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Iran Gains Influence as Shi'ite Militias Seize Sunni Territory in Iraq

By Jason Ditz

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Iran's direct military involvement in Iraq's ongoing invasion of Tikrit is getting a lot of publicity, and US hawks are using it as an excuse to try to get US boots on the ground to compete for Iraq's affections.

Iran's gaining influence across Iraq, however, has less to do with their relatively small military involvement than with the rising influence of Shi'ite militias, many of which have long-standing ties to Iran.

The Badr Brigade is a prime example. Their leadership has had prime positions in Iraqi politics since the US occupation, with Nouri al-Maliki a former leader of the group. The notion they'd moved away from militia operations in favor of governance, however, is being radically dispelled.

Badr forces are now openly flying their flag in several key Sunni towns, and the "Sunni Triangle" so often talked about by US occupation forces is now dominated almost entirely by the single Shi'ite militia.

With the ISIS war putting the Iraqi government in jeopardy, the call to arms for Shi'ite militias had made them into an essential part of Iraq's internal security operation.

But the problem is deeper than Iraqi officials care to admit, as the Shi'ite militias have been carrying out violent retribution killings against Sunnis on flimsy pretexts. That the Iraqi government denies these incidents reflects how dependent they are on these militias: they dare not cross them, even if they are violently undermining what remains of sectarian calm in the nation.

All of this is a recipe for even deeper dependence on Iran-backed militias to keep things together, and is alienating any potential Sunni Arab allies, ensuring that Iraq will continue to have to depend on Iran in the long run.