

News Flash! Neocons Discover That Iran Has Influence in Iraq!

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As soon as President Obama announced that negotiations with the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to keep a sizable number of U.S. troops in Iraq beyond the end of 2011 had failed, neoconservative [pundits](#) ^[3] [went](#) ^[4] [wild](#) ^[5]. They accused the president of dangerously undermining Washington's strategic position in the Middle East and paving the way for Iran's dominance. The more restrained critics contended that Obama used poor judgment, while angrier types [accused him](#) ^[6] of endangering America's security and appeasing Iran merely to pander to the anti-war base of the Democratic Party.

The most charitable comment that one can make about the flurry of criticism from neoconservatives is that it reflects a curious collective amnesia in that camp. Most of them either ignore the point or barely mention it in passing that George W. Bush, not Barack Obama, signed [the agreement](#) ^[7] to withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. Obama sought to get the Iraq government to modify that agreement, but an impasse developed when the Maliki administration refused to exempt the remaining U.S. troops from the jurisdiction of Iraqi laws.

But that example of amnesia is minor compared to the failure of U.S. hawks to acknowledge [the](#) ^[8] [repeated](#) ^[9] [warnings](#) ^[10] that realist scholars expressed over the years that Iran was inevitably the principal beneficiary of the U.S.-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein. It is likely that the mullahs were secretly thrilled that Washington obligingly removed not only a hated adversary, one who had waged a bloody war against Iran in the 1980s, but eliminated Iraq as the principal strategic counterweight to Iranian power. No one should have been surprised that a new Shiite-led government in Baghdad would be far friendlier than Saddam's Sunni-dominated regime toward Shiite Iran. The red-carpet treatment accorded Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his [visit](#) ^[11] to

Baghdad in March 2008 confirmed what had long been obvious to non-neocon observers of the region.

For neoconservatives to argue that the withdrawal of the few thousand remaining U.S. troops from Iraq significantly worsens that aspect is either obtuse or disingenuous. If they didn't want Iran to gain significant influence in the region, they should have thought of that danger in 2002 and early 2003, instead of lobbying feverishly for U.S. military intervention against Iraq. The United States has paid a terrible cost—some \$850 billion and more than 4,400 dead American soldiers—to make Iran the most influential power in Iraq.

And the pro-war camp cannot even claim a consolation prize—the emergence of a truly democratic Iraqi government. [Evidence mounts](#) ^[12] that that the Maliki regime is [becoming ever more authoritarian and corrupt](#) ^[13]. Such abuses as jailing (and even torturing) critics, harassing independent news media outlets, and trying to bar Sunni political opponents from running for office have become increasingly common features in the “new Iraq.” And corruption has reached epidemic proportions.

In essence, it appears that the United States, at great cost in both treasure and blood, has managed to replace a staunchly anti-Iranian Sunni dictator with a pro-Iranian Shiite quasi-dictator. When neoconservatives contemplate the distasteful result that Iran may become the leading power in the region, with Iraq as a de facto ally, they should not blame Barack Obama and his decision to carry out George Bush's pledge to withdraw the remaining U.S. troops by the end of 2011. Instead, they need to look in the mirror. They were the architects of this debacle.