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A Hopeful Iraq: Two Dangers Averted

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Executive Summary: Opponents of the war in Iraq have long warned that the removal of Saddam Hussein would have two extremely negative consequences: that Iraqi Shiites would impose a radical religious regime on the country, and that Iran would effectively come to control the country. However, a dispassionate examination of the facts on the ground reveals that neither of these horrors has come to be. While the struggle is not yet over and these dangers exist, the likelihood of Iraq becoming radically religious or Iranian-dominated seems considerably lower than it did in 2003.

Background

From the beginning, the Bush Administration knew that the war in Iraq would be difficult, and the decision to launch the war was not easily taken. Administration officials were forced to choose between the risks of removing Saddam Hussein and the risks of leaving him in power.

Many experts warned that the Shia majority rule that would inevitably follow an overthrow of Saddam would mean the imposition in Iraq of Islamic fundamentalism, similar to that of Shiite Iran. It would also lead, they warned, to the suppression of Kurds and Sunnis, and a new ally for international Shia power. They argued that even if the Iraqi Shia leaders were not so inclined, they would still be dominated by Iran and the Shiite organizations that were funded, penetrated, and supported by Iran; and would be coerced through armed Iranian subversion.

So far, this has not happened. Iraqi Shiites are following the lead of Ayatollah Sistani, who despite turmoil and pressure, stands firm in his support for free elections, non-clerical government, and decent treatment for all – Sunnis, Kurds and secular leaders.

The current government, led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, is in the hands of a sectarian Shiite alliance that was formed during a period of sectarian violence provoked by the failed Sunni and Iranian efforts to create a civil war. The Maliki government has admirably shown it is not interested in following the paths of either Saddam Hussein or Ayatollah Khomeini. Rather, it appears committed to a pluralistic approach to government – the likes of which has not been seen in the Arab world for many years. Nor does the regime seem interested in a policy of persecuting or seeking revenge against the Sunni communities – although it has been slow to give Sunni leaders a greater share of power.

Basis for Fear

There are both real and exaggerated fears of Iranian domination of a Shia-led Iraqi government.

Iraqi leaders such as Talabani, Chalabi, al Sadr, Maliki, and Hakim often meet with high-level Iranian leaders in Iran, and have generally refused to denounce Iran – leading many to claim that they are “agents” of Iran. It is well understood, as well, that no Iraqi leader can stand completely aloof from Iran. Iran's population is more than double that of Iraq, and it is led by an authoritarian government with a powerful, well-financed force of foreign agents, many of them operating inside Iraq. These agents have plenty of cash to spread around in a society where money buys power and influence, and they have the ability to eliminate those who they believe stand in their way. Indeed, many Iraqis have been murdered by Iranian agents.

Moreover, many Iraqi political figures have spent years in exile in Iran, and others have close family ties there, further making them subject to Iranian pressure. Iraqi Shiites also have more recently feared the possibility of a Sunni attempt to regain power in Iraq, with the help of the US and Sunni governments such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. If Shia majority rule was in danger, Iran would be their only support.

All these factors provide a real basis for concern about the possibility of Iranian domination of Iraq.

Understanding Iranian Influence on Iraqi Leaders

On the other hand, one can dismiss many of these warning indicators. It is true that in effect many Iraqi players have kept a foot in both the Iraqi and Iranian camps – but that was to be expected, and does not mean that Iraq is falling into Iranian hands!

Consider the situation of any one of a number of Iraqi leaders who for years received financial or other help from Iran. Such a leader, now with some kind of political position in a free Iraq, was a potential source of Iranian influence. But he had his own power and income and the Iranians had to be afraid that if they demanded too much he would tell them “thank you very much for your past help, but things have changed.” Such a person

was interested both in preserving his independence and keeping his links to Iran, which were useful and in the future might become essential.

A few years ago nobody knew which way those with feet in both camps would go. If they acted as agents of Iran, then Iran would dominate Iraq. Now, five years after the liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein, after the creation of an Iraqi constitution and two elected Iraqi governments, and after the defeat of al Qaeda in Iraq, it is becoming increasingly clear that most of these leaders remain primarily loyal to Iraq. While many of them do maintain connections with Iran, they are not turning out to be reliable Iranian agents. The Iranians have had to recognize they can only maintain their connection by not asking too much.

These Iranian “agents of influence” in Iraq will prevent Iraq from acting against Iran, but they will not enable Iran to subvert the government of Iraq. A large number of Iraqi leaders will probably maintain significant relationships with the Iranian regime. A few will be almost completely compliant with the Iranians. Others will pay only perfunctory attention to Iranian attempts at influence. Most will be scattered along the spectrum of degree of Iranian influence.

Iranian Agents in Iraq

The Iranians have another source of power in Iraq. In addition to well-funded political agents, they support hundreds of armed agents, many in criminal gangs, especially in southern Iraq. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard has operated such agents in many European countries where they have killed numerous Iranians deemed threats to Iranian interests. It is much easier for them to operate next door in Iraq, using the many Iraqis who have lived in Iran for years. These agents are used to fight against the US, but they are also potentially available to influence Iraqi politics.

However, similar to the decline in Iranian political influence, this source of Iranian power is also growing weaker. The gangs recently received a heavy blow in Basra and the south where the British had allowed them almost free rein, and they are not dominating the political scene in Baghdad.

The Iraqi government’s recent action to bring law and order to Basra exposed the strange coalition dominating the city – criminal gangs, Iranian agents, and Muslim extremists. Due to the British army's unwillingness to maintain law and order, this three-party coalition has been controlling the city and making life miserable for its residents. While impoverished Shiites of southern Iraq are glad to be rid of criminal gangs and fanatic Muslim enforcers, they also care about getting enough to eat and are not convinced that Maliki cares about their needs.

Iraqi Power

Thus far, the fears of Iranian domination are not materializing. In fact, it can reasonably be argued that the opposite is true: we are beginning to see signs of Iraqi Shiite

independence and even blowback against the Iranians. Led by Ayatollah Sistani, Iraqi Shiism (which theologically is traditional Shiism) is beginning to be considered as an alternative source of religious authority in Iran. A Shiite Iraq is beginning to look more like a rival to Iran than like an addition to Iranian Shia power. Ayatollah Sistani was not willing to see Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his brief trip to Iraq in March 2008, and Iraqi demonstrations against Ahmadinejad kept him away from the Shiite holy city of Najaf.

While the fears of Iranian domination of Iraq are so far unrealized, the story is not yet over. In Iraq, as in most of the world, political leaders support those who they perceive will be the winner. Iran's failure to dominate Iraq results from the expectation that Iraq will continue to be independent and protected by the US. If that expectation changes, and the common view becomes that Iran will be the dominant voice in the region, many Iraqis will pay more attention to Iranian suggestions. This could result in an intensified struggle in Iraq and perhaps a drastic change in the current situation.

The other serious danger is deadlock in the Iraqi government, rendering it unable to carry out essential actions. The Iraqis – like the US when it first achieved independence – avoided the need to compromise by agreeing to act by consensus. This assured all parties that their interests would not be trampled on. However, a system in which nothing happens unless everyone agrees is vulnerable to deadlock.

While this is still a danger, the confidence and respect that Maliki has gained by his initiative and success in Basra makes it more likely that Iraqi politicians will allow him enough freedom of action to limit harm from deadlock.

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