

Egypt's Top Court Orders Temporary Suspension of YouTube



Courtesy of the Associated Press
CAIRO — An Egyptian court has ordered the suspension for one month of video-sharing website, YouTube, and others sharing a video found to be insulting the Muslim Prophet Mohammed.

The Supreme Administrative Court's ruling on Saturday dismisses appeals against a similar 2013 ruling, including one by the National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority which said the ruling's application is not feasible.

The verdict was final and could not be appealed.

In 2012, the 14-minute trailer video titled "The Innocence of Muslims," which appeared on YouTube, triggered protests across the Muslim world, including in Egypt.

The video can still be found on YouTube with a disclaimer saying it has been found "inappropriate or offensive to some audiences."

It remains unclear whether the ruling will be enforced. YouTube has remained accessible as of yet.

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Syria Says it Has Named a Constitutional Committee

dent Bashar Assad's government and the international community and Syrian opposition.

Assad has said his government will only consider amendments to the current constitution, in defiance of a U.N. initiative to have the government, opposition, and independents draft a new document.

The U.N. initiative was given a boost in February by Russia which organized a Syrian congress in Sochi earlier this year to press the warring sides to pen a new constitution.

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But the Syrian government has refused to endorse the effort.

The Foreign Ministry's statement, published on state media, was vague on the matter of whether the government was naming its own commission or nominating members to a U.N. commission. It did not identify the members named in the list. And it said the government was satisfied with "the current constitution."

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The End of the Iran Deal Could Destabilize Iraq

developments but of a favorable geopolitical situation—namely, the thaw in relations between Washington and Tehran since the 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal. With U.S. President Donald Trump's May 8 decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, U.S.-Iranian relations are almost certain to deteriorate, creating new dangers for Iraq's fragile domestic peace.

The real question now facing Iraq is how Iran will choose to respond to Trump's withdrawal. Specifically, it is whether Iranian hawks, who control their country's Iraq portfolio, can resist the temptation to use Iraq to play out their anger and fear over the demise of the Iran deal, potentially drawing Iraq back into the sectarian conflict that has plagued the country since the U.S. invasion.

The proximate cause of Iraq's improved domestic situation is the defeat of ISIS, which Abadi officially declared in December 2017. The Iraqi army's battlefield victory against ISIS, particularly in major campaigns such as the Battle of Mosul, repaired the reputational damage it had suffered after fleeing the city in 2014 and granted it a high degree of legitimacy among Iraqis of all backgrounds. The Iranian-backed Shiite militias, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), are basking in the same glow. The success of the counter-ISIS campaign and the attendant collapse of Sunni intransigence have, in turn, accentuated Iraqi nationalism and fostered the nonsectarian political mood. Stability and the hope of a new political model have also stimulated the economy. A February investment conference in Kuwait, which solicited pledges of support for postconflict reconstruction, enjoyed significant buy-in from the Gulf Cooperation Council. Remarkably, Iraq also managed to increase oil production by about 25 percent through the war years despite massive destruction and displacement, which helped cushion the blow to Iraq's economy of the extended downturn in global oil prices.

Yet Iraqis' undeniable achievements also benefited from a favorable international environment—in particular, the reality of de facto cooperation between the United States and Iran in the fight against ISIS, enabled by the environment of diplomatic contact surrounding the JCPOA, which had made it less heretical for voices in the United States to suggest that Iran may not always and everywhere be the regional bad guy. In 2014, for instance, as ISIS seized broad stretches of Iraq while the United States and Tehran pursued nuclear negotiations in Vienna, even as well credentialed an Iran hawk as Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina was able to admit that "the Iranians can provide some assets to make sure Baghdad doesn't fall."

This cooperative mood spilled over to the battlefield. U.S. Central Command set up a joint forces command in 2014 that coordinated U.S. and Iraqi forces, including key Iranian-backed factions of the PMF. And just as the diplomatic context of the JCPOA made the military contributions of the PMF palatable, if not welcome, to U.S. policymakers, so too did it give the Iranian leadership leeway to accept Abadi's decision to solicit military help from Washington in order to fight ISIS.

The JCPOA was not the only factor in the successful counter-ISIS campaign. But Iraqis across the political spectrum recognize the deal's important role in facilitating the optimism of the current moment. Politicians as opposed as Khamis al-Khanjar, a Sunni businessman who has been accused of funding anti-American insurgents in the past, and Ameri, a Shiite and leader of the Iran-aligned wing of the PMF, agree that the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA could seriously damage Iraq. In a recent interview with Al Jazeera Arabic, Khanjar said that "the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement will have negative repercussions on the situation" in Iraq. Speaking to The New York Times, Ameri admitted: "Now, we need [the Americans'] help. We can't let our country become a playground for other powers." The real question now facing Iraq is how Iran will choose to respond to Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA.



Iraqi politicians Ammar al-Hakim (L) and Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf, May 2018.

PLANNING FOR WAR

In view of the relative domestic comity, exogenous political shocks remain the primary threat to Iraq's progress. Renewed competition between Iran and the United States and its Gulf allies could quickly remind fledgling Iraqi nationalists of the importance of sectarian identity when the going gets tough. And although politicians such as Abadi have made it clear that they do not want Iraq to become a playground for U.S.-Iranian rivalries, they are not masters of their country's fate.

Iran, as a matter of prudence, will be planning for conflict. Already there is evidence that Iran is prepared to mobilize its Iraqi allies for an asymmetric response should the withdrawal from the JCPOA presage U.S. attacks against Iranian assets. Direct Iranian proxies, such as the Kataib Hezbollah militia, have entered the rhetorical fray. According to the unit's spokesman, "The resistance has been resolved for months to confront and expel the American presence." This cannot be discounted as empty rhetoric—Kataib Hezbollah and others like it have a long history of devastatingly effective attacks against U.S. troops. The irony is that until now, Kataib Hezbollah had been fading from the scene.

Even if open violence does not break out, however, heightened tensions between the United States and Iran are likely to affect the formation of the Iraqi government. Iranian planners will see control over Iraq as more essential to Iran's self-defense than before and will view Iraq as a theater of operations in which they can deter the United States, either through the threat of direct attacks on U.S. personnel or, indirectly, by pressing the Iraqi government to ratchet down cooperation with the United States.

Iranian preparations will hinge on firming up its influence over the post-election Iraqi government by promoting a range of proxies and fellow travelers into positions of responsibility within key ministries. Tehran will not have to push very hard, since many Iraqi politicians' hard-wired sympathy with Iran is more potent than anything Washington can offer.

In the event of renewed tensions, Iran is especially likely to favor senior government posts for candidates drawn from the Badr Corps, the Iranian-backed Shiite militia led by Ameri and Qasim al-Araji, who would in turn would advance their own patronage networks. If Ameri and Araji themselves prove too controversial for high office, lesser-known analogues from other Iraqi political parties and movements would be waiting in the wings: Mohammed al-Ghabban, minister of the interior under the Shiite sectarian former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki; Ahmad al-Assadi, a member of Parliament, spokesman for the PMF, and cheerleader for Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Quds Force; and Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, the minister of labor and social affairs, who has strongly backed trade and investment with Iran. If the Islamic Dawa Party, currently led by Abadi but with Maliki waiting in the wings, enters into government with Sadr, a compromise candidate between Abadi and Maliki might be Tariq Najm, Maliki's former chief of staff, who would likely be sensitive to Iran's needs.

These are just a few possibilities. The situation remains fluid; some of these players might emerge in top positions, others might descend into obscurity. But all of these Iran-affiliated candidates have interacted with U.S. representatives in Iraq over a long period of time and could claim to be open to continued collaboration despite their pro-Iranian orientation. But without the JCPOA, such cooperation is less likely. Sadr's strong showing engenders additional uncertainty, given his anti-American

orientation. (The notion that Sadr is absolutely anti-Iranian is largely overstated, and he will side with Iran against the United States in any serious confrontation between the two.) The bottom line is that Iran will advocate for its favorites, and its favorites will be prepared to answer the call.

At the same time, Iran is likely to begin to push back, in a way it has not done thus far, against Saudi Arabia's nascent attempt to establish its own sphere of influence in Iraq, which it has done through a mix of investment, a conditional offer of access to Saudi Aramco's Muajjiz pipeline, and comforting rhetoric about the legitimacy and "Arab-ness" of Iraqi Shiites. The Saudi push will be viewed by Iran as a stalking horse for U.S. influence, and those Iraqis who hoped they could rely on what they like to call their "two uncles"—the one in Washington and the other in Tehran—may be forced to choose. And given the proximity and methods of their Iranian uncle, they may stick with him instead of the U.S. one.

This inclination toward Iran does not mean that these Iraqi politicians, senior bureaucrats, or military commanders are dancing on marionette strings. What it does mean is that Iran has a stronger claim to their loyalty than does the United States, as well as the capacity to intimidate or bribe individuals whose collaboration might not be offered a priori. The gains the United States has made in winning Iraqi cooperation on security were not simply the product of a top-down decision by Abadi (although Abadi's help was indispensable)—they were made possible by the decisions of individuals with command responsibilities to acquiesce in political decisions for personal or institutional reasons. Iran is clearly in a position to affect these calculations in ways that degrade U.S.-Iraqi security cooperation.

A DARK FUTURE?

Unless and until tensions between the United States and Iran begin to rise significantly, Tehran will likely be content with a ministerial landscape populated by Iraqis who lean toward Iran. Their main objective will be to secure a continuing role for the PMF and to sustain militant groups such as Kataib Hezbollah. Tehran will see these force structure conditions as essential infrastructure for defending its interests in Iraq against U.S. pressure and deterring U.S. aggression elsewhere in the region or against Iran itself.

Should hostilities erupt in Lebanon, Syria, the Persian Gulf, or as the result of U.S. or Israeli strikes against targets linked to Iran's nuclear enrichment or missile programs, Iran would be in a position to use armed units within Iraq to attack U.S. interests there directly—very likely through methods they have used in the past, such as ambushes and bombings. This would be intolerable to the United States, which would have to increase its footprint in Iraq to defend its existing presence, as well as to maintain U.S. influence over the Iraqi government, whose authority—and legitimacy—would be threatened by renewed conflict between its two patrons.

Where this dynamic rests is too hard to predict. Both contenders have cards to play in Iraq. The question is who gets outbid. Only one thing is certain: in the event of real conflict between Iran and the United States, Iraq's halting progress to normal statehood will once again be blocked.

The views expressed in all the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of AN-NOUR Newspaper