

Can Iraq and Kurdistan Region Stay Neutral amid US-Iran Tensions?

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The US-Iran tensions in Iraq are a bit calmer now, but is not clear whether these tensions will lead to compromise or war! In between, some of the Iraqi and Kurdish officials are always emphasize that they are unbiased. The question is that can Iraq and Kurdistan region stay neutral amid US-Iran tensions? Certainly no. because when two other states are fighting on other country's land then neutrality of that country is not only in the authority of the officials, but other factors such the geopolitical position and balance of international policy also play key role in that. In history there are many examples of those states had wanted to be neutral during war between other states but either they were invaded or their neutrality did not last long.

Scaling down tensions between Washington and Tehran will give an opportunity to Iraq at least to have a peaceful breath. Otherwise both Baghdad and Erbil need to take side, because neither of them have power to stay neutral.

US-Iran Crises Post-Soleimani Era

Qassim Soleimani's killing was a turning point in US-Iran tensions in Iraq. Whether Iran will choose compromise with US or prepare for war and obtain nuclear bomb in post Soleimani era, this will become a turning point in the region.

So far the indications are telling us that despite Iran's slogan "harsh retaliation" against America, Iran is more in the favor of compromise than war. Also there are some other efforts and indications that will avoid military standoff between US and Iran at this stage, like Iraqi caretaker Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi's efforts with a western country as mediator to find "new formula" to keep US troops in Iraq after that Iraqi Shia MPs voted to expel US troops. And US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo ordered to US diplomats to limit any contact with Iranian opposition groups. Also the Iranian foreign minister said that we do not have issue with US presence if Iraq agrees. Both American and Iranian officials have stated that do not want war, therefore war scenario is a weak option for now.

It seems that Iran's first step post-Soleiamni is reorganizing itself internally and externally. Is expected that at this stage Iranian hardliners will take control more of power and moderates and reformists will be more isolated. Disqualifying more than 90 MPs to run for the next Iranian parliament election [\[1\]](#) by the Guardian Council (body of clerics and legal experts in Iran) might has come from that perspective that Iran for war and peace need strong and united power. In the meantime such unity has been seen in the acts and statements of Tehran's proxies in Iraq and the region.

The military and security tension between US and Iran on Iraqi territories to some extent is calmer now. The issue of US military presence to remain or leave has become more a political, legal and popular demand. Prior killing of Soleimani most of the Iraqi popular protests against foreign interference were against Iran but now there is an effort lead by Shia leader Muqtada al- Sadr to turn such popular protests against America as well. Despite Iraqi parliament resolution proposed and voted on by Shias MPs to expel US troops, America is insist to stay in Iraq. And some of the Baghdad officials have realizes that due to military and economic ties with the US is difficult to implement the parliament resolution and if they do then Iraq has a lot to lose. Some of the Iraqi army weapons are American made such F16 aircraft, Abrams tank and many kinds of light weapons too. Also if US cut its financial aides to Iraq and impose sanctions then Iraq will be in difficult condition. However, if Sadr was successful in mobilizing the public and in leading popular protests to expel US troops, then solving the issue will be difficult.

First American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 was in the interest of Iran, but is not necessarily second withdrawal will have the same result for Tehran. Iran is doubtful in post-Soleimani's stage that how should deal with US. Most likely that Iran

will make its final decision when it is clear that if Trump will stay in power or US is heading to post-Trump era.

Can Iraq stay neutral?

Most of the Iraqi leaders are claiming that they are unbiased in the tensions between US and Iran, and Shia high authority Ayatollah al-Sistani also has called Iraqi leaders to stay neutral. But these intentions are not enough to make Iraq to have neutral strategy practically.

Claiming neutrality is not enough to make a state neutral. As Holsti said "There is no guarantee that other states respect the decision of neutrality" the geographical position and intention of conflicted states will determine whether Iraq can become neutral or not. Countries like Switzerland and Sweden due to their geographical positions were neutral during both World Wars. And due to the surrounding Mountains of Switzerland was more expensive for the Germans to invade the country. But both Norway and Denmark were invaded by Germany because through them Germans had captured part of the Baltic Sea and North Atlantic Ocean. Belgium also announced its neutrality, but was invaded by Germany because it was the closest way of the Germans to capture France. And during Vietnam War a neutral state like Laos could not preserve its neutrality because the North Vietnam had considered Laos's land was useful to reach South Vietnam [2] and Iran was one of those countries that despite its claim of neutrality but was invaded during the war.

Although there is no war that took place yet, but neither US nor Iran tend to see Iraq as impartial. And Iraq's geography is important for their geopolitical stakes. Earlier Iranian Ambassador to Iraq threatened to attack American military bases in Iraq in case of US attack on Iran. But more importantly at least some of the Iraqi Shia officials will take side with Iran. Even recently Sadr also openly is taking side with Tehran. Therefore it is difficult for Iraq to stay neutral in US-Iran tensions. In this crisis, it is more appropriate to call Baghdad the city of clashes rather than city of peace.

If US-Iran relations head towards compromise than war, then both Kurdistan region and Iraq can try to make balance in relations with them. And on the contrary if they head towards more escalation or war then it is difficult for Iraq and Kurdistan region to stay neutral. They have to choose one side and most likely that Iraq's decision won't be united. For the Kurds it is important that Kurdish officials make the decision carefully in such a moment which is not going to be easy. But in history all the nations made their fortunes in important moments!

[1] - <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/30385336.html>

[2] - *K. J. Holsti, International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*