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NEWS ANALYSIS

U.S. and Iran Find Common Ground in Iraq's Shiite Conflict

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BAGHDAD — In the Iraqi government's fight to subdue the Shiite militia of [Moktada al-Sadr](#) in the southern city of Basra, perhaps nothing reveals the complexities of the [Iraq](#) conflict more starkly than this: [Iran](#) and the United States find themselves on the same side.

The causes of this convergence boil down to the logic of self-interest, although it is logic in a place where even the most basic reasoning refuses to go in a straight line. In essence, though, the calculation by the United States is that it must back the government it helped to create and take the steps needed to protect American troops and civilian officials.

Iranian motivations appear to hinge on the possibility that Mr. Sadr's political and military followers could gain power in provincial elections this fall, and disrupt the creation of a semiautonomous region in the south that the Iranians see as beneficial.

The American-Iranian convergence is all the more remarkable because of mutual animosity. The United States says that Iran has backed thousands of attacks on American troops in Iraq, bitterly opposes its nuclear program and has not ruled out bombing Iran if Iranian policies do not change. Meanwhile, at the level of senior officials at least, Iran takes quite seriously its depiction of the United States as the planet's Great Satan.

But the two sides are making nice on the issue of fighting Mr. Sadr, one of Iraq's most powerful Shiite clerics. As Iraqi government soldiers took control of the last areas of Basra from Mr. Sadr's militia on Saturday, concluding a monthlong effort, Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, took the unusual step of expressing strong support for the government's position and described Mr. Sadr's fighters as outlaws.

When it comes to which Shiite leader Iran and the United States want to see in power, at least for now they largely see Mr. Sadr's ascendance as a common threat — nowhere more so than in Basra, the oil-rich capital of Iraq's most populous region, the Shiite south.

Although there are many groups in Iraq — Shiite and Sunni, Turkmen and Kurd — it is a majority Shiite country, and in the end the geopolitical calculus of the United States and Iran has to do with what kind of Shiite government they want in control.

The party that Iran and the United States are backing, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, is a bitter rival of Mr. Sadr's political movement and has managed to play to the interests of both countries. Under Iraq's Constitution, provinces can form regions with considerable independence from Baghdad. The Supreme Council advocates a large, semiautonomous region in the south, similar to Kurdistan in the north, made up of the nine southern provinces. And because many of the council's leaders lived in exile in Iran during the rule of [Saddam Hussein](#), Iran has political ties to the group.

Coupled with Iran's shared Shiite heritage, such a region would amplify Iran's influence over the oil-rich area.

The American backing of the Supreme Council comes in part because the armed wing of the council, the Badr Organization, has never confronted American troops. As one American general said, "They aren't trying to kill us." The same cannot be said of Mr. Sadr's militia, the [Mahdi Army](#), which the United States believes is behind some of the most sophisticated and deadly attacks on American troops.

Second, the Americans have treated the Supreme Council as an ally from the beginning of the fight against Mr. Hussein. Its members were guaranteed safe passage when they returned from Iran and were made charter members of Iraq's first governing body after the American-led invasion toppled Mr. Hussein's regime. Since then, the United States has backed the Iraqi government, which in turn relies on the Supreme Council to stay in power in the country's parliamentary system.

But this position could have damaging unintended consequences. It could push the United States further into the vortex of an intra-Shiite political struggle and could lead to the creation of a large, Iranian-influenced region in southern Iraq.

For the Iraqis, the battle is in part a political one over how the balance of power would change province-by-province and ward-by-ward in coming elections. The prize is control of provincial councils that have significant budgets, jobs and local power.

During the elections in 2005, Mr. Sadr's supporters did not vote in most southern provinces, so despite having grass-roots support they were not represented in local governments.

But the Supreme Council encouraged its followers to go to the polls, and they dominated even in places where their supporters made up a comparatively small percentage of the electorate. If Mr. Sadr's movement participates in the next elections, scheduled for October, they are sure to fare better than they did when they did not field candidates, and the Supreme Council is likely to lose some of its power.

For instance, in Qadisiya Province, the Sadr movement fielded few candidates and did not vote in great numbers; the Supreme Council was able to dominate the provincial council and control the governorship.

In contrast, just to the southeast, in Maysan Province, where the Sadr bloc did participate, it won the largest number of seats and controls the governorship.

The fight in Basra and elsewhere in the south, which appears to have weakened the Sadr movement, is also a way to make it more difficult for the organization to use its militia to coerce voters and intimidate political rivals. In turn, that puts the Supreme Council in a better political position to retain power because its armed wing is well entrenched, having held positions in the police and army for years.

But the political calculus that has landed the Americans and Iranians on the same side of the Shiite conflict in southern Iraq breaks down in the capital. The foremost example is Sadr City, the dusty, impoverished enclave of more than two million Shiites in northeastern Baghdad where Mr. Sadr has his base of power.

There, Iraqi and American forces are trying to oust essentially the same Mahdi fighters who were stalking the streets in Basra. And the stakes for the Americans are even higher, because the Mahdi Army has been using parts of Sadr City and its surroundings as a launching pad for rockets aimed at American and Iraqi government offices in the Green Zone.

But there is at least one crucial difference from Basra: in Sadr City, American troops are playing a much bigger role in the battle. For the Iranians, who have consistently opposed the American presence here, that difference comes with consequences.

Iran stridently opposes the operation against the Mahdi Army in Sadr City.

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