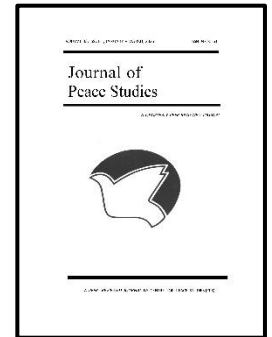


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Iraq's Impossible Position: When the Battlefield is a Sovereign State

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OPINION

Iraq's Impossible Position: When the Battlefield is a Sovereign State

Manoj Mathew*

Abstract

Iraq is in an impossible position as a sovereign state caught between US and Iranian military presence on its soil. It cannot simply “choose a side” as it hosts both American forces and Iranian-backed militias that are officially part of the Iraqi state structure. Thus, Iraq faces contradictory pressures: it depends on American goodwill while sharing deep religious, trade, and border ties with Iran. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), born from the fight against ISIS, enjoy state legitimacy while maintaining their own command structures aligned with Tehran. Iraq’s leadership practises a difficult balancing act— absorbing blows from both directions while trying its best to keep the state intact. The fundamental problem here is that regional security arrangements cannot endure if built over “hollowed-out states” whose sovereignty is compromised. Iraq remains not a party to regional wars but has become the unfortunate address where geopolitical conflicts play out at local cost.



On 28-29 July 2026, Iraq was dragged into the US-Iran war as joint US-Saudi airstrikes hit targets on its soil— formations that are, by law, part of the Iraqi state. Baghdad called it an unacceptable aggression, yet the world barely blinked. Having served with the UN in Iraq, I have watched this contradiction firsthand: a sovereign state that hosts both sides of a war, and pays the price for each. Some reflections on why Iraq cannot simply “choose a side” — and why no

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regional order will endure if it is built over hollowed-out states.

The war between the United States and Iran has arrived — once again — at an address that belongs to neither of them: Iraq.

Joint US–Saudi airstrikes on Iraqi territory, targeting positions of Iran-backed militias, killed at least twenty fighters and, according to Iranian officials, around four military advisers from Tehran. Baghdad's National Security Council protested the loss of innocent lives, and Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi denounced the strikes as unacceptable aggression. Within a day, Iranian missiles struck a base in Jordan hosting American troops, US forces answered with a two-hour barrage against Revolutionary Guard targets inside Iran, drones set gas vessels ablaze at an Egyptian port, and Brent crude jumped above \$88.

Six months into this war, much of the commentary has focused on Washington and Tehran, on Hormuz and the Houthis and Riyadh's reluctant entry into the fighting. But if you want to understand why this conflict is so difficult to end, and what is really at stake in the regional order being contested — look at Iraq. I spent years serving with the United Nations in Iraq, supporting Iraq's political process. What is happening

now is the culmination of a contradiction Iraqis have lived with for over two decades.

A state hosting both sides of a war

Iraq is the only country on earth that formally hosts the military presence of both belligerents. American forces remain on Iraqi soil at the government's invitation, a legacy of the campaign against the Islamic State. At the same time, the 'Popular Mobilization Forces', the umbrella of primarily Shia armed groups raised in 2014 to fight ISIS — are an official component of the Iraqi state: designated by law as a formation within the security structure, paid from the national budget, and answerable, on paper, to the Prime Minister as commander-in-chief.

In practice, the most powerful of these factions maintain their own command structures, their own political parties and economic offices, and their own relationship with Tehran; cultivated over decades of exile, war, and ideological affinity, and with close relations with Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The presence of Iranian advisers among casualties in Iraq in late July 2026, was not an anomaly; it was a snapshot of an arrangement everyone in Baghdad knows and no one can undo.

This is the paradox at the heart of the Iraqi state: the government pays the salaries of forces it does not fully command, whose actions can invite retaliation against the very state that employs them. When Saudi Arabia accuses Iraqi militias of striking its oil facilities and responds with airstrikes, the Iraqi Prime Minister must condemn an attack on formations that are nominally his own — even though their alleged operations were never his decision. Sovereignty, in the textbook sense of a monopoly over legitimate use of force, exists in Iraq as an aspiration, not as a practice.

How it came to this

It is worth remembering that the militias did not emerge from nowhere. When ISIS seized a third of the country in 2014 and the Iraqi army retreated, it was Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa calling able-bodied Iraqis to the country's defence that filled the breach — tens of thousands of volunteers, joined by pre-existing Shia militias, coalesced into the Popular Mobilization Forces. The fighters who stopped the caliphate at the gates of Baghdad earned genuine legitimacy in the eyes of many Iraqis. The 2016 law that folded them into the state was an attempt to honour that service while asserting control.

But integration without subordination produces exactly what we see now: hybrid actors who enjoy the resources and protection of the state while retaining the autonomy and external alignment of a militia. Their political wings sit in parliament and shape government formation. Their commanders answer partly to Baghdad and, for the most powerful factions, more to direct lines running east. Successive prime ministers have tried to square this circle. None has succeeded, because the arithmetic of Iraqi democratic politics does not permit a confrontation, and the geography of Iraq does not permit an escape.

Why Iraq cannot choose

The counsel Iraq receives from the international community is usually some version of "choose a side." This misunderstands the country's predicament. Iraq shares a 1,600-kilometre border, deep religious ties, and vital trade with Iran. It depends on American goodwill for its financial system, much of its security assistance, and its reintegration into the region and wider world. Its society contains constituencies passionately attached to each orientation, and a young generation, the protesters of 2019; increasingly contemptuous of both.

Choosing is not a policy option; it is a formula for state collapse. Every Iraqi government since 2003 has therefore practised the same uncomfortable art: balancing, hedging, absorbing blows from both directions, and trying to keep the state intact in the space between. In quieter years, that art bought Iraq a measure of stability. In a direct US–Iran war, the space between is precisely where the bombs fall.

The stakes beyond Iraq

There is a larger lesson here for the region's future. The war now raging will eventually produce some new regional arrangement, either through negotiation or exhaustion. The test of that arrangement will not be the communiqués signed in Islamabad or elsewhere. It will be whether countries like Iraq get to be states again, or remain arenas: territories where the sovereignty is local but the

decisions are made elsewhere, where armed groups serve as both national institutions and foreign instruments, and where every regional escalation is paid for in local blood.

Having watched Iraqi officials, party leaders, and ordinary citizens navigate these pressures at close quarters, I hold to a conviction that experience has only strengthened: no security architecture for this region will endure if it is built over hollowed-out states. The measure of the coming order is whether it restores to Baghdad, and Beirut, and Sanaa, and Damascus, the most basic attribute of statehood, 'sovereignty': the exclusive right to decide questions of war and peace on their own soil.

Until then, Iraq will remain what it has too often been these past two decades — not a party to the region's wars, but their address. ■

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