

Iran and the American Presidential Elections

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Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus might have relegated the US-Iran confrontation from the top news stories but the next months before the US presidential elections remain significant for Iran's plan to influence American voters against the re-election of president Trump. Indeed, on 30th of March 2020, an Iraqi group under the name of "Usbit al-Tha'ereen" (the revolutionary league) declared the cancellation of a big attack against American troops stationed at the Ain al-Assad military base, claiming that it did not want to harm Iraqis who lived close to the target.¹ The following article argues that Iran will try to make Iraq its battlefield against American troops in order to push Trump's policies against Iran to the centre of the US presidential election debate. The eviction of American troops from the Middle East has become central to Iran's strategy and to that of its allies; this article begins by explaining the origin of this policy, and the strategy behind it. The significance of Iraq in this approach is emphasised, including an illustration of how Iran is levelling the field in Iraq in order to implement its plan. The article concludes by emphasising the importance for Iran, and for the success of its strategies, to have both a united Shia front, and a legitimate government that works closely with it.

Evicting American Troops from the Middle East?!

Origin of the Slogan

Two days after the killing of major general Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the al-Quds Forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, or al-Hashd al-Shaabi) on the 3rd of January 2020, Hassan Nasrallah the Secretary General of Hezbollah made a public speech. In it, he wondered "what would be a justice qisas (retribution) for the killing of Soleimani? ... Taking down Trump? Pompeo?", he asked. "But the shoes of Soleimani are more valuable for us than them", he answered. The only answer to the question of qisas, he added, "is to end the American military presence in West Asia." Nasrallah explained "if they refuse to leave vertically (willingly and peacefully), the axis of resistance (Iran and its allies) will force them to leave horizontally (forcefully)." Borrowing the term 'West Asia' from Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who used it to designate the Middle East, Nasrallah further noted that "the decision of forcing the American troops to leave West Asia has already been taken by the axis of resistance." He also made an appeal to the Kurds of Iraq to vote in the parliament with the Shiite representatives to expel the American troops from Iraq. He reminded them of a meeting that Soleimani and leaders from Hezbollah had conducted with their top leaders in 2015 to defend themselves from ISIS's attacks, reminding them that "at that time no country rushed to defend them."²

Following Nasrallah' speech, forcing American troops to leave the Middle East became the mantra of Iran and of its allies in the region. Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign affairs minister tweeted, on January 6th, 2020, "End of malign US presence in West Asia has begun."³ In a televised speech, hours after Iran missile's strike on the American Ain al-Assad military base in Iraq, on January 8th, Khamenei declared "What is important is to end the corrupt

¹ "Usbit al-Tha'ereen declares the cancellation of an attack against the American troops at Ain al-Assad this morning", Iraq Electronic News, March 30, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3aDd2fS>

² Laila Bassam, Nadine Awadalla, "Hezbollah: U.S. forces in Middle East to go home in coffins", Reuters, January 5, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-lebanon-hezbollah-nasra/hezbollah-us-forces-in-middle-east-to-go-home-in-coffins-idUSKBN1Z40IO>

³ Javad Zarif, Twitter, January 6, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1214267053043060738>

presence of the US in this region.”⁴ Similarly, on January 15th, Hassan Rouhani, Iran’s president, demanded the US to withdraw its troops from the Middle East saying “US troops are insecure in the region today, and EU troops might be in danger tomorrow.”⁵ Iran’s top military commanders, including Hossein Salami, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the Aerospace Force of the IRGC, and Ismail Qaani, the new commander of the al-Quds Force all made similar statements.

Nasrallah’s speech reverberated in Iraq, Yemen, and to a lesser extent in the Palestinian territories. In Iraq, the leaders of Kata’eb Hezbollah –part of Iraq’s PMF –promised, in a statement, that “the price of this crime (the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, who was also the commander of Kata’eb Hezbollah) won’t be less than removing their throne (the American presence) from Iraq and the entire region.”⁶ They also called the parliament to endorse a law to evict American troops out of Iraq.⁷ The Alnujaba movement, another component of the PMF, asked “the leaders of Iraq official security forces to keep a safe distance from the American troops and not to let themselves be used as a human shield for the crusader’s invaders.”⁸ The Asa’eb Ahlu al-Haq movement, also part of the PMF, stated “we will not be satisfied by getting the American troops out of Iraq; we call for trade boycott with the Americans and for closure of the American embassy.”⁹ Hadi al-Ameri, the president of the al-Fatah coalition, the political arm of the PMF in Iraq’s parliament, and the head of Badr organisation, called for “the unity of all Iraqi forces in order to get the American troops out of Iraq whose presence became a burden on Iraq and whose existence means more Iraqi bloodshed.”¹⁰ In Yemen, the Houthis expressed “their readiness to participate in a retaliation against American interests in the region” and called for “using all possible means to oust the American troops from the region.”¹¹ In their part, the Palestinian Hamas movement and the Islamic Jihad, who sent their top leaders to Iran in order to participate in the funeral ceremony, called Soleimani “the martyr of al-Quds, who armed and supported the Palestinian resistance, which will continue its path in resisting the Israeli-American aggressions”; however, they stopped short of calling for a removal of American troops from the region.¹²

Taking Nasrallah’s Speech Seriously

The call for the removal of American troops from the region should neither be seen as an empty slogan to calm down the rank-and-file of the so-called ‘axis of resistance’, nor as a call to avenge the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis. Rather, it should be understood as an Iranian strategy to influence the results of the American presidential election of November 2020. In his speech, Nasrallah was blunt about this goal: “when the coffins of the American soldiers and officers start to be transferred to US soil...Trump and his administration will know that they lost the region and will lose the elections.”¹³ Targeting American troops in the region, and more

⁴ “A Sea of Mourners in Iran, and New Threats From Both Sides”, New York Times, January 6, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/middleeast/iran-soleimani.html>

⁵ Natasha Turak, “‘Danger tomorrow’: Iran’s Rouhani makes veiled threat to US and EU troops in Middle East”, CNBC, January 15, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/15/irans-rouhani-makes-veiled-threat-to-us-and-eu-troops-in-middle-east.html>

⁶ “Kata’eb Hezbollah to American, Zionists and evil kingdoms: you will pay heavily for your crime”, Kata’eb Hezbollah website, January 3, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.kataibhezbollah.com/statment/3052>

⁷ “Kata’eb Hezbollah calls the parliament to ratify a law to remove the American bases from Iraq after its crime”, Almanar TV, January 5, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://almanar.com.lb/6144448>

⁸ “The Islamic resistance in Iraq calls the security forces to stay away from the American troops”, AlNuJaba movement website, January 5, 2020. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2RwG8qs>

⁹ Asa’eb Ahlu al-Haq, “Ahlu al-Haq: we will not be satisfied by evicting the American troops”, Ahlu al-Haq website, January 7, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://ahluahaq.com/post/10909>

¹⁰ “Amri calls national forces to unite to evict the Americans from Iraq”, Al-Hashad AISHa’bi website, January 3, 2020. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2O3I5cy>

¹¹ “Houthis gathered in Sanaa to support a retaliation against American military bases”, MCD, January 6, 2020. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2GrPNYP>

¹² “Ismael Hanieh: Soleimani is the martyr of AlQuds”, AlJazeera Mubashir, January 6, 2020. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2GvsJIN>

¹³ “Hezbollah’s secretary general speech on January 5, 2020”, Almanar website, January 6, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://almanar.com.lb/6152819>

precisely in Iraq (regarding which, see more below) is a strategy set in order to bring Trump's policies in the Middle East to the forefront of the US presidential elections' agenda. The goal being to force Americans into feeling and seeing the repercussions of Trump's policies themselves. With the rift between Europe and the US over Iran after Trump's withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal, the Iranian leadership is betting that a new American president from the Democratic party will re-embrace the Nuclear Deal and end the economic sanctions, which are severely hampering the Iranian economy, and thereby threatening the regime's stability.

Iraq as Iran's Battlefield Against America

While Iran can activate its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Palestinian territories and Afghanistan to work against the Americans, there are several indicators which suggest it intends to make Iraq its main battleground against American troops. First, besides influencing the results of the US presidential elections in favour of a president who will re-endorse the Nuclear Deal and end sanctions, Iran desires hegemony over Iraq's policies. By forcing a hasty American withdrawal from Iraq, Iran will be the main power that can fill the vacuum and influence Iraq's internal and external policies.

Second, Iraq is Iran's main route to deliver supplies to its allies in Syria and Lebanon. Indeed, its allies in Iraq, the PMF, control the al-Qaem-Bukamal gate, one of the three border crossings between Syria and Iraq. The al-Qaem-Bukamal crossing was liberated from ISIS in November 2017, however it was only reopened two years later.¹⁴ This crossing is of strategic importance to Iran as the other two border crossings with Syria are closed: al-Waleed-al-Tanaf is controlled by the Americans from the Syrian side, and al-Ya'rubia-Rabe'a is located within a Kurd-controlled area.¹⁵ The strategic importance of this crossing is further highlighted by the fact that America has also chosen to target it. Dozens of PMF militants were killed at al-Qaem on the 29th of December 2019 due to a US airstrike.¹⁶

Third, Iran has more influence in Iraq than in any other area of the Middle East. Militarily, Iran tasked Soleimani to form the PMF in June 2014 as part of an effort to prevent ISIS from taking control over more territory in Iraq, and also to drive ISIS away from Iran's borders. Formed after a religious edict from Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shia Muslims and one of the most senior clerics in Shia Islam, the PMF is composed today of more than 130 thousand fighters, belonging to dozens of Shia groups. Soleimani used 120 operational officers from the Lebanese Hezbollah party to train the PMF militia.¹⁷ This not only shows the strong coordination among the so-called axis of resistance, but also the influence Hezbollah has in Iraq. The backbone groups of the PMF, such as Badr Organisation, Kata'eb Hezbollah, Asa'eb Ahlu al-Haq, and the al-Nujaba movement all take their orders directly from Iran.¹⁸ The degree of loyalty to Iran is well-illustrated by the fact that Hadi al Amri, the head of Badr organisation and the president of the al-Fatah coalition, fought - in the 1980-1988 war between Iraq and Iran - on the Iranian side, against his own country.¹⁹ Politically, Iran enjoys the support of the al-Fatah coalition, which received 47 seats in Iraq's 2018 Parliamentary elections (total Members of Parliament being 328). However, at critical junctures, that is to say when the Shia community feels a collective threat, Iran can enjoy the support of 170 members, i.e. over 50% of the Iraqi Parliament. Religiously,

¹⁴ Majd Hamzah, "Al-Qaem-Bukamal crossing, the gate of resistance opens today", U News Agency, September 29, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2U7VIKR>

¹⁵ "Reopening Bukamal crossing between Syria and Iraq", Liwa News website, November 1, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2RuTSSk>

¹⁶ "Activists passing around photos of the American strike on Kat'eb Hezbollah sites", AlHura Website, December 29, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://arbne.ws/2RVno2D>

¹⁷ "Nasrallah: Soleimani opened for us new horizons and today we have a real missile's force", Almanar, January 13, 2020. Retrieved from: <http://almanar.com.lb/6287030>

¹⁸ "AlHashd AlSha'bi in Iraq is a real political and armed force", AlJazeera, December 31, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2t89yI7>

¹⁹ Suzzanah George, "Breaking Badr organization", Foreign Policy, November 6, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/>

Qom, Iran's holy city and the headquarters of the clergy who run the country, seems to be able to unite Iraq's Shia religious leaders when necessary (see below).

Finally, the PMF has its own reasons to target American troops in Iraq. This is partly because the US has itself targeted the PMF, on December 29th, 2019 killing dozens of its militants, and partly because the Americans killed al-Muhandis, the head of Kata'eb Hezbollah. It is also worth remembering that the US designated Kata'eb Hezbollah as a terrorist group in July 2009.²⁰ This makes it easier for Iran to mobilise the PMF against US troops.

For the above-mentioned reasons, making Iraq the forefront of Iran's battle against American troops is the most likely approach of the so-called axis of resistance, at least until the end of the US presidential elections. This does not mean that Iran will refrain from acting alone against the interests of the Americans and/or the Gulf States, as it did in the last year, but the burden of the mobilisation against American troops will be placed on Iran's allies in Iraq.

Levelling the Political Field in Iraq Before Striking

It appears that two things have so far prevented the PMF from acting against US troops: namely, the divisions within the Shia community, and the lack of a constitutional government in Iraq. Starting a military confrontation with the American troops in Iraq before fixing those two interrelated problems might backfire on Iran and its allies. Because the Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq do not support Iran, the PMF cannot run the risk of being accused by important segments of the Shia community of destabilising the country. Furthermore, in order to ensure that the militias required to fight the American troops enjoy the support of the Shia community, Iraq must have a legitimate government, and one moreover that seeks to evict American troops from Iraq in a peaceful manner. In other words, such a government would first have to attempt to implement the parliament's decision on January 4th, 2020 that required the government to end American military presence in Iraq. Before explaining how Iran is moving ahead to fix these two problems, the two subsections below map first the divisions within Iraq's Shia community, and illustrate the constitutional problem of the caretaker government.

The Divided Shia Community

The Shia in Iraq are divided into five major groups that compete with one another:

First, the Al-Fatah coalition, which has 47 seats in parliament. This is headed by Hadi al-Amri, and is the political arm of the PMF. It is fully supported and backed by Iran.

Second, the Sa'eron coalition, which has 54 seats in parliament, and was formed by the renowned Shia clerk, Muqtada al-Sadr.²¹ This coalition, which includes two members from Iraq's Communist Party, supported the anti-governmental protests, and has sought in the past to keep its distance from Iran.

Indeed, al-Sadr opened channels with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt in an attempt to counter Iran's influence in Iraq.²² However, al-Sadr is a Shia nationalist, and he is anti-American. His militia, Jayesh al-Mahdi, fought the Americans in Iraq between 2003 and 2008. Despite dissolving his militia in 2011, he was able – three years later – to call them back within days, and in full armament in order to fight ISIS, under the name of Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades).²³ Following the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, al-Sadr made it clear that he wants “the American occupation troops to leave Iraq”. He noted that he would prefer this to occur peacefully, “to save

²⁰ "State Department Terrorist Designation of Ahmad al-Hamidawi", US Department of State, February 26, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designation-of-ahmad-al-hamidawi/>

²¹ Mustafa al-Duleimi, "Map of seats' distribution in Iraq new parliament", Arabi 21, May 19, 2018. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2RAzAHg>

²² "After Saudi Arabia and UAE, al-Sadr visits Egypt", AlJazeera, August 14, 2017. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2U7WCv>

²³ "Mahdi Army", Center for International Security Cooperation (CISAC), n.d. Retrieved from: https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/mahdi-army#highlight_text_16994

Iraqis the pain of a new war”, but with force if necessary.²⁴ On January 24th, 2020, he gave a speech on the occasion of the Iraqi demonstration against continued American presence, and declared, “we will exhaust every possible peaceful means... to get the occupation forces out of Iraq.” This includes “closing all the American military bases, ending contracts with the American security companies, shutting the airspace before the American forces ... and the abolishing of all security agreements with the occupier.” He added, “if these conditions are implemented, we will not deal with [America] as an occupier.” Finally, he announced a “temporary truce” so as to give the Iraqi government time to implement the parliamentary decision concerning the American troops in the country.²⁵

Third, the coalition of Dawlat al-Qanoon, headed by former prime minister, Nour al-Maliki. It has 25 seats in parliament, and it fully supports Iran.

Fourth, the al-Nasr coalition, which enjoys 42 seats in parliament, and is also headed by a former prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi. Although the al-Nasr coalition is, to some extent, supported by the US-led international coalition against ISIS²⁶, and has few Sunni legislators within it, the Shia legislators inside al-Nasr voted in parliament for an end to American presence in Iraq.

Fifth, the al-Hikma current, which has 20 seats in parliament, and is headed by the Shia clerk Ammar al-Hakim.²⁷ The al-Hikma current condemned the killing of Soleimani, and voted in parliament to end American military presence in Iraq. However, it does not seem to be onboard with the call to use arms to expel the US from Iraq.

The Unconstitutional Government

Adel Abdul-Mahdi, Iraq’s prime minister, resigned on November 30th, 2019 when Sistani, the Shia religious referee, called in parliament for a vote of no confidence.²⁸ Article 81 of Iraq’s constitution states that the head of the country shall nominate a replacement to the resigned prime minister within 15 days from the resignation.²⁹ But, over four months since his resignation, Abdul-Mahdi is still heading a caretaker government, rendering his government unconstitutional. In fact, article 80(6) of Iraq’s constitution states that it is the responsibility of the council of ministers, or those whom the council delegates, to negotiate international pacts and treaties.³⁰ This ultimately means that because Abdul-Mahdi’s government is unconstitutional, it can neither implement parliament’s decision concerning the removal of American troops in Iraq, nor can it negotiate their withdrawal on behalf of the Iraqis.

Iran’s Two-pillar strategy

As mentioned briefly above, two large components of the Shia community do not support Iran’s policies in Iraq: the Al-Nasr and Sa’eroun coalitions. But following the killing of Soleimani, al-Sadr (of Sa’eroun) shifted his position, and became favourable towards coordination with Iran. This was to avoid activating the PMF against American troops before exhausting the diplomatic means available to end American military presence in Iraq. In fact, the conditions he stated in his speech on January 24th, 2020 were declared immediately after the killing of Soleimani. A close ally to al-Sadr, Mohammad al-Iraqi, stated on January 6th, 2020 that “al-Sadr does not want the military actions against the American troops to begin before exhausting all the political and diplomatic

²⁴ “Al-Sadr complete speech on January 24, 2020”, al-Sadr website, January 24, 2020. Retrieved from: <http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/11069.html>

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ “Al-Sadr first in Iraq elections and al-Abadi the third”, Arabi 21, May 19, 2018. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/38gYRv7>

²⁷ Iyad Anbar, “Shia leaders in Iraq: the struggle for authority and influence” Alhura, June 30, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://arbne.ws/2VFXzxd>

²⁸ “Abdulmahdi officially resigned”, Alhura, November 30, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://arbne.ws/39dvNpK>

²⁹ “Iraq Constitution”, Iraq parliament website, n.d. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2PEI4fc>

³⁰ Ibid

means." Al-Iraqi further explained that "all Iraqi resistance movements should meet first and agree on this approach."³¹

To this end, al-Sadr met with the main groups that compose the PMF in Qom, on January 14th, 2020 to unite the Shia front and to agree on a strategy to evict the American troops out of Iraq.³² Al-Sadr also met Hadi al-Amri in Qom to unite and prioritise the visions of al-Fatah and Sa'eron in parliament.³³ The decision to organise a demonstration, attended by hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, on January 24th against the presence of American troops in Iraq occurred following this meeting.³⁴ The meeting was also followed by an agreement to appoint Mohammed Allawi, as Iraq's new prime minister.³⁵ Al-Sadr also asked its supporters to withdraw from the popular protests in Iraq against corruption arguing that cursing Iraq's neighbours (notably Iran) in the protests was not in the Iraqi's interests, and that anyone who declared support for the Americans was a traitor.³⁶

What has happened between al-Sadr and Iran's clerks in Qom is unknown. However, it is reasonable to assume that in order for Iran to achieve its goal – ousting US forces from Iraq – it would not mind following al-Sadr's strategy to this end. This would ensure the unity of the Shia community, or at least of its majority, and would also safeguard the participation of the al-Sadr militia in the campaign against the American troops.

Having fixed the first problem (Shia divisions), it now remains for Iran to ensure the installation of a legitimate government that will support its strategy. Should Iran secure a loyal government in Iraq, its strategy will start by asking the government to push for a peaceful departure of American troops from Iraq, before asking its allies to enforce the withdrawal.

Mohammed Allawi, Iraq's latest prime minister-designate, was – according to non-confirmed news sources – selected by Mohammad al-Kawtharani, the Lebanese Hezbollah representative in Iraq. According to news reports, al-Sadr was in favour for the appointment of Mustafa al-Kathimi, the former head of Iraq military intelligence, but al-Kawtharani convinced him to support Allawi.³⁷ Reuters reported that Iran was relying on Hezbollah to unite the Iraqi militant groups. Born and raised in al-Najaf, al-Kawtharani has worked closely with Soleimani and enjoys Nasrallah's support; Iran sees him as fit to the task.³⁸ However, al-Kawtharani's effort to install Allawi as Iraq's new prime minister has been impeded by the Sunni and Kurd's blocks in the parliament, leaving the country with no elected prime minister since late November 2019.³⁹ Allawi has now bowed to pressure and withdrawn from the race.

One of the possibilities, of course, is that Iran fails to secure a legitimate – and biddable – government in Iraq. In this scenario, which seems very plausible, Iran will most likely risk its alliance with al-Sadr and activate the PMF against American troops, simply because the time period available during which to influence American

³¹ "Saleh Mohammad al-Iraqi explains a tweet of al-Sadr", al-Alam channel, January 6, 2020. Retrieved from:

<http://bit.ly/2t4BMx4>

³² "The presence of the American troops in Iraq is conversed with the resistance groups' leaders with al-Sadr", AlMayadeen, 13 January 2020. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/314XDF>

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Mohammed Tawfeeq, "Hundreds of thousands protest US troop presence in Iraq", CNN, January 24, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/24/middleeast/iraq-protests-us-troops-intl/index.html>

³⁵ "Al-Sadr disband the blue hat group that is accused of killing demonstrators", D.W., February 11, 2020. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2wz9qwh>

³⁶ "Leaders in al-Sadr group explain the reasons of their withdrawal from the protests", CNN Arabic, January 25, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2020/01/25/iraq-sadr-demonstrations-withdraw>

³⁷ "Iran and Nour al-Malki against Allawi", Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, January 31, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/103848>

³⁸ "Tehran-backed Hezbollah steps in to guide Iraqi militias in Soleimani's wake" Reuters, February 11, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-hezbollah-insight/tehran-backed-hezbollah-steps-in-to-guide-iraqi-militias-in-soleimanis-wake-idUSKBN20520Y>

³⁹ "Allawi apologizes of forming the government", Aljazeera, March 1, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3dK5JoP>

voters against re-electing Trump is very short. As noted in the last month, the military attacks against American troops in Iraq have increased, with the deadliest attack being on the Taji military base that claimed the lives of two Americans, and one British soldier. The American military accused Kata'eb Hezbollah of organising the attacks, and retaliated by carrying out airstrikes against five of the latter's weapons depots.⁴⁰ It is important to note, however, that Kata'eb Hezbollah did not endorse any of the attacks against American troops in Iraq so as to stick with the two-pronged Iranian strategy in Iraq of unifying the Shiite front and installing a legitimate government. Instead, an unknown group calling itself "Usbit al-Tha'ereen" (the Revolutionary League) claimed responsibility for the attack.⁴¹ The same group responded to the US attacks on Kata'eb Hezbollah's weapons depots by firing 33 rockets at the US military base, al-Rasheed, injuring both American and Iraqi troops.⁴² It is, however, widely believed that Usbit al-Tha'ereen is just a name under which Iran's proxies in Iraq are operating.

Conclusions

Stephen Collinson, an analyst at CNN believes that it is too early to argue that Iran might have given president Trump a foreign policy victory since the Iranian revenge for the killing of Soleimani did not in fact amount to any significant US loss. Collinson further noted that despite the fact that "the region didn't explode into war" after the killing of Soleimani, "the White House that's always ready to declare Mission Accomplished had better keep its powder dry" because Iran and its allies are plotting attacks.⁴³ This, indeed, is no secret. Iran cannot afford to have Trump in office for another four years, and it will do its best to sway the American voters to vote against him. This will be done by organising attacks on American forces in Iraq, and placing Trump's decision to kill Soleimani at the centre of the election debate. As this analysis argues, Iran and its regional allies are in the process of levelling the field for these attacks. First, they are uniting the Shia front in Iraq against the Americans, and second they are making sure that the new Iraqi government will be on their side. The first task has been accomplished by getting al-Sadr on their side; they are, however, still struggling with the second. Nonetheless, even if they fail to install a government friendly to Iran, they are not going to postpone their attacks against American troops.

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⁴⁰ Mark Mazzetti et al, "As Iran Reels, Trump Aides Clash Over Escalating Military Showdown", NY Times, March 21, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/world/middleeast/trump-iran-iraq-coronavirus-militas.html>

⁴¹ Usbit al-Tha'ereen, a new group adopts al-Taji attacks, Alakhbar, March 16, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Iraq/285700>

⁴² "A new group called Usbit al-Tha'ereen claims responsibility for the attacks on the American al-Taji military base", Nahrain News, March 18, 2020. Retrieved from <https://nahrainnet.net/?p=55709>

⁴³ Stephen Collinson, "Did Iran give Trump a foreign policy victory, after all?", February 28, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/28/world/meanwhile-in-america-february-28-intl/index.html>

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