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THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE U.S.-IRAN DISPUTE ON IRAQ

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The U.S. assassination of Iranian General Qassim al-Suleimani and leader of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis initially threatened to engulf Iran and the U.S. in direct conflict, despite the U.S. President's [claims](#) that "Iran appears to be standing down." For Tehran, however, retaliation will not be limited to short-term tit-for-tat military attacks, but will include a longer-term campaign to increase Iranian influence in the region at the expense of the U.S., beginning in Iraq.

At the end of 2019, before this attack, Iran was losing its foothold Iraq. [Mass protests](#) in Baghdad and southern Iraq saw Iraqis in predominantly Shi'a areas calling for the downfall of the ethno-sectarian political system and for the removal of Iran from the country. Chants were even directed against Suleimani and Muhandis, whom protesters argued were directly responsible for killing over 500 and injuring tens of thousands. In Baghdad, the political elite was fragmented and weak, and Iran could not find reliable allies to assert its influence and formulate a solution to protests, as evidenced by the [stalemate](#) around the status of Prime Minister 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi.

OUTLOOK

A result of the assassinations is that Iraq's political elites are reuniting along ethno-sectarian lines. Shi'a leaders, specifically, are resorting to the old tool of anti-Americanism to reunify in the wake of Muhandis' death, as well as to sideline the protesters and their demands. Their top policy priority has become U.S. troop removal, rather than reform. On 24 January, Muqtada al-Sadr precipitated a [march](#) in Baghdad. Rather than protesting corruption or Iranian interference, as he did in 2016, these protests called for the removal of U.S. troops.

In response, the Kurds and Sunnis – which had also become fragmented toward the end of 2019 – are reuniting [against the motion](#) to remove U.S. troops, concerned that such a move will alienate them from their U.S. allies and further destabilise Iraq. While it is still uncertain whether U.S. troops will leave, what is certain is that Iraq will be the most immediate battleground in the U.S.-Iran conflict. The popular pressure to move past identity-based politics and to hold leaders accountable is at risk of being overturned. And any deterioration of U.S.-Iraq relations will have implications. The U.S. provides important security cover for other Western diplomatic missions and for businesses that operate in the country. If that umbrella departs, it is likely that many other U.S. allies and companies will have to follow suit.