Two conflicting trends characterize the recent evolution of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). On one hand, the group has lost over 45 percent of its territorial gains in Iraq and about 20 percent of the areas it controlled in Syria.\(^1\) The number of active foreign fighters in those countries has also decreased considerably.\(^2\) On the other hand, ISIS has demonstrated the ability to orchestrate an increasing number of high-casualty attacks in cities and capitals throughout the world including in Paris in November 2015, San Bernardino in December 2015, Brussels in March 2016, London in March and June 2017, and to many observers’ surprise, in Tehran in June 2017. Former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John Brennan noted that ISIS’ capability to conduct global terrorist attacks had not been disrupted despite its territorial losses.\(^3\)

The United States and Iran are the two key players in the fight against ISIS, not least of all because they are two of the group’s main targets. Indeed, other countries, particularly in Europe, have also been targeted by the group and seen ISIS attempt to recruit among their populations. As a result, they also share an interest in combatting the group. But the United States and Iran have made the fight against ISIS a security policy priority and allocated considerable resources to undertaking efforts in Iraq and Syria. While the two adversaries have aligned interests in Iraq, they have undertaken separate counterterrorism efforts to tackle the group.

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To date, neither the United States nor Iran has achieved its objectives. The United States’ initial stated goal was to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS. This was the policy formulated by President Barack Obama, and the goal pursued by the international coalition to defeat ISIS led by Washington. Republican nominee Donald Trump pledged to revise this policy during the presidential campaign in 2016, but it is unclear how much U.S. policy on ISIS is likely to evolve since President Trump’s inauguration. For Iran, the objective is to keep ISIS far and weak, so it cannot successfully target the Iranian homeland, population, and interests. This policy seemed successful until June 2017, when ISIS was able to carry out a successful attack against the Iranian Majles (parliament) and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini—the founder and first Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. Both countries share the goal of maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity and promoting a viable Iraqi central authority that can secure and stabilize the country.

In Syria, U.S. and Iranian interests diverge, even though there too, they would like to preserve the country’s territorial integrity. Tehran continues to support the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which under President Obama, Washington saw as part of the problem. President Trump muddied the landscape when he prioritized the fight against ISIS and as a result, did not rule out working with President Assad. Today, the administration’s Syria policy remains unclear and convoluted, but it has so far resulted in defunding the CIA’s covert program that funded and armed the Syria opposition, and some territorial gains, according to the U.S. government’s envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk. But as the conflict progresses and the Assad regime continues to perpetrate mass atrocities, including further instances of the use of chemical weapons against civilians, it is vital for the United States to counter Iranian and Russian efforts in Syria.

Importantly, both Washington and Tehran see the fight against ISIS as a priority. However, President Trump cannot maintain a simplified policy of fighting ISIS while aggressively containing Iran throughout the region. U.S. policy priorities should be divided tactically: to work with Iran to push back ISIS in Iraq, sustain their military progress, and stabilize Iraq’s political situation, while countering Iranian efforts to prop up Assad in Syria. One does not preclude the other. Despite significant operational progress against ISIS, ultimately the United States and Iran’s ability to maintain these gains in Iraq will remain limited because the two adversaries can only reach their respective objectives through collaboration.

Benefits to Cooperation

There are a number of reasons why the United States and Iran should cooperate to attain their goal of defeating ISIS. First, Tehran is a key player in the region with
the political will to fight ISIS. The regional states that make up the international coalition (Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) lack the political will to effectively fight ISIS. However, Iran feels the ISIS threat more acutely. Iran has always been a top target for ISIS because Shia Islam is its predominant religion, and ISIS considers the Shias to be apostates. ISIS started to actively try to recruit, build an offshoot, and conduct terrorist attacks in Iran early on. In June 2016, the group’s operatives tried to carry out a spectacular attack, targeting fifty different locations in the Iranian capital, and spent over $600,000 on it. That attack was ultimately thwarted by Iranian security services.

A year later, on June 7, 2017, Iranian authorities were not able to stop an ISIS attack, where operatives carried out two attacks in highly symbolic and secure areas within the Iranian capital: one against the Majles and another at the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini outside of Tehran, resulting in scores of deaths and almost fifty injured. In August 2017, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence stated that the country had arrested 10 ISIS operatives in supporting roles outside of Iran’s borders and 17 operatives inside the country who planned on conducting a number of attacks in holy cities. As a result, Tehran is willing and able to allocate more resources to fight ISIS than most of its Sunni neighbors.

Second, Tehran’s anti-ISIS campaign has been fairly effective. Until June 2017, the country managed to prevent ISIS attacks against its own territory. And even then, the attacks were fairly contained. After the June 2016 attack was thwarted, Iranian Sunnis recruited by ISIS, who had fought in Syria and Iraq, returned to attack the Majles and the shrine—symbols of the Iranian struggle for democracy and the revolution, respectively. To be sure, while Iran’s anti-ISIS campaign has succeeded on a number of fronts, it also has a number of shortcomings as we will see later. Iranian authorities were, however, successful in pushing ISIS back from the country’s key interests in other parts of the region—Iraq being the most important.

For example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—the paramilitary organization established during the 1979 Islamic Revolution and now an integral part of Iran’s armed forces—was successful in protecting Shia holy sites and Iranian interests and persons after ISIS’ takeover of neighboring Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014. This increased their popularity in Iran. Indeed, as ISIS got closer to Iranian borders and issued threats against the Iranian nation, the IRGC became more popular. This trend was further entrenched by the successful ISIS attack in Tehran in June 2017. In addition, despite their overt sectarian stance, Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq are effective. To be sure, these
groups have perpetrated their own share of atrocities. And by doing so, they have further exacerbated the sectarian divide in the country. But they have proven indispensable in certain campaigns. For example, as McGurk put it, during the Mosul campaign, “given the terrain that Iraq had to cover […], there was some necessity for the Popular Mobilization Forces,” referring to the Shia militias by their formal umbrella name. The militias received training and equipment for many years and fought established armies and militant groups, particularly following the period of instability after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. With the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shias, Ayatollah Ali Sistani’s fatwa—or religious edict—calling on Shias to join the struggle against ISIS, Iran has a wider pool to draw from in its efforts to galvanize local forces to fight the group.

Today, these militias continue to evolve into a more regular force as they work with the Iraqi security forces. Their involvement in the battle against ISIS allows the United States and the coalition to achieve their goal of destroying ISIS and recapturing lost territory in a shorter time frame. Airstrikes alone do not allow the coalition to recapture and hold cities. The Iraqi military also cannot hold cities without the help of Shia militias. Clearly, Iran committed political, military, and intelligence means to fight ISIS, and it enjoys “enormous influence” in Iraq.

The coalition needs local and regional support both to fight ISIS and retain regained territory. This makes Iran unavoidable.

Third, excluding the one major Shia state from the coalition and continuing to work solely with Sunni Arab states has maintained the gap between the two major regional and sectarian rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran. This has only served to play into ISIS’ hands. Indeed, the group’s ideology and appeal feeds off of further conflict in the region and a growing divide between the two primary sects of Islam. Diminishing regional sectarian divides through dialogue will help address some of the group’s ideological appeal.

Fourth, given Iran’s growing influence in Iraq since 2003, Iran must be included in the fight against ISIS. Iran has always maintained ties with various groups in Iraq, including its significant Shia constituency, but since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran cultivated its ties to both the Iraqi central authority and a variety of local groups. And it has reached out to a number of friendly groups including the Kurds, Shia groups, and mainstream Sunnis, as well as non-friendly groups, even Sunni radicals with an anti-Shia and anti-Iranian agenda. Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander General Qassem Soleimani enjoys good relations with many groups and key individuals in Iraq, including all the main factions: Sunnis, Kurds, and Shias. He often plays the role of arbitrator among these
groups, and has been involved in key deliberations within the Iraqi government since 2003.\(^{19}\) In fact, Soleimani’s men were crucial to coordinating efforts between the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, the Iraqi military, and the Shia militias in breaking the ISIS siege of Amerli in Northern Iraq in the summer of 2014.\(^{20}\) Indeed, the Iranian role in training the Shia militias and coordinating with other significant fighting forces, such as the Kurds, was essential in securing Amerli’s release. Iranian ties to Iraqi groups even go beyond the political and security institutions. These ties encompass the Iraqi religious authorities that have a long history of intermarriage with the Iranian clerical establishment, and close ties to the central authority in Tehran.\(^{21}\)

Finally, all parties involved need to begin thinking about a post-ISIS Iraq. Even if the United States and its partners make substantial military progress, overcoming ISIS cannot be done unless they address the root causes of its rise and ability to operate. As the former U.S. ambassador to Syria (2010–14) Robert Ford put it, ensuring ISIS is defeated is one thing, but maintaining stability after it is “isn’t something Apaches and F-16s can fix. You must deal with the politics as much as you deal with the military.”\(^{22}\)

In March 2017, lawmakers in the United States called on President Trump to consider how to rebuild Iraq in the event of a victory against ISIS. They called for “decentralizing some functions of the government, disbanding Iranian-aligned militias, addressing the humanitarian needs of Iraq’s community, and committing to a program of reconciliation.”\(^{23}\) Given Tehran’s extensive presence and influence in Iraq, none of these can be achieved without its acquiescence at the very least. What is more, the objective of “disbanding Iranian-aligned militias,” while laudable, is currently unachievable. The militias are too widespread and a part and parcel of both daily life in Iraq and the Iraqi army’s ability to maintain security in reclaimed territories. The militias will have to either integrate with the Iraqi security forces, or continue to operate on their own. And in both cases, Washington needs Tehran to bring them into the fold. In addition, given the Iraqi government’s “policy of decentralization,” based on “empowering people at the local level to restore life to their communities,”\(^{24}\) the various local groups will continue to shape Iraq politically. As a result, maintaining gains against ISIS and rebuilding Iraq after an ISIS defeat cannot be done without Iranian involvement and a degree of U.S.-Iranian collaboration.

Iran also stands to gain from coordinating with the United States. First, the country sees ISIS as a significant threat, and with the group more active than ever in the Iranian border regions and on Iranian soil, the country will continue
to grapple with the problem. Today, with the ISIS offshoot in Afghanistan, known as the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP), gaining ground, Iran risks facing this threat on two fronts. Second, Iran has committed considerable resources to the fight against ISIS and its efforts in Iraq and Syria because of the high-priority threat the group represents. The United States has a presence in both arenas, which means it is well positioned to help achieve the objective of fighting ISIS. For Iran, U.S. assistance might mean that Tehran can save some of the allocated resources for other foreign policy objectives. Third, America will continue to be active in Iraq and will shape the country’s political and security environments. It also brings a number of groups into the fold that the Iranian government cannot. All these, combined by America's unmatched military capabilities, make it imperative for Iran to work with the United States.

While there are a number of benefits to working with Iran on a military and political level in Iraq, both in terms of pushing back ISIS and sustaining gains as well as ensuring the political stability of Iraq, there remain a number of barriers to U.S. and Iranian cooperation.

**Barriers to Cooperation**

The United States is reluctant to work with Iran, even when the two countries’ goals overlap. Many view U.S.-Iranian relations as a zero-sum game, where one’s gain will inevitably be the other’s loss. Pundits, lawmakers, and policymakers call on Washington to further isolate and pressure Tehran and avoid working with it in areas of mutual interest such as Afghanistan and Iraq. But such an ideological approach stops the United States from collaborating with Iran where it would benefit U.S. national interests, including allowing the United States not to deploy more troops and allocate resources to the region, while failing to change the Islamic Republic’s behavior.

The first barrier to cooperation between Iran and the United States in Iraq is the lack of political will in the United States, especially under the Trump administration. This barrier exists because of the Islamic Republic’s rhetoric and efforts to undermine U.S. policy in the Middle East, as well as the Trump administration’s overwhelming ideological stance against Iran. Washington and Tehran cut diplomatic ties in 1979, when the anti-American Islamic Republic replaced the Shah of Iran, a key U.S. ally in the Middle East. Since then, dialogue between the two has been limited, punctuated by a brief diplomatic channel between former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif from 2013 to 2016.

The Islamic Republic’s rhetoric and some of its policies aim to undermine the United States and its influence in the region. Iran is trying to balance a dual agenda. On one hand, it does not want to see Iraq fragmented, and
wants its neighbor to have some security and stability. After all, an unstable and insecure Iraq that is a hotbed for sectarianism and extremism is also a threat to Iran, its vast political, strategic, and economic interests in Iraq, and the broader region. But on the other hand, Tehran does not want a strong and independent Baghdad. This would jeopardize its own regional standing and undermine its national interests. The last time Iraq was a force to be reckoned with in the region, it invaded Iran, leading to an eight-year-long devastating war in the 1980s. As a result, Tehran must fight ISIS, while maintaining the influence it has gained because of the current instability in Iraq and Syria. Although Iran’s stated policy is to maintain the territorial integrity and stability of Syria and Iraq, Tehran views the idea of stability in both Iraq and Syria differently than Washington.

Syria is even more complex. The United States’ and Iran’s goals in the Syrian conflict put them at direct odds with one another. While both countries fight ISIS in Syria, Washington trained, armed, and supported some of the rebels fighting President Assad—although this has largely ceased under President Trump—while Iranian forces continue to support the Assad regime. There are disagreements over a number of issues in Syria, including over legitimate leadership, the transition of power, and the conflicting goals of fighting ISIS and ending the Syrian civil war. To make matters more complicated, the Trump administration’s Syria policy has been inconsistent, ranging from stating that Assad must go, to tolerating Assad as a counter-ISIS force, to establishing unclear red-lines on the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in early April 2017, which could potentially result in America targeting his regime again.

Domestic politics in both Iran and the United States push against possible collaboration between the two nations. Hardliners in Iran widely criticized the prospect of rapprochement, or even détente, with Washington, and they have done so since the revolution and all through the 2012–15 nuclear talks. Iran would have been unwilling to join the international coalition against ISIS had it been asked, because it disagrees with its composition. Tehran believes that some of the countries in the coalition, specifically some of its Gulf Arab neighbors and Saudi Arabia in particular, are responsible for the rise of ISIS by spreading Salafi and Wahhabi ideologies. In the United States, some policymakers and experts express similar suspicion vis-à-vis some of the Sunni Arab states.

For their part, Iran hawks in the United States criticize the 2015 nuclear deal for providing Iran with the resources and political capital to expand its presence in the region, and presented Iraq and Syria as examples of this. Today, some go as far as noting that America should not push back ISIS as this would empower Iran. The idea that the United States must contain Tehran at best, and confront it at worst, has shaped the U.S. domestic discussion on Washington’s policy vis-à-vis Tehran. What is missing in the debate is that in some instances, working with
Iran can be beneficial to U.S. interests. The limited collaborative efforts between Washington and Tehran in Afghanistan in the early 2000s could be a model for the fight against ISIS. In Afghanistan, Iran helped the United States secure and stabilize the country.

Second, Tehran relies on non-state actors to compensate for its conventional military inferiority and imbalance of power, deter or weaken its adversaries, and expand its influence in the region. Tehran’s relationship with such groups has not changed despite decades of pressure from the United States and its allies. Today, Iran’s involvement with Shia militias is one of the main challenges to U.S.-Iran coordination in Iraq. Iran trains and equips existing Shia militias in Iraq and creates new ones, all under the umbrella organization of the al Hashd al Shaabi (or the Popular Mobilization Forces). These groups weaken the central authority in Baghdad and are responsible for U.S. military casualties.

These groups also further worsen Iraq’s already intense sectarian divisions. This follows more than a decade of sectarian strife under Iraq’s previous President Nouri Al-Maleki, who gave Iraq’s Shia majority a greater voice, but also greater means to subjugate the Sunni minority with Tehran’s tacit consent. After decades of marginalization under Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Shia grievances were many. These were compounded by a number of ISIS-led atrocities committed against the Shia, including the massacre of 1,700 Shia soldiers in camp Speicher in June 2014. As a result, these newly empowered Shia militias have committed a number of reprisal attacks. Reports emerged of Shia-led mass killings in liberated ISIS-held territories including in the Diyala province near the Iranian border in January 2015 and again in 2016. In 2015, Human Rights Watch documented the systematic destruction of buildings “in at least 47 predominantly Sunni villages (in a way that) was methodical and driven by revenge…” by Shia militias, aided by volunteer fighters and the Iraqi security forces, after the liberation of Amerli. This coupled with the overtly Shia and pro-Iran messaging, including banners reading, “At your service, O Hussein,” referring to the Shia Imam killed by the Sunnis at the battle of Karbala in AD 680, and pictures of the Islamic Republic’s founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei along the roads liberated by the Hashd which diminished the Shia groups’ popularity and damaged their image of liberators. Similar reports emerged from the battle to take back Mosul in autumn 2016. It also led some Iraqis to turn back to ISIS in a “better the devil you know” mindset.
Such sectarian strife by the Iranian-backed militias also undercuts Western efforts to promote unity between the Sunnis and Shias. Today, the dominant Shia political parties not only struggle to gain support from Sunni and Kurdish minorities, they have lost the confidence of most Iraqis, including the Shias themselves. Rising differences among various Shia factions have complicated matters further. 38 Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs is painfully aware of the negative repercussions of Iran’s efforts against ISIS, the excessive violence used by the militias, and the overt Iranian presence in Iraq including plastering images of Khomeini and Khamenei along major roads and in multiple cities. 39 The Iranian government is more inclined to keep its involvement in Iraq covert, but the Revolutionary Guards in charge of executing Iran’s counter-ISIS strategy see signalling as an inherent and crucial part of its campaign. Due to its presence on the ground and control of the file, the Guards are in charge of the tactical and operational levels. This overt presence and the atrocities perpetrated by the Shia militias are two main reasons why Iraqi Sunnis—15–20 percent of the Muslim population—reportedly view Iran negatively. 40

However, the depth of Iran’s influence over Iraq’s Shia communities is unclear. Historically, the relationship between Tehran and Iraq’s Shia community was tumultuous. First, Iraq’s Shias do not believe in the Iranian revolutionary-style mix of politics and religion. The differences with Tehran deepened with the rise and prominence of Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Abd al-Qasim al-Khoei in Najaf, and the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the 1970s. Like most prominent Shia authorities of his time, including the Iranian clerical establishment in Qom, Khoei believed that the religious elite should stay out of politics, in direct opposition to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini and his vision of velayat-e-faqih (the governance of the jurist). Today, Ayatollah Sistani’s vision of religion and politics is closer to pre-Islamic Revolution Qom than post-revolution Tehran. He follows his predecessor and rejects Khomeini’s vision, to Tehran’s great dismay. As a result, Iran tries to increase its penetration of the Iraqi Shia community, including through past efforts to groom its own candidate, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, as Ayatollah Sistani’s potential successor. 41

Like other non-state actors, the loyalty of the Shia militias is not set in stone; rather, in the context of the war, it is particularly fluid. 42 Balancing the preservation of its influence among the Shias in Iraq and not overplaying its hand by being too present is a constant battle for Tehran. In the mid-2000s, in a letter to Osama Bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist active in Iraq who pledged allegiance to Bin Laden and al-Qaeda in late 2004, said that sectarianism would inevitably force the Shias to overreact, and consequently push the disenfranchised Sunnis toward joining al-Qaeda. 43 A decade and a half later, that is exactly what has happened: The decade of brutal sectarianism in Iraqi
society and politics following the U.S. invasion of Iraq has only served to swell ISIS’ numbers.

The third barrier to Iranian and American cooperation is Tehran’s either nonexistent or limited relations with some U.S. allies in the region, which is problematic for the United States. At the center of the debate lies Saudi Arabia. The Saudi establishment has undertaken a robust anti-Iran campaign in the United States, urging U.S. lawmakers and decision-makers not to work with Tehran and, instead, to isolate it in the region.44 These efforts paid off when in May 2017, President Trump visited Riyadh and made Iran’s nefarious activities the main subject of the discussion between the United States and the Gulf Arab partners.45 The ongoing conflict in Yemen, which has become increasingly controversial in the United States due to its humanitarian consequences and lack of an exit plan by Riyadh, has only added fuel to the fire.

Finally, the Trump administration has adopted a more hawkish Iran policy and rhetoric. In its first few weeks in office, President Trump’s then National Security Advisor Michael Flynn put Iran “on notice” after another missile test by Tehran.46 Since then, the administration has tightened sanctions on Iran and made it clear it aims to aggressively contain the Islamic Republic in the region, including in Iraq and Syria.47 President Trump has also consistently undermined the nuclear deal with Iran rhetorically by threatening to dismantle it on numerous occasions, both on the campaign trail and once in office.48 In fact, by the end of summer 2017, President Trump installed real doubt over whether his government would certify the nuclear deal at the next certification deadline in September 2017,49 sparking outrage from Tehran.

Should the United States jeopardize the implementation of the nuclear deal, then any cooperation between the United States and Iran will be highly unlikely, instead leading to a serious escalation in the crisis between them, and between the United States and its European allies. Such statements feed into the Iranian conservative view that the United States is not to be trusted. This makes Tehran less likely to be forthcoming and open to potential cooperation with the United States in pushing back ISIS in Iraq.

How to Get There and Potential Areas for Cooperation

To date, there has been limited coordination between Washington and Tehran, and this has had repercussions for the effectiveness of the fight against ISIS. The successful Amerli counter-offensive in August 2014 and operations in Tikrit in 2015 are the best examples of that. There, both players identified ad hoc tactical and operational level areas where they could work together. But they failed to coordinate strategically. As a result, small-scale military gains did
not translate into broader and sustained stability. But in Falluja in Iraq’s Anbar province, there were setbacks due to the United States’ and Iran’s failure to work together.\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, both in the city and in the province more generally, Sunnis and Shias have been unable to work together to rebuild and govern their cities. This resulted in the beginnings of a humanitarian catastrophe in 2016 as ISIS was pushed back.

Collaboration with Iran is, of course, not unprecedented in modern counter-terrorism. Despite the lack of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the United States and Iran cooperated in 2001 to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban.\textsuperscript{51} Later, similar efforts were undertaken in Iraq. In 2007, U.S. and Iranian representatives met in Baghdad to discuss the sectarian violence in the country. According to Ambassador James Dobbins, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the talks “may even have contributed to more restrained Iranian behavior.”\textsuperscript{52} Given the potential benefits of U.S.-Iranian collaboration, some Western leaders have called for cooperation—or, at the very least, coordination—with Iran in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and in order to end the Syrian civil war. Dobbins noted that, “some level of agreement between Washington and Tehran will be essential to any effort to defeat the Islamic State, end the civil war in Syria and prevent the complete disintegration of Iraq.”\textsuperscript{53} And given the escalation between the two countries since President Trump’s inauguration, the two countries’ engagement may lead to more restraint once again.

The most immediate and obvious way Washington and Tehran can work together in Iraq is for the United States to provide air cover for Iranian-backed ground assaults to regain ISIS captured territory. This type of small-scale, tactical coordination already occurred successfully in specific instances, including during the liberation of Amerli right after ISIS’ takeover of large swathes of territory in spring 2014, and is part of the reason for ISIS’ loss of territory in recent months. But coordination was limited. In order for it to be successful and for it to buy U.S. influence over Iranian actions, it must become strategic. This would allow the United States to impose certain conditions to the provision of air cover. Washington began to do this in the successful spring 2016 offensive to retake Falluja, when it agreed with Baghdad that Iraqis would take the lead in recapturing the city from the ground. But as we have seen, the Iraqi army was unable to do this without the more powerful and able Shia militias.
The United States and Iran could also extend this coordination to sharing intelligence on targets. Precedent exists for this from the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. While the United States continues to deny such coordination exists in Iraq, Iranian officials state that Iranian ground operatives and Shia militiamen transmit target information to the Iraqi security forces, which in turn, share it with U.S. forces. The catch will be to ensure that these are legitimate targets and not just ones selected by the Revolutionary Guards Special Forces in charge of covert operations. The Iraqi security forces prefer to work with the United States on sharing intelligence. But Baghdad believes that Washington’s efforts have been slow, inefficient, and half-hearted. As a result, it created a joint intelligence center with Moscow and Damascus in October 2015, following frustrations with the pace and level of U.S. involvement. In addition to target selection, the United States and Iran could share intelligence on foreign fighters and their whereabouts, similar to Iran’s April 2015 informal agreement to share intelligence with Australia.

Another area where Iran and the United States can work more closely together is in facilitating the movement of people and transit of goods and equipment throughout Iraq. In particular, by working together the United States and Iran can help move populations in danger and facing mass atrocities by ISIS. Iran is present on the ground and can act faster than the United States. Iran could be coaxed into assisting with humanitarian assistance because it wants to maintain good ties with various groups in Iraq, as well as its influence. Perception that its efforts in the country are good for all Iraqis is part of maintaining that influence. So far, the humanitarian response to crises has been slow and inadequate. This was illustrated by the Yazidi struggle on Mount Sinjar—where tens of thousands of Yazidis, Iraq’s oldest minority, were threatened with slavery, rape, and death at the hands of ISIS if they escaped or dehydration if they stayed stranded—from June to August, and the critical challenges many still face today.

In addition to counterterrorism and other military and humanitarian efforts, the United States and Iran also need to work together on a political level, both today and in planning for a post-ISIS Iraq. Given that the two states are adversaries, this is very difficult. But it is crucial they work together to prevent an escalation of the current political crisis in Iraq, which would distract from the fight against ISIS and perhaps even feed into the group’s appeal as a functioning pseudo-state. In the words of the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, “the chaos in Baghdad, culminating in the temporary occupation of the parliament by followers of Shiite Islamist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, is undermining the war against the Islamic State, weakening Iraq’s economy, and accelerating the country’s disintegration.” The political crisis is the result of government mismanagement of the economy and security in the country. Protesters demand ambitious reforms and an end to corruption. Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr sought to highjack the
reform movement from the more secular Shia parties in government, creating rifts among the different Shias in government. This does not benefit either Washington or Tehran, and certainly not Iraq. In fact, the only player that can come out of this chaos better off than prior to it is ISIS.

The United States and Iran have different tools at their disposal and the ability to influence different groups critical to fighting ISIS. In addition, it is imperative for the United States and Iran to work together to secure the sustainability of gains on the ground. Both countries are important players in Iraqi politics and have leverage over various political parties, security forces, and different sects, which they will need to unify in order for Iraq to have an effective and sustainable political and security apparatus. Iran maintains significant influence among the Shia political elite, while the United States has cultivated extensive ties with the Sunnis. Developing a sustainable political and security apparatus is in line with U.S. lawmakers’ stated goal of planning for a post-ISIS Iraq, which they cannot achieve without Iran. To secure Iraq’s security, stability, and territorial integrity, while effectively combatting ISIS, it is imperative for Washington and Tehran to identify all the possible areas of collaboration and work with each other.

Finally, ISIS can only be beaten if first, its ideology is discredited, and second, Iraq sees a certain measure of stability, much improved from the country’s current state of sectarian strife and political uncertainty. ISIS’ ideology can only be discredited if all the major Muslim players in the region tackle their appeal together, including Iran and Saudi Arabia. This would also provide the foundations for dialogue and a potential resolution of the ongoing Syrian conflict. Washington can help make that happen. In fact, behind closed doors, officials in the Persian Gulf insist that the United States is the only actor that can help bring Iran and Saudi Arabia to the negotiating table.60

The Rouhani government seeks dialogue with Riyadh, and made engagement a top priority early on into its tenure. The Foreign Ministry under Zarif has reached out to Saudi Arabia to hold talks in the spirit of Rouhani’s policy of “constructive engagement.” For example, Zarif wrote a number of opinion pieces in major U.S. newspapers, including The New York Times and The Washington Post in 2015 and again in 2017,61 inviting his counterparts to hold talks with him, and flew to Riyadh for King Abdullah’s funeral.62 But Saudi Arabia does not want to negotiate, calling instead on a unilateral Iranian disengagement from the conflicts in the region as a prerequisite to any dialogue.63

The drastic increase in tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia following the January 2016 execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr and continued confrontation in Yemen eroded some of the Iranian desire to talk to Saudi Arabia in 2016. In
addition, personal frustrations of those in Tehran who consistently called for engagement with the Arab Gulf states and were rebuked within the Rouhani administration, and internal politicking, resulted in greater pressure on the Rouhani administration not to engage in dialogue with Riyadh. By following Rouhani’s reelection in May 2017, the administration made engagement with its Gulf Arab neighbors a priority once again. This effort was stymied, however, when Saudi Defense Minister and first in line to the throne, Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, stated in May 2017 that dialogue with Iran is impossible, adding that the Saudis would take the fight to Iran. This, only a few weeks prior to the June 2017 ISIS attack in Tehran, led many Iranians including those in positions of power to blame the Saudis for the attack.

Both countries, however, are a vital part of any durable and effective solution to the crisis in Iraq and Syria. Washington should leverage its influence over Riyadh and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies to encourage them to open more sustained channels of communication with Tehran, including on resolving current regional crises, rather than its current policy of blind support to one side. This is in line with President Trump’s policy of ensuring that U.S. allies take responsibility for guaranteeing their own security. Likewise, the United States should work with its European allies and partners, which enjoy good relations with Iran, to ensure that at the table, the Iranians hold their promise of “constructive engagement,” while doing the same with the Saudis.

**ISIS is the Priority in Iraq**

The United States and Iran share some of the same goals in Iraq. They both want to see a secure and integral Iraq, with a central authority capable of controlling its territory, and a drawdown of sectarian violence. Both countries want to make sure Baghdad does not become a threat to their respective national security and interests as it was prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Importantly, both countries view ISIS as a threat to regional security and their own national security and interests, and are among ISIS’ top targets. As a result, Washington and Tehran have held basic levels of tactical and operational coordination.

But the U.S. policy of “demolish and destroy ISIS” can only materialize if these two players work together on a more strategic level in Iraq. The two countries have an interest in coordinating military and counterterrorism efforts, as well as humanitarian efforts, on political, ideological, and counter-messaging levels. Of course, there are barriers to cooperation. But it remains vital for the United States to identify and recognize the areas where it can draw upon Iran’s influence and leverage to limit its own footprint in Iraq and achieve objectives in a timely manner. By doing so, Washington can lead a more effective
counter-ISIS campaign, while reducing the resources and troops it commits to Iraq. Should this strategic level coordination between Washington and Tehran be effective, it could be used to bring the two sides closer together on areas of divergence in other regional conflicts.

Notes

14. Robin Wright, “Are We Nearing the Endgame with ISIS?”
15. Ibid.
17. Author interview with senior Iranian official, Lausanne, March 2015.
30. Author interview with Iranian official, Phone interview, May 19, 2016.

37. See tweet and picture by CNN journalist Arwa Damon: “Outside of #Mosul #Iraq armor with Shia flags does not help combat the perception of a sectarian army,” October 19, 2016, https://twitter.com/arwaCNN/status/788659628414341120.


41. Tim Arango, “Iran Presses for Official to Be Next Leader of Shias.”


44. Author interviews with Emirati and Qatari academics, Doha, May 17, 2016.


54. Author interview with Iranian official, Lausanne, March 18, 2015; Alex Vatanka and Fatemeh Aman, “The Afghan Bridge in Us-Iranian Ties,” The Middle East Institute, February 18, 2014, http://www.mei.edu/content/afghan-bridge-us-iranian-ties.
55. Author interview with Iranian official, Phone interview, May 19, 2016.
62. Author interview with Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Lausanne, March 18, 2015.
64. Author interview with Senior Iranian official, New York, September 24, 2016; and Iranian official, Phone interview, May 19, 2016.