

Iran's Presence in Iraq: New Realities?



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Abstract

This study explores the new realities related to the Iran's presence in Iraq. It focuses on Iran's grand strategy in Iraq, and Iran's decision-making process concerning that presence. The study discusses different methods that Iran has used to achieve its goals in Iraq. It also discusses in-depth the four Iranian levels of intervention in Iraq, and the consequences on the region. The study includes supporting data, which help to understand the nature of Iranian intervention in Iraq.

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Introduction

Prior to the killing in June 2006 of Abu Mussab Zarqawi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, little attention was given to the nature of Iranian intervention in Iraq. The focus tended to be on ending the war, destroying the Ba'ath party and building a new Iraq. Most important of all, there was determination to link the war on Iraq to the war on terror, particularly to Al-Qaeda. In Western capitals – even more so than Arab capitals – discussion of the Iran-Iraq relationship centered on the potential to use Iranian animosity towards Iraq to persuade Iran to join the international alliance in its mission of regime change.

“Grand Strategy” and the decision-making process

It can be argued that Iran has a ‘Grand Strategy’ in relation to Iraq which is linked to the ‘National Security of Iran’. The aim of this strategy is to ensure that Iraq does not become a threat to Iranian security in any way, or is not maneuvered so as to cause a threat to Iran. This approach towards Iraq emerged as a result of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, which caused Iran to perceive Iraq as a threat to its regional geo-strategic, economic and religious interests². Iran also “fears that the new Iraq will still follow an anti-Iran policy.”³ Therefore, it is vital for Iran to protect these regional interests by maintaining a presence in Iraq. Moreover, Iran’s presence in Iraq is sending a clear message to the United States that it has failed to establish a pro-American regime in Baghdad. It also underscores the fact that the “U.S doctrine of preventive regime change is dead”.⁴

1 This study is the expansion of my short article “Iran intervention in Iraq, One Strategy and Multiple Tactics,” which was published on www.Islamonline.net, 8 March 2007.

2 An Iranian opposition Iranian rebel group (Mujahdeen-e-Khalq), which was considered to be a threat to the Islamic republic of Iran, has been weakened as a result of the war on Iraq. This is one of the benefits that Iran has received.

3 Ehteshami, Anousheravan: Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam, *Washington Quarterly*, autumn 2003, p. 118-119.

4 Byman, Daniel L.: Iran’s Iraq Strategy: What Tehran is Really Up To, www.washingtonpost.com, 18 February 2007.

Iran's decision-making process vis-à-vis Iraq is complex and difficult to understand. However, it is accurate to say that the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) in Iran is fully involved in such a process, as are other important decision-making circles in Iran including the government, the Expediency Council, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the religious institution (Hawaza) and the office of Ayatollah Kamenie. Although the outlines of security-related strategies must be authorized by the National Security Council, each involved institution has space to maneuver within the framework of these outlines.¹

Iranian Methods

Iran was well-prepared to fill the political vacuum that occurred after the collapse of the Iraqi regime. From the early days of the preparations for the military campaign against Iraq, and after the meetings of Iranian officials with their American and European counterparts, Iran was convinced that war on Iraq would definitely happen.

Consequently, opponents of Saddam's regime were prepared in two ways. First, religious Shia leaders such as Mohammed Baker Al-Hakim and others were encouraged to attend meetings held in Washington, London, and Sulimaniya in the Kurdish area of northern Iraq.² These meetings were excellent sources of information concerning American and Western plans with regards to Iraq.

Second, relations with secular Shia opposition figures such as Ahmed Chalabi and with Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq were consolidated. Iran developed strong ties with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masoud Barazani as well as good connections with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani, the current President of Iraq. By establishing and consolidating these connections, the Iranians prepared themselves for the aftermath of the collapse of Saddam's regime.

As coalition troops were gaining ground and advancing towards Baghdad, they left the south (with its predominantly Shia population) in chaos. Meanwhile, the Badr Brigade – which had been known as the Tenth Army in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Forces – was taking its positions in cities of southern Iraq. This was an important tactic for achieving the Iranian strategy of intervening in Iraqi affairs. All this was accompanied by an extensive media propaganda campaign, spreading the message that because Iraqi Shia represented 60 percent of the population of Iraq, according to the numbers that were widely circulated by Western circles and the new Iraqi political elite, they have the legitimate right to assume leadership in post-Saddam Iraq.

¹ See Article 176 of the Iranian Constitution, at http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch12.php

² The Badr Brigade started meeting the Patriotic Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 2001. It has been reported that at least 5 meetings (27 September 2001, 1 October 2001, 2 October 2001, 4 November 2001, and December 2001) took place in Sulaymania. See Abedin, Mahan: The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, October 2003.

At that time, Iran adopted another tactic portraying Iran's intervention in Iraq as a form of assistance to the new Iraqi regime which aimed to ensure political stability. This was manifested in Iranian statements emphasizing that what happens inside Iraq is an Iraqi affair and comparing the Iranian role to that of the United States in Iraq. Although the majority of those elected for membership of the interim government were Shia, Iran pretended that such an issue was not motivating its ties with Iraq.

During the war which erupted between the two countries in the 1980s, Iraqi policy was to expel Iraqis of Iranian descent back to Iran and confiscate all their property. This policy aimed to secure Iraq from the threat of any possible spies and proved to be a golden opportunity for Iran to employ the Iraqi human factor in the war effort. Nowadays, Iran attempts to fulfill its goals in Iraq through emphasizing its allegiance to the Shias within Iraq. In other words, Iran exerts strong effort to ensure that the Shias remain powerful within Iraq for they are regarded as being trustworthy to pursue Iranian interests in Iraq. However, it is important for Iran to do so in a political context rather than a religious one. On the one hand, this means supporting those who are ruling Iraq, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) (which has recently dropped the word revolution from its title, reaming itself the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC)),¹ the Iraqi National Congress (INC), and the Islamic Da'wa Party. On the other hand, Iran supports those who oppose some aspects of the political process and the occupation such as Ayatollah Sistani, Moqtada Al-Sadr and Sunni and Shia insurgents.²

By following this dual-track approach, Iran is able to keep all channels open and demonstrate its political talent in managing the crisis in Iraq. This crisis serves Iranian interests because it keeps the United States busy in Iraq and shows America's failure to promote democracy in the Middle East and to stabilize a new Iraq. To Iran, it is important to see client factions in Iraq, and more important to see them as Iranian clients.

¹ Karouny, Mariam: Iraq's top Shi'ite party changes platform, <http://uk.reuters.com/home>, 12 May 2007.

² Former American Ambassador to Iraq Khalizad described the Iranian strategy: "They're (Iranians) using variety of tools that to you and I would look very contradictory but to them is part of a comprehensive strategy". Beehner, Lionel: Iran's Goals in Iraq, www.cfr.org, 23 February 2006.

Levels of Intervention

There are four levels of Iranian intervention in Iraq: 1) relations with religious leaders, 2) relations with governmental officials, 3) relations with insurgents and 4) economic relations, including the provision of aid. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

The first level of intervention involves Iranian relations with Iraqi religious leaders. These relations were maintained according to the announced strategy of highlighting the Iranian influence on the Iraqi religious establishment, which pushed in the direction of building and stabilizing a new Iraq. Iran has a strong relationship with the Shia religious groups such the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and "its military arm, the Badr Brigade, which has now been transformed into a political organization, [named] Badr Organization"¹. SCIRI was established under the leadership of Mohammed Baker Al-Hakim, who was assassinated in a 2003 explosion in Najaf. His brother, Abdel Aziz Al-Hakim, assumed leadership of the council afterwards. The council is the core of what is today known as the Shia Alliance in Iraq.

Iran also has connections with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and has kept ties with Shia secular groups, i.e. the Iraqi National Congress (INC) which was led by Ahmad Chalabi. These organizations and their leaders represent the new Iraqi elite, a fact that makes their strong ties with the Iranians all the more important. Similarly, it is important to take into consideration visits of Iranian officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Iranian ambassador, to Ayatollah Sistani.

The nature of the relationship between Iran and the Shia religious groups can be understood as one of the Iranian tools of influence. It can be argued that Iran was funding some of those organizations when they were in exile from Iraq under the Ba'ath regime, but providing specific evidence is difficult. Both Iran and those leaders shared a major goal: bringing about the demise of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime. However, there was no clear vision of the nature of the relationship once regime change was successful. Iran had planned to be a very important player in the new Iraq regardless of any pressure it might face, and based on that, there was no limitation to its involvement. It is not clear how Iran has practiced its influence through Shia leaders, however, it might be correct to say that the shared political interests make the two sides appear as if they are coordinating their efforts.

¹ Mite, Valentinas: Iraq draws a bead on 'enemy' Iran, www.atimes.com, 30 July 2004.

The second level of Iranian intervention occurs through an “official” medium, one where official relations are maintained with political leaders in Iraq. Such relations develop before the eyes of the whole world via meetings that could be held between officials of any two countries. It is important to note, however, that official relations between the two countries have reached a point where the Iranian side is able to infiltrate Iraqi governmental institutions. Commenting on this situation, an Iranian diplomat said confidently, «If you call any Iraqi governmental office, at least five Persian speakers will pick up the phone». Moreover “in the cafeteria of Iraq’s parliament, Shia legislators slip into Farsi when they do not want their conversations overheard.”¹ Iran had always supported all Iraqi elected governments. According to the Sunni Arab positions, such support was significant because all those who won the elections in Iraq have in many ways been linked to Iran.

Upon assuming their roles within the government, Iraqi officials have always ensured that visiting Tehran was high on their ‘to-do’ list. This kind of policy was implemented by the majority of Iraqi politicians in the last four years and resulted from the political isolation from which those politicians suffered, especially from Arab governments. Former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari, who represents the Islamic Da’wa Party – supported and funded by Iran – visited Iran in July 2005.² Nouri al-Malki, the current Prime Minister, visited Iran in September 2006. In November 2006, Iraqi president Jalal Talabani also visited Tehran. In addition to these trips, there have been regular trips from Members of Parliament, ministers, and military personnel. It is also worth noting that Moqtada Al-Sadr, a prominent Shia leader, visited Tehran and met with Iranian officials in 2005. The only exception was the interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi,³ who was invited to visit Iran but did not accept the invitation. It became gradually obvious that he was worried about the Iranian role in Iraq.

The crisis of the five Iranian detainees captured by the United States in Kirkuk has shown the influence of Iranian government on Iraqi senior politicians. In response to their detention, Iran decided not to participate in the Sharm El-Sheikh conference on 3-4 May 2007. Iraq sent its Foreign Minister to Tehran to secure Iranian participation. Although this initiative was initially rejected by the Iranian government, Iran subsequently changed its decision and participated in the conference. The efforts of Iraqi officials also succeeded in persuading the United States to agree to family visits to the Iranian detainees.⁴

It has been reported that this crisis “has created a rift between the United States and the Iraqi Shiite-dominated government”.⁵

1 Sly, Liz: Iranian influence soaring in Iraq, www.chicagotribune.com, 8 March 2007

2 Mosher, Andy and Wright, Robin: Iran, Iraq Herald ‘New Chapter’ in Shiite-Led Alliance, www.washingtonpost.com, 17 July 2005

3 Iyad Allawi had criticized former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari, saying “he has to behave as an Iraqi. He has to be loyal to Iraq and not to another country”. ‘Allawi’s party warns possible successor over Iran ties and role of Islam in state’, *Daily Star*, 17 February 2005

4 “Families to Meet Kidnapped Diplomats,” www.iran-daily.com, 30 April 2007.

5 Michaels Jim: Iraqi urges U.S to release Iranian detainees, www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2007-05-10-iranian-detainees_N.htm

The third level of Iranian intervention in Iraq occurs through the security spectrum. This is manifested in the creation of cells working within the militant groups in Iraq. The Iranian security services consider Iraq to be one of its main challenges, and thus have considered it vital to have an Iranian presence within militant groups there.¹ Iran is providing certain elements within Iraq with logistical support under the pretext of confronting the occupation or confronting political groups that work to marginalize Shias in Iraq. These groups are very clandestine in nature and have managed to infiltrate the Badr Brigade as well as other Iraqi Shia groups established to protect Shia districts and institutions. It is difficult to predict the number of infiltrators in Iraq; however, the state of chaos in southern Iraq and the inability to control the Iranian-Iraqi border facilitates their movement and makes it easier for them to hide inside Iraq.

It is important to note the crucial role played by the human factor in the security level. The Iraqi mu>awadeen (returnees), for instance, have strong relations with Iranian security apparatuses. Significantly, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) pointed out that after the fall of Baghdad the number of Iraqi migrants in Iran dropped dramatically – from 300,000 to 70,000. The decline of the Iraqi immigrants in Iran indicates that those Iraqis who returned to Iraq were somehow linked to Iran's governmental departments, including the security services. Indeed, this link was one of the reasons behind the mistrust between those Shias and Moqtada Al-Sadr.²

It is reasonable to assume that the Iraqi returnees are ready to cooperate with Iranian security apparatuses. Moreover, Iran has the largest group of foreigners entering Iraq. Based on an agreement signed by Iran and Iraq, 1500 Iranian pilgrims a day are allowed to enter Iraq.³ Iran has followed the same approach in dealing with Iraqis of both Arab and Persian origin. It seems that Iran looks at the issue considering one fact: who is most likely to implement an Iranian strategy and serve Iranian goals in Iraq? If this happens to be the Sunnis, then Iran will not hesitate to support them. It can be argued that the links between Iran and Sunni insurgents, including Al-Qaeda, can be understood as a means to cause the situation in Iraq to deteriorate, so the United States will face greater challenges in dealing with it. Again, it is important to understand the Iranian involvement in Iraq within a political context, otherwise it seems hard to follow and assess such involvement.

The fourth level of intervention occurs through "aid". Tehran has promised to pay more than \$100 million to rebuild Iraq, provided that this aid is not paid directly to the Iraqi government, but instead to establish infrastructure projects in Najaf and Karbala. Iran has promised to help in rebuilding Najaf's airport and connecting the Iran-Iraq rail network as a step towards increasing trade and religious tourism. "Iran gives Najaf \$20 million a year to build and improve tourist facilities for pilgrims... and Karbala gets roughly \$3 million a year"⁴.

1 Buchta, Wilfried: "Iran's Security Sector: An Overview", Working Paper-NO 146, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Geneva, August 2004.

2 According to the figures published by the Director of the Emigration Department at the Interior Ministry in Iran, the number of Iraqis in Iran had decreased 70% since 2002. See www.isna.ir, 16 February 2007.

3 White, Jeffrey: Fighting Iran in Iraq, www.washingtoninstitute.org, 14 February 2007.

4 Wang, Edward: Iran is playing a growing role in Iraq economy, www.nytimes.com, 17 March 2007.

In December 2006, Iran signed an agreement that involved the payment of \$1 billion to Iraq, part of which would be paid to balance the budget of the Iraqi government. The rest, however, would be spent on developing different Iraqi sectors as well as training employees in the Iraqi public sector. Iran has already received thousands of trainees in the postal,¹ health, educational, and security sectors. The two countries have also signed a security agreement which will lead to the exchange of security information. As the government in Baghdad is failing to tackle security challenges, it is very hard to know the real progress that the two governments are making on the economic level, and whether or not these agreements have been implemented.

Iran is playing an important role in Iraq's economy. Despite the fact that there are no accurate figures about the size of the Iran-Iraq economic relations, trade between the two countries has grown by 30 percent since 2003.² The available figures claim that Iran's non-oil export to Iraq exceeds \$1 billion.³ Iran exported more than \$79 million in animal products to Iraq in the first four months of 2006.⁴ The value of Iraqi imports of Iranian hygiene-related materials and medicines was more than \$5 million.⁵ Iran also provides Iraq with 150 Megawatts of electricity, which will soon be increased to 1650 Megawatts.⁶

Iran also has built independent economic relations with the Kurds in Iraq. As a result, "around 30 to 40 percent of Kurdistan imports come from Iran. Iraq's Kurds also depends on gas imports from Iran".⁷ Moreover, it has been reported that 200 Iranian companies have started activities in different fields in Iraq. The Kish Free Trade Zone (KFTZ) in Iran has signed a memorandum of understanding with Iraqi Kurdistan to expand bilateral exchanges, which include an agreement to establish an air link between KFTZ and Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸ Undoubtedly, Iran could not achieve all of this without a substantial presence on the ground. Today Iran has its main embassy in Baghdad, and two consulates of significant importance in Karbala and Basra. There is also a diplomatic office in northern Iraq which is to be transformed into a consulate by the end of this year.

Despite what it is doing in Iraq, Iran appears to be simply reacting. However, careful follow-up of this intervention, the nature of the relationship with the new Iraqi elite, and the multiple levels of this Iranian intervention leaves no room for doubt that there is some kind of planning and initiative on the Iranian part.

1 See www.isna.ir, 16 May 2006.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid, 27 May 2006.

4 See www.isna.ir, 2 September 2006.

5 Ibid 15 May 2006

6 Ibid, 7 June 2006.

7 Saberi, Roxana: Iraqi Kurds split between Iran and US, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/6638255.stm. 10 May 2007.

8 Iraqi Kurdistan, Kish FTZ ink MoU, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), www.irna.ir, 30 April 2007. Iran to Expand Economic Cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), www.irna.ir, 25 February 2007. Masoud Barazani, the leader of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), visited Tehran in May 2007. He called for Iran to develop its ties with Iraqi Kurdistan. He stressed that any anti-Iran operation would never be allowed in Iraqi Kurdistan. Anti-Iran Operations never Allowed in Iraqi Kurdistan, <http://english.farsnews.com>, 6 May 2007.

Conclusion

Iraq has become a proxy for an Arab-Iranian conflict for regional hegemony.¹ The reasons behind this are the politicians' historical background and the divisions based on religious and political aspirations. Most of the new political elite in Iraq came from exile, and while a strong relationship has already been forged with the Iranian establishment, the Arabs have been, on the whole, left out. Kuwait – with its relatively strong ties with SCIRI – may be an exception to this, however, Kuwaiti influence in Iraq does not come close to level of the Iranian involvement.

Iran's persistence on developing its uranium enrichment program has led to its subjection to United Nations Security Council sanctions.² Iran is under the perception that Arab Sunni states are working with the United States in forming a new coalition as a preliminary step to attack Iran. According to the Iranian officials, this scenario is forcing Iran to reinforce its presence in Iraq. It seems that all previous attempts by the Iranian regime to convince its Arab neighbors of its good intentions with regards to both the nuclear program and the Iranian intervention in Iraq have failed. The March 2007 meeting in Baghdad, which both Iran and the United States attended, had no real impact either on the situation in Iraq, nor on Iranian-American relations.

According to the Iranian understanding, previous meetings have proved that the mountains of suspicions between Sunni neighboring countries and Iran need a lot of work to be removed, simply because of the American factor.³ Therefore it seems difficult to see Iran working with Sunni neighboring countries and the U.S. even where there are common interests. For instance, Iran prefers to work directly with Turkey and Syria regarding the Kurdish issue. Today, in the Arab Sunni street there is a real concern regarding Iran's role in Iraq and Lebanon. There is a new phenomenon, which might be called 'Iran-phobia' or 'Shia-phobia'. Such a phenomenon is causing more divisions within Arab Middle Eastern societies, in particular between Sunnis and Shias. This will undoubtedly negatively affect the unity of societies and lead to further fragmentation.

To Iran, it is more important to keep strong ties with Iraq's Kurdish population. Such policy will create mistrust between Iran's Kurds and Kurds in Iraq. Such policy is facilitating Iran's task of controlling Kurds in Iraq who might be used by the United States in any future conflict between Iran and the U.S.

The Iranian strategy in Iraq has succeeded in keeping all political players – religious and secular – connected to Tehran. However this achievement has depended on other geographical and geopolitical factors. In the past Iran gained from the perception that Iraq is the major threat to the regional security, but nowadays it is Iran which is presented as a serious threat to regional and international security. Iran's nuclear program and statements made by the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, about Israel have helped to form a new international alliance against Iran. This alliance, led by the United States, is extremely critical of Iran's intervention in Iraq and has warned Iran of severe consequences of that intervention.

1 Zweis, Mahjoub: "The Iraqi Issue and its impact on GCC-Iran Relations", *Vasetej-Journal of the European Society for Iranian Studies* 1 (2) 2006, pp 72-79.

2 Resolutions 1737 and 1747, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8928.doc.htm> <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sc8980.doc.htm>

3 For instance, Iran criticized the conference of the foreign ministers of Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which was held in Pakistan on 25 February 2007. Iran understood that conference as an attempt to establish up a Sunni Alliance to confront rising influence of Shia Iran in the Middle East. See "Pakistan gathering was not aimed at Shias or Iran," www.dailytimes.com.pk, 25 February 2007.