totaling 87.5 euros spent on gifts for a Kurdish commander.



**Left/Top: Iraqi soldiers surround anti-government protesters outside the local government headquarters in Basra, Iraq, on Oct. 28, 2019. Right/Bottom: Thousands flood Tahrir Square in Baghdad for an anti-government protest on Nov. 1, 2019. Photos: AFP via Getty Images; Ivor Prickett/The New York Times via Redux**

According to one of the leaked Iranian intelligence cables, Abdul-Mahdi, who in exile worked closely with Iran while Saddam Hussein was in power in Iraq, had a “special relationship with the IRI” — the Islamic Republic of Iran — when he was Iraq’s oil minister in 2014. The exact nature of that relationship is not detailed in the cable, and, as one former senior U.S. official cautioned, a “special relationship could mean a lot of things — it doesn’t mean he is an agent of the Iranian government.” But no Iraqi politician can become prime minister without Iran’s blessing, and Abdul-Mahdi, when he secured the premiership in 2018, was seen as a compromise candidate acceptable to both Iran and the United States.

The leaked cables offer an extraordinary glimpse inside the secretive Iranian regime. They also detail the extent to which Iraq has fallen under Iranian influence since the American invasion in 2003, which transformed Iraq into a gateway for Iranian power, connecting the Islamic Republic's geography of dominance from the shores of the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.

The trove of leaked Iranian intelligence reports largely confirms what was already known about Iran's firm grip on Iraqi politics. But the reports reveal far more than was previously understood about the extent to which Iran and the United States have used Iraq as a staging area for their spy games. They also shed new light on the complex internal politics of the Iranian government, where competing factions are grappling with many of the same challenges faced by American occupying forces as they struggled to stabilize Iraq after the United States invasion.

And the documents show how Iran, at nearly every turn, has outmaneuvered the United States in the contest for influence.



**Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, left, meets with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani during a visit to Tehran, Iran, on July 22, 2019. Photo: Iranian Presidency/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images**

The archive is made up of hundreds of reports and cables written mainly in 2014 and 2015 by officers of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, or MOIS, who were serving in the field in Iraq. The intelligence ministry, Iran's version of the CIA, has a reputation as an analytical and professional agency, but it is overshadowed and often overruled by its more ideological counterpart, the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which was formally established as an independent entity in 2009 at the order of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, which Iran considers crucial to its national security, the Revolutionary Guards — and in particular its elite Quds Force, led by Suleimani — determine Iran's policies. Ambassadors to those countries are appointed from the senior ranks of the Guards, not the foreign ministry, which oversees the intelligence ministry, according to several advisers to current and past Iranian administrations. Officers from the intelligence ministry and from the Revolutionary Guards in Iraq worked parallel to one another, said these

sources. They reported their findings back to their respective headquarters in Tehran, which in turn organized them into reports for the Supreme Council of National Security.

Cultivating Iraqi officials was a key part of their job, and it was made easier by the alliances many Iraqi leaders forged with Iran when they belonged to opposition groups fighting Saddam. Many of Iraq's foremost political, military, and security officials have had secret relationships with Tehran, according to the documents. The same 2014 cable that described Abdul-Mahdi's "special relationship" also named several other key members of the cabinet of former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as having close ties with Iran.

A political analyst and adviser on Iraq to Iran's government, Gheis Ghoreishi, confirmed that Iran has focused on cultivating high-level officials in Iraq. "We have a good number of allies among Iraqi leaders who we can trust with our eyes closed," he said.

Three Iranian officials were asked to comment for this article, in queries that described the existence of the leaked cables and reports. Alireza Miryusefi, a spokesperson for Iran's United Nations mission, said he was away until later this month. Majid Takht-Ravanchi, Iran's U.N. ambassador, did not respond to a written request that was hand-delivered to his official residence. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif did not respond to an emailed request.

When reached by telephone, Hassan Danaiefar, Iran's ambassador to Iraq from 2010 to 2017 and a former deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards' naval forces, declined to directly address the existence of the cables or their release, but he did suggest that Iran had the upper hand in information gathering in Iraq. "Yes, we have a lot of information from Iraq on multiple issues, especially about what America was doing there," he said. "There is a wide gap between the reality and perception of U.S. actions in Iraq. I have many stories to tell." He declined to elaborate.

The current objective is for this person to provide intelligence insights into the U.S. government's plans in Iraq, whether it is for dealing with ISIS or any other covert operations. The ultimate goal is for this person to be an informant, either in the U.S. State Department or with any Iraqi Sunni or Kurdish leaders who are willing to cooperate.

هدف بالفعل که ایشان می تواند همکاری نماید در راستای اشراف اطلاعاتی از روابط و برنامه های دولت ایالات متحده آمریکا در عراق و بر خورد با موضوع داعش و هر گونه برنامه پنهان این کشور در این موضوع و در هدف بالقوه ایشان می تواند نشانگر خوبی در وزارت خارجه آمریکا و یا در بین افراد مستعد همکاری سران اهل سنت و اکراد عراق باشد.

According to the reports, after the American troop withdrawal in 2011, Iran moved quickly to add former CIA informants to its payroll. One undated section of an intelligence ministry cable shows that Iran began the process of recruiting a spy inside the State Department. It is unclear what came of the recruitment



effort, but according to the files, Iran had started meeting with the source, and offered to reward the potential asset with a salary, gold coins, and other gifts. The State Department official is not named in the cable, but the person is described as someone who would be able to provide “intelligence insights into the U.S. government’s plans in Iraq, whether it is for dealing with ISIS or any other covert operations.”

“The subject’s incentive in collaborating will be financial,” the report said.

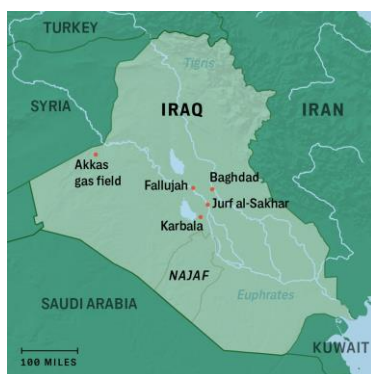
The State Department declined to comment on the matter.

In interviews, Iranian officials acknowledged that Iran viewed surveillance of American activity in Iraq after the United States invasion as critical to its survival and national security. When American forces toppled Saddam, Iran swiftly moved some of its best officers from both the intelligence ministry and from the Intelligence Organization of the Revolutionary Guards to Iraq, according to the Iranian government advisers and a person affiliated with the Guards. President George W. Bush had declared Iran to be part of an “axis of evil,” and Iranian leaders believed that Tehran would be next on Washington’s list of regime-change capitals after Kabul and Baghdad.

## 700 Pages of Documents

Around the world, governments have had to contend with the occasional leak of secret communiqués or personal emails as a fact of modern life. Not so in Iran, where information is tightly controlled and the security services are widely feared. The roughly 700 pages of leaked reports were sent anonymously to The Intercept, which translated them from Persian to English and shared them with the Times. The Intercept and the Times verified the authenticity of the documents but do not know who leaked them. The Intercept communicated over encrypted channels with the source, who declined to meet with a reporter. In these anonymous messages, the source said that they wanted to “let the world know what Iran is doing in my country Iraq.”

Like the internal communications of any spy service, some of the reports contain raw intelligence whose accuracy is questionable, while others appear to represent the views of intelligence officers and sources with their own agendas.



**Map: The New York Times and The Intercept**

Some of the cables show bumbling and comical ineptitude, like one that describes the Iranian spies who broke into a German cultural institute in Iraq only to find they had the wrong codes and could not unlock the safes. Other officers were browbeaten by their superiors in Tehran for laziness, and for sending back to headquarters reports that relied only on news accounts.

But by and large, the intelligence ministry operatives portrayed in the documents appear patient, professional, and pragmatic. Their main tasks are to keep Iraq from falling apart; from breeding Sunni militants on the Iranian border; from descending into sectarian warfare that might make Shia Muslims the targets of violence; and from spinning off an independent Kurdistan that would threaten regional stability and Iranian territorial integrity. The Revolutionary Guards and Suleimani have also worked to eradicate the Islamic State, but with a greater focus on maintaining Iraq as a client state of Iran and making sure that political factions loyal to Tehran remain in power.

This portrait is all the more striking at a time of heightened tensions between the United States and Iran. Since 2018, when President Donald Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions, the White House has rushed ships to the Persian Gulf and reviewed military plans for war with Iran. In October, the Trump administration promised to send American troops to Saudi Arabia following attacks on oil facilities there for which Iran was widely blamed.



**A Shia Muslim pilgrim walks in front of posters of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, right, and spiritual leader of the Shia community, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, during a procession from the holy Iraqi city of Najaf to the central shrine city of Karbala on Oct. 12, 2019. Photo: Haidar Hamdani/AFP via Getty Images**

## **Tell Them We Are at Your Service**

With a shared faith and tribal affiliations that span a porous border, Iran has long been a major presence in southern Iraq. It has opened religious offices in Iraq's holy cities and posted banners of Iran's revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, on its streets. It supports some of the most powerful political parties in the south, dispatches Iranian students to study in Iraqi seminaries, and sends Iranian construction workers to build Iraqi hotels and refurbish Iraqi shrines.

But while Iran may have bested the United States in the contest for influence in Baghdad, it has struggled to win popular support in the Iraqi south. Now, as the last six weeks of protests make clear, it is facing unexpectedly strong pushback. Across the south, Iranian-backed Iraqi political parties are seeing their headquarters burned and their leading operatives assassinated, an indication that Iran may have underestimated the Iraqi desire for independence not just from the United States, but also from its neighbor.

In a sense, the leaked Iranian cables provide a final accounting of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The notion that the Americans handed control of Iraq to Iran when they invaded now enjoys broad support, even within the U.S. military. A [recent two-volume history](#) of the Iraq War, published by the U.S. Army, details the campaign's many missteps and its "staggering cost" in lives and money. Nearly 4,500 American troops were killed, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died, and American taxpayers spent up to \$2 trillion on the war. The study, which totals hundreds of pages and draws on declassified documents, concludes: "An emboldened and expansionist Iran appears to be the only victor."

Iran's rise as a power player in Iraq was in many ways a direct consequence of Washington's lack of any post-invasion plan. The early years following the fall of Saddam were chaotic, both in terms of security and in the lack of basic services like water and electricity. To most observers on the ground, it appeared as if the United States was shaping policy on the go, and in the dark.



**High-ranking officers of ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's regime take an oath after signing a statement declaring that they have deserted Saddam's Baath Party during a ceremony in Mosul on Jan. 26, 2004. Photo: Marwan Naamani/AFP via Getty Images**

Among the most disastrous American policies were the decisions to dismantle Iraq's armed forces and to purge from government service or the new armed forces any Iraqi who had been a member of Saddam's ruling Baath Party. This process, known as de-Baathification, automatically marginalized most Sunni men. Unemployed and resentful, they formed a violent insurgency targeting Americans and Shias seen as U.S. allies.

As sectarian warfare between Sunnis and Shias raged, the Shia population looked to Iran as a protector. When ISIS gained control of territory and cities, the Shias' vulnerability and the failure of the United States to protect them

fueled efforts by the Revolutionary Guards and Suleimani to recruit and mobilize Shia militias loyal to Iran.

According to the intelligence ministry documents, Iran has continued to take advantage of the opportunities the United States has afforded it in Iraq. Iran, for example, reaped an intelligence windfall of American secrets as the U.S. presence began to recede after its 2011 troop withdrawal. The CIA had tossed many of its longtime secret agents out on the street, leaving them jobless and destitute in a country still shattered from the invasion — and fearful that they could be killed for their links with the United States, possibly by Iran. Short of money, many began to offer their services to Tehran. And they were happy to tell the Iranians everything they knew about CIA operations in Iraq.

In November 2014, one of them, an Iraqi who had spied for the CIA, broke and terrified that his ties to the Americans would cost him his life, switched sides. The CIA, according to the cable, had known the man by a nickname: “Donnie Brasco.” His Iranian handler would call him, simply, “Source 134992.”

Turning to Iran for protection, he said that everything he knew about American intelligence gathering in Iraq was for sale: the locations of CIA safe houses; the names of hotels where CIA operatives met with agents; details of his weapons and surveillance training; the names of other Iraqis working as spies for the Americans.

Source 134992 told the Iranian operatives that he had worked for the agency for 18 months starting in 2008, on a program targeting Al Qaeda. He said he had been paid well for his work — \$3,000 per month, plus a one-time bonus of \$20,000 and a car.

DATE: 2014-11-16

7 - The above mentioned's pseudonym was Donnie Brasco and he received a monthly salary of \$3,000. After their contract of a year and half ended, in addition to a meeting being held for him and plaque of appreciation being presented for him, he was awarded \$20,000 and a car.

7 - اسم مستعار نامبرده دانی براسکو بوده و ماهانه سه هزار دلار حقوق دریافت و بعد از اینکه دوره قرار داد یک سال و نیم آنها خاتمه یافته است، ضمن برگزار نشست و ارایه لوح تقدیر، مبلغ بیست هزار دلار و یک خودرو به عنوان پاداش به نامبرده داده شده است

But swearing on the Quran, he promised that his days of spying for the United States were over, and agreed to write a full report for the Iranians on everything he knew from his time with the CIA.

“I will turn over to you all the documents and videos that I have from my training course,” the Iraqi man told his Iranian handler, according to a 2014 Iranian intelligence report. “And pictures and identifying features of my fellow trainees and my subordinates.”



The CIA declined to comment.



**Shia Muslim pilgrims, mostly from Iran, walk near the shrine of Imam Abbas on Sept. 11, 2016, the second day of hajj, in Karbala, Iraq. After being barred from Mecca amid a spat between Tehran and Saudi Arabia, masses of Iranian Shia converged on Karbala for an alternative pilgrimage. Photo: Haidar Hamdani/AFP via Getty Images**

Iranian spies, Iraqi officials say, are everywhere in the south, and the region has long been a beehive of espionage. It was there, in Karbala in late 2014, that an Iraqi military intelligence officer, down from Baghdad, met with an Iranian intelligence official and offered to spy for Iran — and to tell the Iranians whatever he could about American activities in Iraq.

“Iran is my second country and I love it,” the Iraqi official told the Iranian officer, according to one of the cables. In a meeting that lasted more than three hours, the Iraqi told of his devotion to the Iranian system of government, in which clerics rule directly, and his admiration for Iranian movies.

He said he had come with a message from his boss in Baghdad, Lt. Gen. Hatem al-Maksusi, then commander of military intelligence in the Iraqi Ministry of Defense: “Tell them we are at your service. Whatever you need is at their disposal. We are Shia and have a common enemy.”

DATE: 2014-01-26

He stated, “Today, when I came to Karbala to meet you, I told one of my friends, Lt. Gen. Hatem al-Maksusi, commander of military intelligence in the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, that I was going to the consulate in Karbala to meet one of the brothers. Encouraging me, he said, “Greet the brothers and tell them that we are at your service. Whatever you need is at their disposal. We are Shia and have a common enemy. We are now in a conflict with ISIS and we must cooperate to eliminate it.” [ ] was ordered to give the Iranian brothers whatever they needed. So [ ] said, “All of the Iraqi Army's intelligence – consider it yours. Tell me whatever you need and I will guarantee it for you.”

اطلاعات و اخباری که نامبرده ارائه داد:

وی اعلام کرد امروز که برای ملاقات با شما به کربلا آمده ام با سپهبد حاتم المخصوصی از دوستانم می باشد و فرمانده استخبارات نظامی در وزارت دفاع عراق است گفته ام که برای ملاقات با یکی از برادران به کنسولگری کربلا می روم. ایشان ضمن تشویق من گفت: به برادران سلام بفرستید و بگوئید ما در خدمت شما هستیم هر چه که نیاز دارید اعلام کنید. ما شیعه هستیم و دشمن مشترکی داریم هم اکنون با داعش درگیریم و برای نابودی آن باید با هم همکاری کنیم. به [ ] ماموریت داده است برادران ایرانی هر چه که نیاز دارند در اختیارشان بگذار. بر این اساس [ ] گفت تمام استخبارات ارتش عراق را مربوط به خود بدانید و هر چه نیاز دارید به من بگوئید برای شما تامین میکنم.

Maksusi's messenger continued, "All of the Iraqi Army's intelligence — consider it yours." He told the Iranian intelligence officer about secret targeting software the United States had provided to the Iraqis, and offered to turn it over to the Iranians. "If you have a new laptop, give it to me so I can upload the program onto it," he said. And there was more, he said. The United States had also given Iraq a highly sensitive system for eavesdropping on mobile phones, which was run out of the prime minister's office and the headquarters of Iraqi military intelligence. "I will put at your disposal whatever intelligence about it you want," he said.

In an interview, Maksusi disputed saying the things attributed to him in the cables and denied ever working for Iran. He praised Iran for its help in the fight against ISIS, but said he had also maintained a close relationship with the United States. "I worked for Iraq and did not work for any other state," he said. "I was not the intelligence director for the Shias, but I was intelligence director for all of Iraq." When asked about the cable, a former American official said the United States had become aware of the Iraqi military intelligence officer's ties to Iran and had limited his access to sensitive information.

### **The Americans' Candidate**

By late 2014, the United States was once again pouring weapons and soldiers into Iraq as it began battling the Islamic State. Iran, too, had an interest in defeating the militants. As ISIS took control of the west and the north, young Iraqi men traveled across the deserts and marshes of the south by the busload, heading to Iran for military training. Some within the American and Iranian governments believed that the two rivals should coordinate their efforts against a common enemy. But Iran, as the leaked cables make clear, also viewed the increased American presence as a threat and a "cover" to gather intelligence about Iran.

"What is happening in the sky over Iraq shows the massive level of activity of the coalition," one Iranian officer wrote. "The danger for the Islamic Republic of Iran's interests represented by their activity must be taken seriously."

The rise of ISIS was at the same time driving a wedge between the Obama administration and a large swath of the Iraqi political class. Barack Obama had pushed for the ouster of Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al-Maliki as a condition for renewed American military support. He believed that Maliki's draconian policies and crackdowns on Iraqi Sunnis had helped lead to the rise of the militants.





**Left/Top: Iraqis carry portraits of Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al-Maliki as they gather in support of him at Firdos Square in Baghdad, on Aug. 13, 2014. Right/Bottom: U.S. President Barack Obama, right, meets with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi during the 69th U.N. General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2014, in New York City. Photos: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images; Allan Tannenbaum/Getty Images**

Maliki, who had lived in exile in Iran in the 1980s, was a favorite of Tehran's. His replacement, the British-educated Haider al-Abadi, was seen as more friendly to the West and less sectarian.

Facing the uncertainty of a new prime minister, Hassan Danaiefar, then Iran's ambassador, called a secret meeting of senior staffers at the Iranian Embassy, a hulking, fortified structure just outside Baghdad's Green Zone. As the meeting progressed, it became clear that the Iranians had little cause to worry about the new Iraqi government. Abadi was dismissed as "a British man," and "the Americans' candidate," but the Iranians believed that they had plenty of other ministers in their pocket.

One by one, Danaiefar went down the list of cabinet members, describing their relationships to Iran. Ibrahim al-Jafari — who had previously served as Iraqi prime minister and by late 2014 was the foreign minister — was, like Abdul-Mahdi, identified as having a "special relationship" with Iran. In an interview, Jafari did not deny that he had close relations with Iran, but said he had always dealt with foreign countries based on the interests of Iraq.

Iran counted on the loyalty of many lesser cabinet members as well.

The report said the ministers of municipalities, communications, and human rights "are in complete harmony and at one with us and are our people." The environment minister, it said, "works with us, although he is Sunni." The transportation minister — Bayan Jabr, who had led the Iraqi Interior Ministry at a time when hundreds of prisoners were tortured to death with electric drills or summarily shot by Shia death squads — was deemed to be "very close" to Iran. When it came to Iraq's education minister, the report says, "we will have no problem with him."

Shias:

We have retained our previous share among the Shias.

- 1) The Ministers of Municipalities, Communications, and Human Rights are Badrists and are in complete harmony and at one with us.
- 2) The Minister of Transportation (Mr. Bayan Jabr) is very close to the IRI.
- 3) The Minister of Oil (Adil) has a special relationship with the IRI.
- 4) The Foreign Minister (Jafari) has a special relationship with the IRI.
- 5) The Minister of Health (Adila Mahmoud) is a member of the Dawa Party Tanzim, but is, in her heart, loyal to the IRI.
- 6) The Minister of Labor (Sudani) is closer to the IRI than the previous one (who is a Sadrist).
- 7) The Minister of Youth (Abdel Hussain Abtan) is better than the previous one, who was a member of the Supreme Islamic Council.
- 8) The Minister of Higher Education (Shahristani) is better than the previous one (Adeeb).

شیعیان:

در بیت شیعی همان سهم قبلی خود را حفظ کرده است.

- 1- وزرای شهرداری، اتصالات، و حقوق بشر بدری و کاملاً هماهنگ و از خودمان هستند.
- 2- وزیر حمل و نقل (آقای بیان جبر) به ج.ا.ا بسیار نزدیک است.
- 3- وزیر تفت (عادل) دارای ارتباط ویژه با ج.ا.ا است.
- 4- وزیر خارجه (جعفری) دارای ارتباط ویژه با ج.ا.ا است.
- 5- وزیر بهداشت (عدیله حمود) از حزب الدعوة تنظیم عراق است، ولی قلباً به ج.ا.ا ارادت دارد.
- 6- وزیر کار (سودانی) از وزیر قبلی به ج.ا.ا نزدیکتر است (ایشان صدوری است).
- 7- وزیر جوانان (عبد الحسین عیطی) نسبت به گذشته بهتر است (مجلس اعلی)
- 8- وزیر آموزش عالی (شهرستانی) نسبت به قبلی (ادیب) بهتر است.

The former ministers of municipalities, communications, and human rights were all members of the Badr Organization, a political and military group established by Iran in the 1980s to oppose Saddam. The former minister of municipalities denied having a close relationship with Iran; the former human rights minister acknowledged being close to Iran, and praised Iran for helping Shia Iraqis during Saddam's dictatorship and for help defeating ISIS. The former minister of communications said that he served Iraq, not Iran, and that he maintained relationships with diplomats from many countries; the former minister of education said that he had not been supported by Iran and that he served at the request of Abadi. The former environment minister could not be reached for comment.

Iran's dominance over Iraqi politics is vividly shown in one important episode from the fall of 2014, when Baghdad was a city at the center of a multinational maelstrom. The Syrian civil war was raging to the west, ISIS militants had seized almost a third of Iraq, and American troops were heading back to the region to confront the growing crisis.

Against this chaotic backdrop, Jabr, then the transportation minister, welcomed Suleimani, the Quds Force commander, to his office. Suleimani had come to ask a favor: Iran needed access to Iraqi airspace to fly planeloads of weapons and other supplies to support the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad in its fight against American-backed rebels.





**In this photo released by the office of the Iranian supreme leader, Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, right, sits next to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at a religious ceremony in a mosque in Tehran on March 27, 2015. Photo: Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader via AP**

It was a request that placed Jabr at the center of the longstanding rivalry between the United States and Iran. Obama administration officials had been lobbying hard to get the Iraqis to stop Iranian flights through their airspace, but face to face with the Quds chief, Iraq's transportation minister found it impossible to refuse.

Suleimani, Jabr recalled, "came to me and requested that we permit Iranian airplanes to use Iraqi air space to pass on to Syria," according to one of the cables. The transportation minister did not hesitate, and Suleimani appeared to be pleased. "I put my hands on my eyes and said, 'On my eyes! As you wish!'" Jabr told the intelligence ministry officer. "Then he got up and approached me and kissed my forehead."

Jabr confirmed the meeting with Suleimani, but said the flights from Iran to Syria carried humanitarian supplies and religious pilgrims traveling to Syria to visit holy sites, not weapons and military supplies to aid Assad as American officials believed.

DATE: 2014-09-25

[Qassim Suleimani] came to me and requested that we permit Iranian planes to use Iraqi airspace to enter Syria. I put my hands on my eyes and said, "On my eyes! As you wish!" Then he got up and approached me and kissed my forehead.

ح. ق. نزد من آمد و درخواست کرد که اجازه بدهیم هواپیماهای ایرانی از آسمان عراق بر[ای سوریه عبور کنند، من دستم را روی چشمهایم گذاشتم و گفتم چشم. ایشان بلند شد و آمد پیشانی مرا بوسید.

Meanwhile, Iraqi officials known to have a relationship with the United States came under special scrutiny, and Iran took measures to counter American influence. Indeed, many of the files show that as top American diplomats met

behind closed doors with their Iraqi counterparts in Baghdad, their conversations were routinely reported back to the Iranians.

Throughout 2014 and 2015, as a new Iraqi government settled in, the American ambassador, Stuart Jones, met often with Salim al-Jabouri, who was speaker of the Iraqi Parliament until last year. Jabouri, although he is Sunni, was known to have a close relationship with Iran, but the files now reveal that one of his top political advisers — identified as Source 134832 — was an Iranian intelligence asset. “[I] am present in his office on a daily basis and carefully follow his contacts with the Americans,” the source told his Iranian handler. Jabouri, in an interview, said he did not believe that anyone on his staff had worked as an agent for Iran, and that he fully trusted his aides. (Jones declined to comment.)

The source urged the Iranians to develop closer ties to Jabouri, to blunt American efforts to nurture a new class of younger Sunni leaders in Iraq and perhaps bring about reconciliation between Sunnis and Shias. The source warned that Iran should act to keep the parliament speaker from “slipping into a pro-American position, since one of Salim al-Jabouri’s characteristics is credulousness and making hasty decisions.”

DATE: 2014-09-21

Of course, I, as a representative of the general secretary of the Islamic Party and member of its Political Bureau and as a consultant to the president of the Parliament, am present in his office on a daily basis and carefully follow his contacts with the Americans, and so far, nothing unnerving has arisen, but it would be appropriate for the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad, too, to behave relatively seriously in its contacts with the president of Iraq’s Parliament to keep him from the likelihood of slipping into a pro-American position, since one of Salim al-Jabouri’s characteristics is credulousness and making hasty decisions.

البته بنده به عنوان نماینده دبیرکل حزب اسلامی و عضو دفتر سیاسی این حزب به عنوان مشاور رئیس پارلمان به صورت روزانه در دفتر وی حضور دارم و ارتباطات وی با آمریکایی ها را با حساسیت پیگیری می کنم و تا به حال مورد نگران کننده ای وجود ندارد، ولی شایسته است که سفارت ایران در بغداد نیز در ارتباط گیری با رئیس پارلمان عراق نسبتا جدی عمل نماید، تا نامبرده در غطتیدن احتمالی به جانب آمریکایی مصون نگه داشته شود. زیرا یکی از خصوصیات سلیم الجبوری زود باوری و تصمیم گیری فوری است.

Another report reveals that Nechervan Barzani, then the prime minister of Kurdistan, met with top American and British officials and Abadi, the Iraqi prime minister, in Baghdad in December 2014, and then went almost immediately to meet with an Iranian official to tell him everything. Through a spokesperson, Barzani said he did not recall meeting with any Iranian officials at the time and described the cable as “baseless and unfounded.” He said he “absolutely denies” telling the Iranians details about his conversations with American and British diplomats.

Sometimes, the Iranians also saw trade value in the information they received from their Iraqi sources.

One report from the Jabouri adviser revealed that the United States was interested in gaining access to a rich natural gas field in Akkas, near Iraq's border with Syria. The source explained that the Americans might eventually try to export the natural gas to Europe, a major market for Russian natural gas. Intrigued, the intelligence ministry officer, in a cable to Tehran, wrote, "It is recommended that the aforementioned information be used in exchange with the Russians and Syria." The cable was written just as Russia was significantly stepping up its involvement in Syria, and as Iran continued its military buildup there, in support of Assad.

And although Iran was initially suspicious of Abadi's allegiances, a report written a few months after his rise to the premiership suggested that he was quite willing to have a confidential relationship with Iranian intelligence. A January 2015 report details a private meeting between Abadi and an intelligence ministry officer known as Boroujerdi, held in the prime minister's office "without the presence of a secretary or a third person."

During the meeting, Boroujerdi homed in on Iraq's Sunni-Shia divide, probing Abadi's feelings on perhaps the most sensitive subject in Iraqi politics. "Today, the Sunnis find themselves in the worst possible circumstances and have lost their self-confidence," the intelligence officer opined, according to the cable. "The Sunnis are vagrants, their cities are destroyed and an unclear future awaits them, while the Shias can retrieve their self-confidence."

Iraq's Shia were "at a historical turning point," Boroujerdi continued. The Iraqi government and Iran could "take advantage of this situation."

According to the cable, the prime minister expressed his "complete agreement." Abadi declined to comment.



**Iraqi security forces arrest suspected ISIS militants during clashes in Jurf al-Sakhar on March 17, 2014. Photo: Alaa Al-Marjani/Reuters**

## Sweetness Into Bitterness

Ever since the start of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran has put itself forward as the protector of Iraq's Shias, and Suleimani, more than anyone else, has employed the dark arts of espionage and covert military action to ensure that Shia power remains ascendant. But it has come at the cost of stability, with Sunnis perennially disenfranchised and looking to other groups, like the Islamic State, to protect them.

A 2014 massacre of Sunnis in the farming community of Jurf al-Sakhar was a vivid example of the kinds of sectarian atrocities committed by armed groups loyal to Iran's Quds Force that had alarmed the United States throughout the Iraq War, and undermined efforts at reconciliation. As the field reports make clear, some of the Americans' concerns were shared by the Iranian intelligence ministry. That signaled divisions within Iran over its Iraq policies between more moderate elements under President Hassan Rouhani and militant factions like the Revolutionary Guards.

Jurf al-Sakhar, which lies just east of Fallujah in the Euphrates River Valley, is lush with orange trees and palm groves. It was overrun by the Islamic State in 2014, giving militants a foothold from which they could launch attacks on the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.

Jurf al-Sakhar is also important to Iran because it lies on a route Shia religious pilgrims use to travel to Karbala during Muharram, the monthlong commemoration of the death of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein, a revered figure for Shias.



**Iraqi families surrender to Shia fighters and the Iraqi Army after they took control of Jurf al-Sakhar from ISIS militants on Oct. 27, 2014. According to the army, the families surrendered in order to be transported to safe areas. Photo: Mahmoud Raouf Mahmoud/Reuters**

When Shia militias supported by Iran drove the militants out of Jurf al-Sakhar in late 2014, the first major victory over ISIS, it became a ghost town. It was no longer a threat to the thousands of Shia pilgrims who would pass by, but Iran's victory came at a high cost to the town's Sunni residents. Tens of thousands



were displaced, and a local politician, the only Sunni member on the provincial council, was found with a bullet hole through his head.

One cable describes the damage in almost biblical terms. “As a result of these operations,” its author reported, “the area around Jurf al-Sakhar has been cleansed of terrorist agents. Their families have been driven away, most of their houses have been destroyed by military forces and the rest will be destroyed. In some places, the palm orchards have been uprooted to be burned to prevent the terrorists from taking shelter among the trees. The people’s livestock (cows and sheep) have been scattered and are grazing without their owners.”

DATE: 2014-11-23

As a result of these operations, the road from Musayyib (35 km from Baghdad) to Amiriyat al-Fallujah enjoys adequate security, and the area around Jurf al-Sakhar has been cleansed of terrorist agents. Their families have been driven away, most of their houses have been destroyed by military forces and the rest will be destroyed. In some places, the palm orchards have been uprooted to be burned to prevent the terrorists from taking shelter among the trees.

The people’s livestock (cows and sheep) have been scattered and are grazing without their owners.

در نتیجه این عملیات جاده مسیب (35 کیلومتری بغداد) تا عامریه فلوچه از امنیت لازم بر خوردار شده است و منطقه عمومی جرف صخر کاملاً از عوامل تروریست پاکسازی و حتی خانواده ها نیز از آنجا کوچانده شده اند و منازل توسط نیروهای نظامی تخریب شده و باقیمانده آنها تخریب خواهند گردید و در برخی مناطق درختان نخل از ریشه کنده تا سوزانده شوند و امکان حضور تروریستها و پناه گرفتن در میان منازل و درختان میسر نگردد.

احشام مردم منطقه (گاو گوسفند) در نقاط مختلف پراکنده شده اند و بدون صاحب مشغول چرا هستند.

The Jurf al-Sakhar operation and other bloody actions led by Iran’s proxies and directed by Tehran further alienated Iraq’s Sunni population, according to one report, which notes that “destroying villages and houses, looting the Sunnis’ property and livestock turned the sweetness of these successes” against ISIS into “bitterness.” One of the Jurf al-Sakhar cables cast the impact of Shia militias in particularly stark terms: “In all the areas where the Popular Mobilization Forces go into action, the Sunnis flee, abandoning their homes and property, and prefer to live in tents as refugees or reside in camps.”

The intelligence ministry feared that Iran’s gains in Iraq were being squandered because Iraqis so resented the Shia militias and the Quds Force that sponsored them. Above all, its officers blamed Suleimani, whom they saw as a dangerous self-promoter using the anti-ISIS campaign as a launching pad for a political career back home in Iran. One report, which states at the top that it is not to be shared with the Quds Force, criticizes the general personally for publicizing his

leading role in the military campaign in Iraq by “publishing pictures of himself on different social media sites.”

Doing that had made it obvious that Iran controlled the dreaded Shia militias — a potential gift to its rivals. “This policy of Iran in Iraq,” the report said, “has allowed the Americans to return to Iraq with greater legitimacy. And groups and individuals who had been fighting against the Americans among the Sunnis are now wishing that not only America, but even Israel, would enter Iraq and save Iraq from Iran’s clutches.”

DATE: 2014-11-29

- This policy of Iran in Iraq has allowed the Americans to return to Iraq with greater legitimacy. And groups and individuals who had been fighting against the Americans among the Sunnis are now wishing that not only America, but even Israel would enter Iraq and save Iraq from Iran’s clutches. This policy of Iran and its blatant interference in Iraq, and Mr. Suleimani’s measures and the advertising maneuvers he launched, caused Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates to unite again against Iran. This has also further inflamed sectarianism between Shias and Sunnis. These actions against the Sunnis will cause another group to rise up in the name of defending the Sunnis.

- We must think about limiting violence against innocent Sunnis in Iraq and limiting Mr. Suleimani’s measures, or else violence and strife between Shias and Sunnis will continue. Currently, any actions taken against Sunnis will be blamed on Iran, whether Iran had a direct or indirect role in it, or none at all.

- این سیاست ایران در عراق باعث شده است که بار دیگر آمریکایی ها با مشروعیت بیشتر به عراق باز گردند و افراد و گروه های که تا دیگر در میان جامعه اهل سنت علیه آمریکا می جنگیدند الآن آرزو می کنند که نه آمریکا و حتی اسرائیل وارد عراق شود و عراق را از دست ایران نجات دهد. این سیاست ایران و دخالت های آشکار ایران در عراق و اقدامات آقای سلیمانی و مانور تبلیغاتی که به راه انداخته است، باعث شده است که بار دیگر عربستان و قطر و امارات علیه ایران متحد شوند. همچنین موجب شده است که فتنه شیعه و سنی شعله ور تر شود. اقدامات صورت گرفته علیه اهل سنت باعث خواهد که بعد از داعش گروه دیگری و با عنوان دیگر به بهانه دفاع از اهل سنت قد علم کند.

- ضرورت دارد که حد و حدودی برای جلوگیری از خشونت علیه افراد بی گناه اهل سنت در عراق و اقدامات آقای سلیمانی اندیشیده شود و الی خشونت و درگیری میان شیعه و سنی همچنان ادامه پیدا کرده و در حال حاضر هر گونه اقدامی علیه اهل سنت به حساب ایران نوشته می شود، چه ایران مستقیم و غیر مستقیم در آن نقش داشته باشد و یا نقشی در آن نداشته باشد.

At times, the Iranians sought to counter the ill will generated by their presence in Iraq with soft-power campaigns similar to American battlefield efforts to win “hearts and minds.” Hoping to gain a “propaganda advantage and restore Iran’s image among the people,” Iran devised a plan to send pediatricians and gynecologists to villages in northern Iraq to administer health services,

according to one field report. It is not clear, however, if that initiative materialized.

Just as often, Iran would use its influence to close lucrative development deals. With Iraq dependent on Iran for military support in the fight against ISIS, one cable shows the Quds Force receiving oil and development contracts from Iraq's Kurds in exchange for weapons and other aid. In the south, Iran was awarded contracts for sewage and water purification by paying a \$16 million bribe to a member of Parliament, according to another field report.

Today, Iran is struggling to maintain its hegemony in Iraq, just as the Americans did after the 2003 invasion. Iraqi officials, meanwhile, are increasingly worried that a provocation in Iraq on either side could set off a war between the two powerful countries vying for dominance in their homeland. Against this geopolitical backdrop, Iraqis learned long ago to take a pragmatic approach to the overtures of Iran's spies — even Sunni Iraqis who view Iran as an enemy.

“Not only doesn't he believe in Iran, but he doesn't believe that Iran might have positive intentions toward Iraq,” one Iranian case officer wrote in late 2014, about an Iraqi intelligence recruit described as a Baathist who had once worked for Saddam and later the CIA. “But he is a professional spy and understands the reality of Iran and the Shia in Iraq and will collaborate to save himself.”

*Document excerpts have been retyped to avoid identifying markings.*

*Additional reporting: Matthew Cole and Laura Secor for The Intercept; Rick Gladstone, Falih Hassan, and Alissa J. Rubin for the New York Times*

**Correction: November 18, 2019, 3:02 p.m.**

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly said that Lt. Gen. Hatem al-Maksusi, a onetime commander of military intelligence in the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, had retired. Maksusi is still a government official, overseeing military engineering.*

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## **Iran's Shadow War On Isis**

In the summer of 2014, with a campaign of shocking violence, the Islamic State established itself as the most fearsome terrorist organization in the Middle East.

In early June, the extremist group stunned the world by taking control of the Iraqi city of Mosul, home to more than 1.2 million people. Days later, ISIS fighters broadcast scenes from a gruesome massacre of more than 1,500 Iraqi army cadets at a former U.S. military base near Tikrit. By the end of the month, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had declared himself head of a new proto-state, the “caliphate,” as his fighters continued their genocidal rampage across northern Iraq, killing and enslaving members of the Yazidi minority and seizing Western hostages, among them an American journalist named James Foley.

As the international community groped for a response, ISIS fighters reached the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan, within striking distance of the glass high-rises of the bustling Kurdish capital, Erbil. It was there, from a dusty, remote Kurdish military base nicknamed “Black Tiger” outside the town of Makhmour, that ISIS was finally confronted by Kurdish Peshmerga in a battle that began to turn the tide against the extremists.

“Makhmour was the first place that we took territory from ISIS,” Staff Col. Srud Salih, the Kurdish commander of the Black Tiger base, told *The Intercept* this summer. “The victories of the Peshmerga began from here.”

The battle of Makhmour represented another important milestone in the war against ISIS: It was the place where two foreign military interventions began. One was directed by the U.S.-led international coalition, which provided air support and later, heavy weaponry. The other, in the form of [ammunition](#), training, and intelligence support, came from Iran. Over the course of a few short days that August, coalition airstrikes hit ISIS positions in the parched desert hills near Makhmour, leveling the playing field between the heavily armed extremists and the Kurdish fighters.



**A Kurdish Peshmerga soldier walks past the remnants of an Islamic State position in Makhmour, Iraq, that was hit during the fight between Kurdish and ISIS forces in 2014.**  
Photo: Sebastian Meyer/Corbis via Getty Images

Since the election of Donald Trump, the United States and Iran have grown increasingly fractious, exchanging provocations that have fueled fears of war. But in the early days of the fight against ISIS under President Barack Obama, these longtime rivals were focused on a common goal: halting the Islamic State’s advance and destroying its so-called caliphate.

While the broad outlines of the conventional war against ISIS have long been known, the details of Iran’s covert war against the militants have not. A portrait of this secret war emerges from [a trove of Iranian intelligence reports provided to \*The Intercept\*](#) by an anonymous source. The reports come from Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security, or MOIS, the country’s primary intelligence agency.



## A Secret Battle

Alongside the U.S.-led military campaign against the Islamic State, Iran's MOIS was waging a parallel, clandestine campaign, spying on ISIS gatherings, providing covert aid to its enemies, and working to break its alliances with other insurgent factions, according to the leaked documents.

In many ways, the Iranian intelligence campaign against ISIS mirrored the U.S. strategy for dealing with Iraq. In addition to an overt military confrontation with the group and support for Shia militias and the Iraqi Army, the Iranians also worked to cultivate Sunni and Kurdish partners whom they perceived as moderate — or at least willing to work with them. From the outset, the MOIS kept its eyes on the day the war would end, when local partners from all sides would be needed to patch together a functional Iraq.

To an extent, the agency played a good-cop role in contrast to the more brutal measures employed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which reports directly to Iran's supreme leader. While the MOIS has been pragmatic, subtle, and willing to look past sectarianism, the Revolutionary Guards, through its Iraqi proxies, has been blamed for carrying out waves of extrajudicial killings and ethnic cleansing. In some cases, it has been accused of treating entire Sunni communities as enemies, trapping them in an impossible choice between religious extremists and a hostile Iraqi government.

In many ways, the Iranian intelligence campaign against ISIS mirrored the U.S. strategy for dealing with Iraq.

This sectarian conflict came to a head during the brutal violence of the ISIS war. But for those Sunnis — whether militants or politicians — willing to accept a place in an Iranian-dominated Iraq, the MOIS showed itself ready to help.

According to the leaked Iranian intelligence documents, there was also frustration on the Iranian side about the lack of direct U.S. cooperation with Tehran in the anti-ISIS war effort. The Iranians noted with approval the impact of U.S. airstrikes against ISIS but wanted to coordinate more closely.

"The Americans' insistence on not cooperating with Iran in the war against ISIS and not participating in the meetings of the 10 countries of the region — the Arabs and Turkey — as well as the Western and Arab countries' extreme positions on the presence and role of Iran in Iraq has had a negative influence," one secret report noted.

Although the Iranian contribution was ultimately more modest than that of the Americans, Iran was nimbler in backing the Iraqi Kurds. "Iran's security institutions are often able to make decisions and act more quickly in an emergency than their U.S. counterparts, who have to navigate a web of bureaucracy," a Kurdish analyst who was present during the battle, and asked for anonymity to discuss issues related to Iran, told The Intercept. "When ISIS attacked Makhmour, the Iranian help came first. It took a day or two after the battle began for the Americans to join in with air support."

The punishing American airstrikes made a vital difference in Makhmour, where the Kurdish Peshmerga ultimately triumphed over ISIS and drove it out of the area. But in the weeks and months before the battle, some of the Peshmerga who fought in Makhmour had received assistance from Iranian advisers connected with the MOIS.



**Members of the People's Protection Units, or YPG, explore one of the many tunnels made by ISIS during its occupation of the border city of Sinjar, Iraq, in 2015. Photo: Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum Photo**

## **Spying on ISIS**

In its propaganda videos and statements, ISIS liked to project an image of complete ideological discipline and authoritarian control. But from early on, the organization appears to have been penetrated by both Iranian and Kurdish intelligence.

On the evening of September 18, 2014, a case officer from the MOIS left his base and headed to the home of an asset living in Erbil. At the time, ISIS was still near the height of its power, and the city was teeming with foreign military and intelligence officials helping coordinate the war effort against the militants. The MOIS officer took precautions to avoid surveillance as he made his way to the meeting. "I left the base by foot an hour before holding the meeting and after twenty minutes walking on foot and carrying out the necessary checks, took two taxis through the neighboring streets to the site of the meeting," he wrote in his report.

The Iranian spy had two goals that night: to learn as much as possible about how Iraq's Sunni leaders viewed the ISIS threat and to create a "detailed and precise biography of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi through his classmates and people who had been imprisoned with him." The meeting was one of many being conducted by MOIS officers trying to develop an operational picture of ISIS. In a December 2014 rendezvous with a source in the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah, another MOIS officer received a flash drive containing information about ISIS, according to one of the reports. The officer instructed the source, who is only identified as a senior deputy official in Iraqi intelligence, to send the Iranians daily reports on ISIS activities.



**A screenshot, taken on July 5, 2014, of a propaganda video released by al-Furqan Media allegedly shows Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi addressing worshippers at a mosque in the militant-held Iraqi city of Mosul. U.S. forces killed Baghdadi last month in northern Syria. Image: AFP via Getty Images**

The MOIS's intelligence sources about ISIS were not limited to outsiders; they had penetrated the group's leadership as well. A report provided to the MOIS by a source in Mosul contains an account of internal deliberations from a December 2014 meeting of senior ISIS leaders, including Baghdadi. At the time, ISIS was bracing for an attack from the Iraqi Army, Shia militia groups, and the Kurdish Peshmerga on the group's territories in Nineveh Province. The attack was planned for the early months of 2015, and ISIS leaders feared that it would be heavily backed by both the U.S.-led coalition and Iran.

The prospect of facing so many adversaries at once bred justified paranoia inside the militant group. It also raised fears that ISIS leaders with past ties to the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussain might feed intelligence to the group's enemies, or even defect. "Some ISIS amirs who have a Baathist record have established relations with the Kurdish Democratic Party to flee to the Kurdish region and not fall into the hands of the Shia Iraqi army," the MOIS source said, according to the intelligence report, which cites a meeting of the "Central Council of the Caliphate presided over by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."

In at least one case, the militant group's fears had already come to fruition. ISIS commanders in two districts north of Mosul had made contact with American and Kurdish forces, given them GPS coordinates of ISIS positions, and revealed the group's attack plans, according to the MOIS report.

In response, ISIS had cut "all telephone and internet connections" for commanders in those areas, and the group wanted to further limit the communications of other front-line commanders. One of the districts named in the MOIS document, Zumar, was the site of heavy [coalition air activity in support of a Peshmerga offensive](#) during this period.

"A sharia court determined that greater control should be exercised over contacts between ISIS amirs and that all means of communication, especially at the fronts, should be cut," the MOIS source reported.



**Sunni fighters opposing the Islamic State take positions at the frontline near the ISIS-controlled village of Haj Ali in the southern Mosul countryside on Nov. 19, 2015. Photo: Moises Saman/Magnum Photos**

## **Divide and Conquer**

As Iran worked to weaken the Islamic State, it embarked on a strategy that, deliberately or not, echoed the U.S. playbook for dealing with Iraq. Nearly a decade earlier, the United States had defeated Al Qaeda in Iraq — the precursor to ISIS — by arming Sunni tribal groups opposed to the extremists. This tribal rebellion, termed “the Awakening,” was credited with helping fracture Al Qaeda’s ties to other Sunni Arab militants. The Awakening helped stabilize the country during the final years of the U.S. occupation, allowing a tenuous new political order to take shape.

Like Al Qaeda before it, the Islamic State belonged to a broad coalition of Sunni Arab factions that were ideologically diverse but united in their opposition to an Iraqi government they viewed as sectarian, corrupt, and beholden to Iran. Many of the most powerful non-ISIS factions could be described as ideologically neo-Baathist in their shared longing for a restoration of the pre-2003 order in Iraq.

The groups initially cooperated, but by the summer of 2014, deadly firefights were reported between ISIS and Sunni militants who did not accept the group’s leadership of the insurgency against Baghdad. Iran was ready to capitalize on these divisions. By the fall of 2014, the MOIS was surveilling and communicating with disaffected insurgents, with the goal of reconciling them with the Iraqi government and turning them against ISIS.

But the Iranians found that the Sunni militants could be deceptive, the MOIS documents show. In September 2014, the agency intercepted a communication from some of these militants to their followers that included derogatory statements about Iran and called on fighters to take advantage of a recent halt in Iraqi government airstrikes to escalate their insurgency.

“We should try to weaken their position and show how untrustworthy they are in claiming that they have changed and become moderate and care for Iraq.”



“Since we are supposed to meet Baathists next week, and considering the principles fixed by the honorable General Director to get answers from them — naturally some of the answers are clear from the text of this statement,” a MOIS officer wrote dryly. “We should try to weaken their position and show how untrustworthy they are in claiming that they have changed and become moderate and care for Iraq. Put this statement in front of them and then ask them to be explicit and clear in their view.”

Iranian officials closely monitored efforts by Sunni Arabs to organize themselves politically throughout the war, including at several meetings held at the Sheraton and Rotana hotels in Erbil in late 2014. An Iranian spy who attended a two-day meeting at the Sheraton in September reported that a former Baath Party member now living in the United States came to the meeting bearing an intriguing message: The Americans were willing to support political autonomy for Sunni-majority regions of Iraq once the fighting had ended. The MOIS was deeply concerned about Iraq breaking apart along sectarian lines and viewed any efforts that might lead to such fragmentation with suspicion.

Three months later, in December, [a delegation of Iraqi politicians](#) including former parliament speaker Salim al-Jabouri traveled to Iran for negotiations with high-ranking Iranian officials. The trip went well, according to a MOIS report, but there was a tense moment when members of the Iraqi delegation were berated by Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council. Shamkhani told the visitors that Sunnis in Iraq had already received “much more than you deserve,” including the leadership of numerous ministries, seats in the Iraqi parliament, and control of a large number of militia fighters. “Whether you want it or not,” he told them, Iran would “cleanse Iraq of the presence of [ISIS].”

Some members of the Iraqi delegation were “offended” by Shamkhani’s remarks, according to the cable.

Initial efforts by the highly unpopular Nouri al-Maliki-led Iraqi government to [coax some Sunni tribes nominally allied with ISIS back onto its side](#) with money and weapons had limited results. But a change of leadership in Iraq coupled with the brutality of life under ISIS did eventually lead some Sunni insurgents to explore switching sides. By 2015, the Iraqi government was said to be [holding secret talks](#) in Qatar and Tanzania with anti-ISIS Sunni insurgents, reportedly mediated by the United States and other countries in the Middle East.

On the morning of December 7, 2014, a delegation of Iranian intelligence officers paid a condolence visit to the headquarters of the Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party, a small movement based in the Kurdish city of Halabja. In addition to the Kurdish Regional Government, Iran cultivated ties with marginal parties like the KSDP that lacked strong connections and military support from Western powers — part of a broader strategy of projecting influence [through textured personal and political relationships](#) across the Middle East. Such ties, sometimes pragmatically cultivated on a nonsectarian basis, have given Iran an advantage in its conflicts with the United States, Israel, and the Gulf Arab countries.

The head of the KSDP, Mohammed Haji Mahmoud, also known as “Kaka Hama,” is a legendary Kurdish nationalist who spent decades in the mountains of Kurdistan helping lead a resistance movement against the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. When ISIS attacked Kurdistan in 2014, Mahmoud himself joined battles at the front.

In late November of that year, Mahmoud’s son was killed fighting ISIS near Kirkuk. A week and a half later, spies from the MOIS showed up at Mahmoud’s office.

“A delegation of colleagues of the consulate went to the political office of KSDP and recited [prayers] and offered our condolences and paid our respects to Mohammed Haji Mahmoud over his martyred son who achieved martyrdom in the suburbs of Kirkuk in an attack against ISIS,” according to a secret Iranian intelligence report. An Iranian official present expressed the ministry’s grief over the death of Mahmoud’s son and “wished his family patience and tranquility.”



**Mahmoud, far left, on the front near Kirkuk on Nov. 26, 2014. Photo: Archives Hama Haji Mahmoud/The PhotoLibrary of Kurdistan**

In January, about six weeks after their condolence visit, MOIS officers met with Mahmoud again. According to their report, the Kurdish leader thanked the Iranians for providing “special military and security training” to some 30 of his party’s Peshmerga fighters based in Sulaimaniyah. The training, according to the report, had been conducted in honor of Mahmoud’s son, and the Iranian-backed fighters had been sent to a front near Makhmour, where they helped rout ISIS. “They played a good role in defeating the *takfiris*,” Mahmoud told the Iranians, using an Arabic word to denote extremists, “and they put into practice the lessons they had learned.”

The MOIS case officer who wrote the report expressed satisfaction with Mahmoud’s comments. “God willing, we will benefit from the existence of these brothers in future training in Iraq toward the struggle with ISIS.”

Mahmoud could not be reached for comment for this story.



**Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters fire at ISIS militant positions from the frontline in Khazer, west of Erbil, on Aug. 14, 2014. Photo: Safin Hamed/AFP via Getty Images**

### **Friends in Fair Weather**

The Iranians would turn out to be less than durable friends to the Iraqi Kurds. Their dealings bear some resemblance to the United States' own tortured relationship with [Kurdish militants in neighboring Syria](#).

Not long after the war against ISIS began, Tehran started shifting the bulk of its support to the Iraqi central government and its allied Shia militias. The major break came in 2017, when Iraqi Kurds held a referendum on the question of full independence, their long-held dream. Kurdish voters overwhelmingly approved the referendum, but the vote alarmed Iran and other countries in the region that feared Kurdish secession.

Instead of independence, the referendum led to war between the Iraqi government and Kurdish forces. In a reversal of their role during the ISIS war, the Iranians worked against the Kurds, and the Iraqi offensive snuffed out any imminent hopes for Kurdish self-determination. In October 2017, the Peshmerga lost the town of Makhmour again — this time to an Iraqi government advance backed by Iran.

Gen. Bahram Arif Yassin was one of the Peshmerga commanders who led the fight against ISIS in northern Iraq. On a grassy hilltop in front of his home in the Kurdish city of Souran, surrounded by his military staff, he reflected on the bitter aftermath of the ISIS war and Kurdistan's thwarted independence bid. "We expected support after the sacrifices we had made on behalf of the whole world fighting ISIS," Yassin said. "Instead, we were opposed by surrounding countries that did not respect the Kurdish people's voice."

"When the independence vote happened, even Turkey didn't close its borders to us," Yassin continued. "Iran did."

Although Makhmour remains under Iraqi control today, the sprawling Black Tiger base in the hills outside the town is still manned by Kurdish Peshmerga forces who are based in a few prefabricated bunkers. A giant Kurdish national flag flies from a pole above the base and a large hangar contains Humvees and other armored vehicles provided by the U.S.-led coalition. Modified vehicles

taken from ISIS during the battle for Makhmour broil under the glaring sun. Among them are captured Iraqi army pickup trucks retrofitted with rusted armor plates and artillery pieces emblazoned with the black flag of the Islamic State.



**Captured ISIS vehicles at the Black Tiger base outside Makhmour in June 2019. Photo: Murtaza Hussain/The Intercept**

The Peshmerga are still fighting ISIS militants hiding in the arid, brown Qara Chokh mountain range nearby, and Kurdish forces say they are grateful for periodic U.S. airstrikes on ISIS positions. Kurdish commanders at the base who fought in the Makhmour battle still consider the U.S.-led coalition their best ally, they said. The support Iran supplied to the Iraqi Kurds against ISIS in 2014 is a distant memory, overshadowed by Iran's contribution to the more recent Iraqi conquest of Makhmour.

Iran's MOIS predicted this rupture with the Kurds, though the reasons for the split were not what they had expected. The September 2014 report that bemoaned the lack of coordination between the U.S. and Iran in the fight against ISIS also noted that Tehran's global isolation might force the Kurds to "keep their distance" from Iran when the war was over. "Our country might undergo a bitter experience yet again," the document said, revealing the officer's suspicion of even close Kurdish allies, as well as a note of pathos about Iran's place in the world.

Ultimately, however, a combination of factors led to Iran's renewed isolation. The U.S. decision to pull out of the Obama-era nuclear deal ended Iran's brief rapprochement with the West. But it was Iran's decision to work against Kurdish independence that squandered any goodwill the Iranians had won during the war against ISIS. Today, Iran finds itself cornered once more.

The destruction of the Islamic State may also prove to be a transient victory. Recent reports have suggested that the militants are [quietly regrouping](#) in Iraq, biding their time for a future resurgence. If the extremists do return, the United States and Iranian intelligence may find themselves once more in the strange position of tacitly working together — two enemies drawn into alignment by crises in Iraq that both helped generate, but neither seems capable of ending.

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## **The Secret Summit**

They were hardly kindred spirits. In fact, they stood on opposite sides of one of the world's fiercest geopolitical divides. Yet in a secret effort at detente, two of the most formidable organizations in the Middle East held a previously undisclosed summit at a Turkish hotel to seek common ground at a time of sectarian war. The 2014 summit brought together the foreign military arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, known as the Quds Force, and the Muslim Brotherhood, a sprawling Islamist political movement with significant influence throughout the region.

The Quds Force represents the world's most powerful Shia-dominated nation, while the Muslim Brotherhood is a stateless but influential political and religious force in the Sunni Muslim world. The Trump administration [designated](#) the Revolutionary Guards a foreign terrorist organization in April, and the White House has reportedly [been lobbying](#) to add the Muslim Brotherhood to the list as well. The disclosure that two such polarizing organizations on either side of the Sunni-Shia divide held a summit is included in a [leaked archive of secret Iranian intelligence reports](#) obtained by The Intercept.

There were public meetings and contacts between Iranian and Egyptian officials while Muslim Brotherhood-backed Mohamed Morsi was president of Egypt from 2012 to 2013. But Morsi was forced from power in a coup supported by the Egyptian Army in July 2013 and later arrested. The regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi launched a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, and many of its leaders have since been imprisoned in Egypt or are living in exile. An Iranian intelligence cable about the 2014 meeting provides an intriguing glimpse at a secret effort by the Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian officials to maintain contact — and determine whether they could still work together — after Morsi was removed from power.



**A supporter of Egypt's ousted President Mohamed Morsi reads the Quran next to a tent outside the Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque, where protesters established a camp, in August 2013 in Cairo. Photo: Khalil Hamra/AP**

The cable about the summit, from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, or MOIS, reveals the fraught political dynamics that separate powerful Sunni and Shia organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Quds Force. Above all, the cable and the story of the summit expose the maddening complexities of the political landscape in the Middle East and show how difficult

it is for outsiders, including U.S. officials, to understand what's really going on in the region. On the surface, the Quds Force and the Muslim Brotherhood would appear to be archenemies. The Quds Force has used its covert power to help Iran expand its influence throughout the Middle East, backing Shia militias that have committed atrocities against Sunnis in Iraq, while siding with the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war. The Muslim Brotherhood, by contrast, has been a key player in Sunni Arab politics for decades, bringing a fundamentalist Islamist approach to a long battle against autocratic governments in Egypt and elsewhere. Along the way, extremists have left the Muslim Brotherhood to form splinter groups, like Hamas, that have sometimes veered into terrorism.

The summit came at a critical moment for the Quds Force and the Muslim Brotherhood, which may explain why the two sides agreed to talk.

But the summit came at a critical moment for both the Quds Force and the Muslim Brotherhood, which may explain why the two sides agreed to talk. When the meeting was held in April 2014, the Islamic State was tearing across the Sunni-dominated regions of northern Iraq. The Iraqi Army was melting away in the face of the terrorist group's brutal tactics, and ISIS was threatening the stability of the Iraqi government in Baghdad. The threat of ISIS prompted the Quds Force to intervene on behalf of the Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. The Quds Force began leading Shia militias into battle against ISIS, but Maliki was widely seen as an Iranian puppet and had stoked deep anger and resentment among Iraqi Sunnis. He would soon be pushed aside. At the same time, the dream of the Arab Spring had turned into a nightmare. War was raging in Syria while in Egypt, the ouster of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government had led to a new dictatorship under Sisi. Morsi died in an Egyptian courtroom in June after nearly six years in solitary confinement. Weakened by its losses in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood probably viewed an alliance with the Iranians as an opportunity to regain some of its regional prominence.



The Muslim Brotherhood-Quds Force summit unfolded against the backdrop of deepening sectarian divisions in Iraq as ISIS gained strength. The Shia Popular Mobilization Forces, or Hashd al-Shaabi, took most of Tikrit, Iraq, from ISIS control in April 2015. Photo: Sebastian Backhaus/picture-alliance/dpa/AP

## Spy Games

What neither side knew was that there was a spy in the summit. Iran's MOIS, a rival of the Revolutionary Guards within the Iranian national security apparatus,

secretly had an agent in the meeting who reported everything that was discussed. The MOIS agent not only attended but “acted as coordinator of this meeting,” according to the MOIS cable. The MOIS envied the Revolutionary Guards’ power and influence and secretly tried to keep track of the Guards’ activities around the world, the leaked archive shows.

Turkey was considered a safe location for the summit, since it was one of the few countries on good terms with both Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet the Turkish government still had to worry about appearances, so it refused to grant a visa to the highly visible chief of the Quds Force, Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, according to the MOIS cable. With Suleimani unable to enter Turkey, a delegation of other senior Quds Force officials — led by one of Suleimani’s deputies, a man identified in the cable as Abu Hussain — attended the meeting in his place.

The Muslim Brotherhood was represented by three of its most prominent Egyptian leaders in exile: Ibrahim Munir Mustafa, Mahmoud El-Abiary, and Youssef Moustafa Nada, according to the document. (After 9/11, the George W. Bush administration and the United Nations suspected that Nada had helped finance Al Qaeda; his bank accounts were frozen and his movement restricted. In 2009, the U.N. sanctions against him were lifted because no proof of his alleged ties to terrorism could be found). In a recent interview, Nada told The Intercept: “I never attended such a meeting anywhere. I never heard about such a meeting anywhere.” Mustafa and El-Abiary could not be reached for comment.



**Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood await the arrival of Brotherhood parliament members during the first session of the Egyptian Parliament on Jan. 23, 2012, in Cairo.**

**Photo: Moises Saman/Magnum Photos**

The Muslim Brotherhood delegation opened the meeting with a boast, pointing out that the outfit “has organizations in 85 countries in the world.” Perhaps that was an effort to counter the Iranian government’s support for the Quds Force, since the Muslim Brotherhood had no similar national power backing it up.

“Differences between Iran as a symbol and representative of the Shia world and the Muslim Brotherhood as a representative of the Sunni world are indisputable,” the Brotherhood members noted, according to the MOIS cable.

But they emphasized that there “should be a focus on joint grounds for cooperation.” One of the most important things the groups shared, the Brotherhood representatives said, was a hatred for Saudi Arabia, “the common enemy” of the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran.

Perhaps, the Brotherhood delegation said, the two sides could join forces against the Saudis. The best place to do that was in Yemen, where an insurgency by the Iranian-backed Houthis against the Saudi-backed Yemeni government was about to escalate into full-scale war.

“In Yemen, with the influence of Iran on Houthis and the influence of the Brotherhood on the armed tribal Sunni factions, there should be a joint effort to decrease the conflict between Houthis and Sunni tribes to be able to use their strength against Saudi Arabia,” the Brotherhood delegation argued.

One of the most important things the groups shared, the Muslim Brotherhood representatives said, was a hatred for Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, the Brotherhood wanted peace in Iraq, the delegation said. If there was one place in the region where help bridging the Sunni-Shia divide was needed, it was there, and maybe the Brotherhood and the Quds Force could cooperate to stop the war.

“On Iraq, it is good to lessen the tension between Shia and Sunni and give Sunnis a chance to participate in the Iraqi government as well,” the delegation said, according to the MOIS cable.

While denying any knowledge of the 2014 meeting, Nada said that the Muslim Brotherhood does want to reduce tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, as was suggested by the cable. “As far as I know, [the Muslim Brotherhood] are interested to defuse, not only reduce, any conflict between Sunni and Shia,” Nada said.

But the Brotherhood also recognized that there were limits to regional cooperation with the Quds Force. Syria, for example, was such a complicated mess that the Brotherhood simply threw up its hands. “Of course, the issue of Syria currently is out of the hands of Iran and the Brotherhood, and there is nothing particular to be done about it,” the cable noted.

And while the Muslim Brotherhood had been pushed out of power the year before the summit by the Egyptian Army, the group didn’t want Iranian support in Egypt. “On the issue of Egypt, we as Brotherhood are not prepared to accept any help from Iran to act against the government of Egypt,” the delegation said. The Brotherhood leaders probably recognized that they would be discredited in Egypt if they sought Iranian aid to regain power in Cairo.

Despite their apparent eagerness to forge an alliance, the Brotherhood leaders still managed to insult the Quds Force officials, according to the MOIS cable. During the meeting, the delegation emphasized that the Brotherhood was committed to a “reformist and peaceful approach” to change in the Middle East.



The observation seemed to imply that the Quds Force was not. The delegation then quickly added that members of the Brotherhood have “trained ourselves to be more patient than Iranians.”



**Members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps march in front of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s mausoleum outside Tehran on Sept. 22, 2011, during an armed forces parade marking the 31st anniversary of the start of the Iraq-Iran War. Photo: Vahid Salemi/AP**

## **Ships in the Night**

The Brotherhood has indeed historically been averse to violence, in contrast to the Quds Force, which is part of a military organization. Some experts have objected to the Trump administration’s desire to designate the Brotherhood a terrorist organization, arguing that it does not engage in terrorist activities.

“The fact that the Trump administration has not [designated the Muslim Brotherhood] suggests that maybe rationality won the day,” observed Ned Price, a former CIA official. “To say you are going to designate the Muslim Brotherhood misrepresents what the Muslim Brotherhood is today, and it risks partnerships we have in countries where the Muslim Brotherhood does have influence.”

In one of his last columns in the Washington Post before he was murdered, Saudi journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi criticized the Trump administration for targeting the Muslim Brotherhood and for failing to understand that it played an essential democratic role in the Middle East. “The United States’ aversion to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is more apparent in the current Trump administration, is the root of a predicament across the entire Arab world,” Khashoggi wrote in August 2018, just two months before his death at the hands of a hit team in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. “The eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood is nothing less than an abolition of democracy and a guarantee that Arabs will continue living under authoritarian and corrupt regimes.”

Maybe the Muslim Brotherhood leaders decided to be candid with their Iranian counterparts during the summit because they could already sense that the Quds Force representatives were not really interested in forming an alliance.

That is certainly how the meeting played out. In fact, it soon became clear that the two sides were talking past each other.

“Friends of the Quds Force who were present in this meeting disagreed that there should be an alliance of Shia and Sunni,” according to the MOIS report on the meeting. At the same time, somewhat mysteriously, the Quds Force representatives insisted that they “never had any differences with the Brotherhood.”

The Brotherhood representatives were clearly irked by that unrealistic statement. “This view was not accepted by the Brotherhood delegation,” the cable noted.

Despite the apparent failure of the talks, the MOIS agent spying on the summit noted that he was willing to “travel again to Turkey or Beirut to be present” in any follow-up meetings. It is not clear from the leaked archive whether further meetings of this kind occurred.

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## **The Changing of the Warlords**

About a month before the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, Tariq Aziz, one of Saddam Hussein’s most trusted comrades, sat in his office in Baghdad in an olive green uniform, cigar in hand, wearing house slippers. The man who for decades had served as the public face of high-stakes Iraqi diplomacy offered a political analysis that might well have gotten him executed in years past.

“The U.S. can overthrow Saddam Hussein,” said Aziz, an Iraqi Christian and one of the most senior figures in Saddam’s government. “You can destroy the Baath Party and secular Arab nationalism.” But, he warned, “America will open a Pandora’s box that it will never be able to close.” The iron-fisted rule of Saddam, draped in the veneer of Arab nationalism, he argued, was the only effective way to deal with forces like Al Qaeda or prevent an expansion of Iranian influence in the region.

When the U.S. invaded, Aziz was the eight of spades in the card deck the Pentagon created to publicize its high-value targets. He was ultimately captured, held in a makeshift prison at the Baghdad airport, and forced to dig a hole in the ground to use as a latrine. He died in custody of a heart attack in June 2015. But Aziz lived long enough to watch exactly what he warned of come to pass, accusing U.S. President Barack Obama of “leaving Iraq to the wolves.”



**Former Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz stands at attention as the Iraqi national anthem is played at a conference in Baghdad on Dec. 2, 1998. Photo: Peter Dejong/AP**

The 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq marked the moment when the U.S. lost control of its own bloody chess game. The chaos unleashed by the U.S. invasion allowed Iran to gain a level of influence in Iraq that was unfathomable during the reign of Saddam. [Secret documents from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, obtained by The Intercept](#), give an unprecedented picture of how deeply present-day Iraq is under Iranian influence. The sovereignty once jealously defended by Arab nationalists has been steadily eroded since the U.S. invasion.

The country that Iran assumed influence over had been shattered by decades of war, military occupation, terrorism, and economic sanctions. Iraq is still struggling with the legacy of years of sectarian bloodshed, the emergence of violent jihadi groups, and widespread corruption unleashed by the U.S. invasion and occupation. In the face of this national tragedy, some citizens express nostalgia for the authoritarian stability of Saddam's regime. Navigating this chaotic situation is no easy task for any foreign power.

In the years after the 2003 invasion, some U.S. politicians cited the "Pottery Barn" analogy to justify a continued long-term presence in Iraq. It was the invasion that broke Iraqi society. So, as the analogy went, having broken the country, the United States now needed to buy it. In reality, the U.S. shattered Iraq and ultimately walked away. It was Iran that ended up figuring out what to do with the pieces.

### **The Disaster of De-Baathification**

A little over a decade before George W. Bush decided to overthrow the Iraqi government, his father's administration had taken a very different path. After mercilessly destroying Iraq's civilian and military infrastructure in a bombing campaign during the 1991 Gulf War, George H.W. Bush was persuaded that it would be too dangerous to march on Baghdad. Not because of the potential human costs, or deaths of U.S. soldiers in combat, but because Saddam was a known quantity who had already proven valuable in the 1980s when he attacked Iran and triggered the brutal Iran-Iraq War. During that eight-year

conflict, the U.S. armed both countries but overwhelmingly favored Baghdad. More than a million people died in trench warfare reminiscent of World War I. Henry Kissinger put a fine point on the U.S. strategy in that war when he quipped that it is “a shame there can only be one loser.”

Even after the war had ended, the American fear of Iran outweighed any appetite for regime change in Iraq. So Saddam remained.

Bush’s son took a different view. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, high-ranking figures in his administration began [falsely connecting](#) Saddam’s regime to Al Qaeda. In reality, the religious extremists were mortal enemies of the Baathists. But the process for Saddam’s removal had already been determined by neoconservatives who had been bent on waging war against Iraq years before 9/11.



**A U.S. marine watches a statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled in downtown Baghdad on April 9, 2003. Photos: Saurabh Das/AP; Jerome Delay/AP**

Within weeks of the 2003 invasion, Saddam was out of power and on the run. A right-wing ideologue who had cut his teeth working under Kissinger was placed in charge of Iraq for a period after the invasion. The country’s new “viceroy,” L. Paul Bremer, once referred to himself as “the only paramount authority figure — other than dictator Saddam Hussein — that most Iraqis had ever known.” Though a longtime diplomat, Bremer had never served in the Middle East and had no expertise in Iraqi politics. But he had become obsessed with the idea that the Baath Party was analogous to the German Nazi Party and needed to be eliminated in its entirety. Under his leadership at the Coalition Provisional Authority, the U.S. implemented one of the most disastrous policies in the modern history of postwar decision-making: liquidating the Iraqi Army as part of a policy known as de-Baathification.

In his book on the Iraq War, “Night Draws Near,” the late Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Anthony Shadid wrote, “The net effect of Bremer’s decision was to send more than 350,000 officers and conscripts, men with at least some military training, into the streets, instantly creating a reservoir of potential recruits for a guerrilla war. (At their disposal was about a million tons of weapons and



munitions of all sorts, freely accessible in more than a hundred largely unguarded depots around the country.)” A U.S. official, quoted anonymously by the New York Times Magazine at the time, described Bremer’s decision more bluntly: “That was the week we made 450,000 enemies on the ground in Iraq.”



**Paul Bremer, the top U.S. civilian administrator in Iraq, during a graduation ceremony for Iraq’s new post war army on Oct. 4, 2003, in Kirkush. Photo: Marwan Naamani/AFP via Getty Images**

The impact of Bremer’s decision can be discerned in the secret Iranian intelligence cables written more than a decade later. Many of the Sunni insurgents who went to war against the government of Nouri al-Maliki in 2013 are described in the documents as “Baathists,” a reference to militant groups led by former Iraqi military officers. These groups have nostalgically identified themselves with the pre-2003 political order. The documents show that the Iranians have worked to either destroy them or co-opt them into the fight against the Islamic State.

**As the leaked intelligence reports show, the sectarian bloodletting that started with the U.S. invasion has never really ended.**

Many former Baathists also found themselves fighting in the ranks of ISIS itself, an organization whose military leadership has included senior officials from Saddam’s disbanded military.

De-Baathification coincided with another ugly development in Iraq: the rise of sectarian politics. The United States played a critical role in this phenomenon as well. To take one example, the U.S. occupation authorities after the invasion went on the offensive against a Shia cleric named Moqtada al-Sadr. Sadr, whose father and brothers were assassinated by Saddam’s henchmen, was an Iraqi nationalist who spoke the language of the people, though he was often at odds with other Shia clerical leaders. Iranian intelligence cables from 2014 cite pro-Iranian individuals in Iraq expressing continued frustration with Sadr for refusing to go along with their program. He remains a thorn in the side of the current Iraqi government and Iranian interests generally, despite having lived and studied in Iran for many years.

Following the U.S. invasion, Sadr's popularity rose after he organized social services and infrastructure to address the abysmal conditions faced by Iraqis, particularly in the Shia slums that had been brutally repressed by Saddam. When the Sunni city of Fallujah was first attacked by the U.S. in April 2004, following the killing of four Blackwater mercenaries, Sadr organized blood donations and aid convoys and condemned the American aggression. For a brief moment, the U.S. had [very nearly united Shia and Sunni forces](#) in a war against a common enemy.

This situation was untenable. By 2005, the U.S. had become fully invested in policies that greatly exacerbated sectarianism in Iraq. It began arming, training, and funding Shia death squads that terrorized Sunni communities in a war that altered the demographic makeup of Baghdad. As the position of the Sunnis became increasingly dire, groups began to emerge that grew more and more extreme, including Al Qaeda in Iraq and its successor, the Islamic State.

As the leaked intelligence reports show, the sectarian bloodletting that started with the U.S. invasion has never really ended. As late as 2014, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security was documenting the continued violent cleansing of Sunnis from areas around Baghdad by Iraqi militias associated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

### **Iran's Calculation, Iraq's Anger**

When the Obama administration conducted a made-for-television "withdrawal" from Iraq in 2011, large swaths of the country were still in a state of political and humanitarian collapse. The Iraqi state that had existed before the war had been utterly destroyed. For better and for worse, Iran has sought to fill the gaping void in Iraq that Washington's policies created. Out of the rubble of the country, Iranian leaders saw an opportunity to create a new order — one that would never again threaten them the way Saddam Hussein's regime had.

The protests now paralyzing Iraqi cities are a vivid demonstration of how unpopular Iranian policies have been in Iraq. Several hundred demonstrators have been killed by security forces firing live ammunition into crowds. The sovereignty of Iraq was effectively annihilated by the 2003 U.S. invasion, but the idea of an Iraqi nation is still cherished by young people in the streets braving bullets to assert their independence.

Iran's aggressive approach toward Iraq has to be seen in the context of history. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any rational nation-state actor that would not have pursued a similar path given the same circumstances. The invasion led to fears in Iran that the next stop for the U.S. military would be Tehran. These fears were heightened after the Bush administration rebuffed a proposed "[grand bargain](#)" from Iran in 2003 that offered talks aimed at resolving the differences between the two sides. Instead, the United States continued to treat Iran as an enemy and pursued a path of occupation in Iraq that left in its wake a trail of failures and hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis.

That Iran would seize an opportunity to assert its influence in Iraq is no shock. While Iran's role has been far from positive, the United States has long since lost any claim to be a legitimate broker regarding the future of either country. In 1963, the U.S. helped initiate Iraq's long nightmare when it aided the overthrow of the popular government of Abdel Karim Kassem, who sought to nationalize Iraqi oil and create social welfare programs. The U.S. supported the ascent of Saddam and continued to back his regime over the years, mainly as a bulwark against Iran, even in the face of high-profile atrocities like the gassing of Kurdish civilians in the city of Halabja and the massacres of Shia Iraqis following the Gulf War.

For more than six decades, the U.S. has played a central role in fomenting disasters that have destroyed the lives of entire generations in Iraq and Iran. Any criticisms of Iran's role today cannot efface this ugly record. How Iraqis respond to the information about Iran's secret dealings in their country is their business. Perhaps there are international organizations and countries whose advice and counsel would be welcome. But given its atrocious legacy in Iraq, the United States should not be among them.

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## **Portrait Of a General**

In the four decades since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, few Iranian leaders have achieved the global profile attained by Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the military commander killed in an American airstrike on Thursday. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Suleimani emerged as the United States's most capable adversary in that country. His American counterpart at a key point during the occupation, Gen. David Petraeus, described Suleimani as "a truly evil figure" in a letter to Robert Gates, then the U.S. defense secretary. Over the years, Suleimani gained a reputation as a fearsome military leader who controlled a network of ideologically driven militia proxies across the Middle East.

A more nuanced portrait of Suleimani emerges from a [leaked archive of secret Iranian spy cables](#) obtained by The Intercept. The documents were generated by officers from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, or MOIS, stationed in Iraq between 2013 and 2015, when the Iranian war against the Islamic State was at its height, and Suleimani was running the show.

The reports reveal how Suleimani was perceived in some corners of the Iranian intelligence establishment, and the picture that emerges does not always align with the carefully crafted public image of the general as an indomitable strategist. While the Iranian-led war against ISIS was raging, Iranian spies privately expressed concern that the brutal tactics favored by Suleimani and his Iraqi proxies were laying the groundwork for major blowback against the Iranian presence in Iraq. Suleimani was also criticized for his own alleged self-promotion amid the fighting. Photos of the Iranian commander on battlefields across Iraq had helped build his image as an iconic military leader. But that outsized image was also turning him into a figure of terror for many ordinary Iraqis.

Some of the cables chronicle Suleimani's battlefield appearances and meetings with senior Iraqi officials, while others describe the activities of his militia proxies in Iraq. As commander of the elite Quds Force, the external operations arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Suleimani belonged to a more powerful institutional rival of Iran's intelligence ministry. In some documents, intelligence officers criticize Suleimani for alienating Sunni Arab communities and helping to create the circumstances that justified a renewed American military presence in Iraq.

A 2014 MOIS document lamented that, partly because Suleimani broadcasted his role as commander of many of the Iraqi Shia militias fighting ISIS, Iraqi Sunnis blamed the Iranian government for the persecution that many were suffering at the hands of these same forces. The document discussed [a recent assault by Iran-backed forces against ISIS fighters in the Sunni farming community of Jurf al-Sakhar](#). The attack had included a number of Shia militia groups, including a notorious outfit known as Asaib ahl al-Haq. The militias succeeded in routing the Islamic State, but their victory soon gave way to a generalized slaughter of locals, transforming the sweetness of Iran's triumph into "bitterness," in the words of one case officer.



**An Iraqi Shia militia member aims his weapon after clashes with militants from ISIS, in Jurf al-Sakhar, 43 miles south of Baghdad on Sept. 28, 2014. Photo: AP**

"It is mandatory and necessary to put some limits and borders on the violence being inflicted against innocent Sunni people in Iraq and the things that Mr. Suleimani is doing. Otherwise, the violence between Shia and Sunni will continue," the MOIS report continued. "At the moment, whatever happens to Sunnis, directly or indirectly, is seen as having been done by Iran even when Iran has nothing to do with it."

That same document speculated that Suleimani's public promotion of his role in the war was geared toward building political capital in Iran, possibly for a future presidential bid. But it also contained subtler insights into the Quds Force commander's character and how he saw himself. The document noted Suleimani's affection for former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, once a close ally of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. For a time, Davutoglu was considered the intellectual force behind Turkey's foreign policy.



“Mr. Suleimani has an old relationship with Ahmet Davutoglu and always compares his role in Iranian foreign policy to that of someone like Davutoglu in Turkish politics,” the secret report said. However, Suleimani’s self-perception had evolved over time, according to the report, and by 2014, with the Iranian proxy war against ISIS in full swing, he had begun to see himself less as a political ideologue and more as a military and intelligence chief comparable to Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey’s powerful intelligence apparatus.

The intelligence ministry report does not contain further details about Suleimani’s relationships with senior Turkish officials. But the apparent shift in his self-perception tracks with developments in the region. Just as Fidan was helping [direct](#) a Turkish proxy war in Syria, Iran was ramping up a similar effort in Iraq.

In late 2014, according to the leaked documents, an expansive program was already underway to send Iraqi Shia militia fighters to Iran for training, equipment, and ideological preparation. It was a program in which the Revolutionary Guards played a critical role. These Shia militia fighters went on to fight the Islamic State, but also stood accused at times of waging an indiscriminate sectarian war inside Iraq and undermining the country’s elected government.

Iran’s secret intelligence documents contain insights into how this training campaign was organized, while also shedding light on the idiosyncratic reasons that some Iraqis sought the support of Suleimani and the Revolutionary Guards.

In a September 2014 meeting at the Iranian consulate in Basra, an Iraqi militia commander told an Iranian spy that he wanted his fighters to operate under Iranian control, rather than being directed by the Iraqi army or the Popular Mobilization Units, or PMUs, formed to fight ISIS. His concerns seemed primarily ideological. The commander told his Iranian interlocutor that he already had 600 well-trained fighters and planned to grow his militia in the near future. He was anxious, however, that his troops might lose their ideological discipline without Iranian guidance.

Many volunteers in the PMUs “might not even pray,” he said, and “some commanders and even soldiers” in the Iraqi security forces were said to drink alcohol. The commander asked the Iranian spy to “coordinate for these soldiers to come under the command of Iran,” worrying that his fighters’ morale and discipline would be harmed otherwise. According to the report, the request was enthusiastically granted.

But some Iraqis appear to have romanticized the Revolutionary Guards, and some militia fighters sent to Iran for training found the experience did not meet their lofty expectations. “Unfortunately, those who we send to Iran to receive training are not happy with the cultural situation in Iran,” another commander whose troops had already undergone training in Iran told an intelligence ministry spy, according to a different report from the same month. This commander complained that “brothers in [the Revolutionary Guards] only pray the usual five

times a day,” and that the Iranian fighters were not as zealous in their religious practices as the Iraqi trainees had expected.

These Iraqi militias wound up playing a significant, if controversial, role in the war against ISIS. Following Suleimani’s death, some of them are now finding themselves in the U.S. military’s crosshairs. Within 24 hours of the strike that killed the Quds Force leader, another strike [took place](#) north of Baghdad, reportedly killing and wounding several members of an Iran-backed militia. There are strong signs that this campaign is just beginning. Late Friday, the State Department [announced](#) that it was designating Asaib ahl al-Haq, which had taken part in the 2014 massacre in Jurf al-Sakhar, as a foreign terrorist organization and sanctioning several of its leaders.

In the short term, it is almost certain that violence will escalate in the Middle East. Late Saturday, U.S. President Donald Trump made a [provocative threat](#) to bomb 52 selected targets inside Iran if it retaliates for the killing of Suleimani, including Iranian cultural sites. But Iran may not even need to respond with violence to impose a price for the death of the Quds Force commander. In response to widespread outrage over the strike that killed Suleimani, Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, who is described in the MOIS documents as having a “special relationship” with Iran — and who enjoyed Suleimani’s personal backing when protests demanded his ouster this past fall — [pledged](#) on Friday to convene parliament to review the status of American troops in Iraq. By Sunday, [the parliament had voted to expel the U.S. military from the country](#).

If the Iraqi government does make U.S. troops leave in response to Suleimani’s killing, it will be another chapter in what is by now a familiar story: Like the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, this latest act of aggression may be a tactical success for the United States that winds up delivering a strategic victory to Iran.