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Iran and the New Iraq: The Challenges Ahead from an Iranian Perspective*
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Introduction
Among the Persian Gulf Arab neighbouring countries, Iraq due to its specific political security and its ethnic, cultural and historical characteristics is undoubtedly perceived by Iran as a core country in the region and in the Arab world. Throughout the last 30 years, the security challenges derived from the presence of a Sunni-Ba'athist dominated government in Baghdad resulted in countless problems and tensions in the Persian Gulf region. The downfall of Saddam Hussein and the ensuing demise of Ba'athist ideology has brought about new opportunities and challenges to Iran's national interests. Understanding these new developments and their impact on the future relations between Iran and Iraq is of a great importance for regional and thus for global security. This paper endeavours to demonstrate an enduring and equitable solution to how Iran should conduct its relations with the New Iraq.

The assumptions of this paper include:
1. Iraq will remain Iran's potential regional rival;
2. Preserving Iraq's territorial integrity is the most prominent, sustainable principle in Iran's national interests;
3. Development of the Shii role in Iraq's politics would have a significant impact on the two countries' future relations.

The paper's central questions address:
1. How would Iran and the contemporary Iraq be able to become reliable neighbours?
2. What would be the main features of Iraq's new government from an Iranian perspective?

The hypothesis of this research is the following:
For a long time, the dominating and defined presence of a Sunni government in Baghdad has caused tensions and problems for Iran-Iraqi mutual relations. Given the new developments, the improvement of relations between the two countries is initially dependent on a new foundation emerging for Iraqi foreign policy towards Iran. To this end, the presence of a balanced government in Baghdad comprised of all the ethnic-

political factions will balance Iraq's relations with Iran and also its neighbouring states and therefore will be a significant step towards resolving the regional tensions.

This paper is organised into three sections: the first section classifies the different Iranian perceptions of how to relate to contemporary Iraq. The second part is dedicated to defining and classifying the sustained, existing parameters by identifying the bases of the current challenges to the relations between the two countries. Finally in the third section, the author suggests what features of the new Iraqi government will be significant from the point of view of Iran's national interests.

I. Iraq from the Iranian Perspectives

A) A General Overview
From the general Iranian perspective, Iraq is an artificial collection of many different ethnic groups, brought together by British foreign policy in order to balance power in the region (1) and limit Iran's influence. Throughout the latter part of the 20th century, Iran and Iraq have never been easy bedfellows; this was only exacerbated by British determination that the Iraqi regime be dominated by the country's Sunni minority. A host of negative effects followed: the damaging Ba'athist regime; the regional arms race and subsequent conflict and the invasion of Kuwait; and finally the growing interference of American power.

From this perspective, disproportionate Sunni influence in Iraq with all its natural resources, potential economic strength and key geographical position will always spell trouble. The prevalent Iranian view is consequently one based on mistrust lack of confidence, to the extent that even with the removal of Saddam Hussein this feeling mostly remained unchanged. This feeling of concern has been manifested by the Islamic Republic's two-pillar policy in dealing with Iraq's contemporary crisis, as Iran on the one hand opposed the American invasion and its subsequent occupation, and on the other designated Saddam's regime as a brutal regime which deserved to be overthrown and punished (2). This author is of the view that the main reason behind the pursuit of this policy, prior to everything, has been the possibility of seeing an Iraqi pro-American puppet regime which would probably act in favour of US purposes and substantively in defiance of the Islamic Republic.

B) Iranian Perceptions of Iraq as an Arab Country
Considering Iraq to be an Arab country that belongs to the Arab world, there are many different viewpoints among Iranians which could be grouped as follows:

First: Opposition to any deal or cooperation with the Arab world
Two views could be identified here:

1. *The idealistic view:* This group holds that Iranian interests are in wholesale conflict with those of the Arab world, whether they are cultural, economic, political or even military. This view derives mainly from the unsympathetic Iranian perception of the Arab invasion of Iran, resulting in the eradication of the Persian civilisation. On this view, Arabs harbour a jealousy toward the ancient Persian culture, leading them to always act against Iran's national interests at historic moments (3). To this end, there is an irreconcilable enmity between the two sides. Therefore, notwithstanding Saddam's aggression towards Iran, Iraq is not an exception. As a constant reality, this way of thinking exists between the Iranian nationalists; the political elites and intellectuals; the Iranian Diaspora and has followers generally among ordinary people. For instance, looking at Iran's current request to join the Arab League, this viewpoint has demonstrated itself in a thorough opposition.

2. *The pragmatist view:* Focusing on the reality of the Arab world, this perception is based on the belief that there should be only a logical level of political and security collaboration between the two sides. This group considers that, in light of cultural and economic structural distinctions, any cooperation between the two sides will be doomed. Accordingly, Iran's advancement as a regional power depends essentially on establishing reasonable interactions with the West rather than the regional Arab countries (4). On this view, acting in favour of Arab issues such as the Arab-Israeli peace process has not only been costly for Iran's national interests, but also has resulted in a thankless lack of appreciation from the Arab side (5). Consequently, Iran, in essence, should prioritise its national interests as a precondition for successfully conducting its regional and international relations. This view exists among the Iranian independent political elites and particularly academics both inside and outside of the country.

Second: Favouring close cooperation with the Arab world
Again, two views could be distinguished within this perception:

1. *The idealistic view:* This viewpoint holds that Iran as an Islamic country should define its national interests in contribution to and coordination with the Arab countries as an important body of the Islamic world. This group, which has mainly been referred to as the Ultra-Left Wing, believes that the Islamic Republic due to its nature needs to be both directly and actively involved in all issues of the Islamic world and, in effect, the interests of the Islamic Republic demands the establishment of an enduring link with the regional Arab countries. During the first Persian Gulf War, supporters of this thinking held the belief that that Islamic duty required Iran to act in favour of Iraq.

2. *The pragmatic view:* On this notion, the Arab world is counted as a sustainable existing fact, to the extent that the Islamic Republic needs to establish an

overwhelming cooperation with this bloc. This group refers both to the demands of the Constitution and to geographical, cultural and religious coherence, dictating Iran to establish close and mutual relations with the neighbouring Islamic countries. Since the early 1990s the basis of Iranian foreign policy has focused on confidence-building and Détente policy in the region, materialised by the contemporary establishment who believe in having close relations with this entity (6). On this view, Iraq occupies a significant place in the Arab world and the current discontent should be removed.

C) The Contemporary Iraq: A Constant Reality
As an underlying reality and as the result of the aforementioned views, one should admit that Iraq with its numerous commonalties with Iran has an identified definition in Iran's national interests. The existing political actualities will, therefore, make the expansion of bilateral relations inevitable and ultimately direct them toward a joint destiny in the regional security arrangements. Another undeniable fact is Iran's vast influence on the Iraqi Shii majority (60%) which has currently been liberated after decades of suppression and marginalisation. Given the new developments, the Shias have in fact emerged as an underlying force in Iraq's politics. In addition, the existence of Shii majority in Iraq along with its 1400 years solidarity; the culture of frustration and sympathies, the record of linkage with Iran through the sacred shrines in Najaf and Karbala and also the Shii seats of learning, distinguishes Iraq in contrast with other Arab countries. Moving away from the current disenchanted relations, therefore, requires the introduction of a new definition of mutual relations based on the new regional developments, to an extent capable of leading the two countries toward a new constructive and contributory, collaborative chapter between the two sides.

II. Constant Parameters in Iran-New Iraq's Relations
Apart from the presence of any kind of government in Tehran or Baghdad, the mutual relations are influenced by a series of sustainable factors, which centrally include:

A) Iraq's Ethnic-Geopolitics
Due to the triple nature of Iraqi identities and citizenship living in the distinct district, Iraq's ethno-geopolitics has always presented a considerable challenge to the Iranian politicians and will continue to do so. During the years after Iraq's independence, the presence of independent discrete identities, such as the Kurds, the Sunni and the Shias who had been living in the northern, middle and southern districts, respectively, and the question of how to balance them, has resulted in tension on the internal and regional levels.

Preserving the leverage of Iran's influence in Iraq, the Iranian ex-regime, having no belief in the role and importance of religious groups in politics, focused on and invested in the ethnic Kurds. This conduct has shifted toward focusing on the

empowerment of the Shias in Iraq's political scene through giving birth to and reinforcing the SCIRI. The result was the ferocious suppression of Shias by Saddam, who considered the empowerment of these political factions equivalent to the reinforcement of Tehran's influence. Although with Saddam's downfall, the concern has been removed, Iraq's Geopolitical complexities and the problem of how to balance the distinct identities in order to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, will remain Iran's main security concern.

B) Iran-Iraq: Two Potential Rivals
Another sustainable parameter in analysing Iran-New Iraq's relations is their regional rivalry. Iran and Iraq are considered the two core regional countries, enjoying numerous economic, political and cultural potentials. These potentials have directed their reciprocal relations toward rivalry and will continue to do so. In fact, these potentials which had been combined with the adventurous nature of the Ba'athist regime resulted in Iraq's aggression to Iran. Given the new developments, the central issue is that of how the two countries, could be able to retreat from this challenging state of affairs.

During the past years, the policies of the "Global Governance" and particularly the US in dealing with these two core regional countries have also had negative effects on mutual relations. Given Iran's current rejectionist policies toward the US, the author is of the belief that the continuation of the current US policy of ring-fencing the Islamic Republic would lead to a new round of competition between Iran and Iraq.

Global governance policies characterising the two countries' role in the region could be grouped accordingly:

1. *Balance of Power (until 1992):* As regards this policy, securing the region was characterised by a balancing between Iran and Iraq. This definition put the two countries in an endless regional arms race from the early 1970s that finally due to the advent of the Islamic Revolution resulted in Iraq's invasion.

2. *Dual Containment (1992-2001):* Based on pursuing the simultaneous weaknesses of Iran and Iraq, this policy dominated US foreign policy in the region throughout the 1990s. This conduct, due to its illogical assumption to consider the two countries equally, finally resulted not only in fewer achievements but also intensified tension at the regional level.

3. *Axis of Evil (2001-2003):* After September 11, the US administration has opportunistically legitimised its direct presence in the Middle East region with the excuse of the war on terrorism. The "Axis of Evil" policy considers the 'evil' states like Iraq, Iran and North Korea to be contrary to Global peace and security and, therefore, must change their attitude or be changed. With the removal of the Iraqi regime, the US policy has mainly focused on Iran as the next stop. But considering the US troops being captured in Iraq and taking the growing daily casualties into account, this policy has shifted toward a new one.

4. *Simultaneous Balance (2003-now):* The new policy holds that an effective strike on Iraq has substantively balanced Iran's (and others' like Syria, Libya, etc.) attitude [(7)](). In other words, on the basis of on "The Exemplary War" and the powerful presence of the US in Iraq, the other rebellious states, have continuously changed their conduct and therefore, in effect, the US policy has succeeded in the region. The acceptance of the Additional Protocol has been exemplified by the US as a concession made by Iran.

III. Iran and the New Iraq; the Challenges Ahead

Based on the traditional existing vision, the pivotal question now is how this destructive image could be removed? In other words, what kind of government in Baghdad could preserve Iran's national interests?

Viewing Iraq as a reliable neighbour requires the establishment of a balanced government in Baghdad that is able to, firstly, resolve the existing problems between the two countries. These problems are fundamentally ensuing from the eight years war. Secondly, it must be able to understand Iran's role in the regional power equations and thirdly, it must strive to redefine the bilateral relations and to direct them toward a new chapter based on mutual respect and good will and thus, a constructive rivalry.

A) The Existing Problems
First: War's Fundamental Problems

1. *War's negative and psychological effect:* Given the painful memories caused by the war, there is a kind of negative psychological effect between the citizens of the two countries, particularly Iranians who aggrieved by the Ba'athist regime. Saddam having been ousted and the boundaries subsequently opened, the possibility for Iranians to visit the sacred Shii shrines have been provided. This is a unique opportunity for the two sides to approach to one another, and therefore, to erase the divisive background. It could perhaps be claimed that the first step has been taken by the Iranians, having been continuously sympathetic

to the Iraqis and even the country's formal policy announced to be neutral. This attitude has even surprised the extremist Sunni in Baghdad (8).

2. *The economic and legal problems of the war:* these problems are classified into two vital issues; firstly, reimbursement of the war compensation ($149 billion) and how the future Iraqi government will be able to deal with it. Although Iran has yet raised no claim, it has a strong influence on the Iranians' minds and is a fact that should certainly be mentioned. Secondly, on an optimistic view, the new Iraqi government should reconfirm the 1975 Algiers Treaty as a means of moving forward in order to establishing a new era in the bilateral relations.

Second: Moving toward a Constructive Rivalry
In the course of the past years, emphasis on ideological and sensitive objectives such as Arab and Persian nationalism, the issue of division between Shias and Sunnis, etc., has grounded the bilateral relations in mistrust, tension and destructive rivalries. In the current situation, if the two sides were to emphasise common interests within the context of their respective national interests, or in other words, to exit from the zero-sum-game, this would gradually lead to a more certain form of cooperation and constructive rivalry between the two countries. This move will substantively result in balance and more stability at the regional level.

Iran and Iraq enjoy numerous common interests, such as a mutual interest in contributing to the regional collective security arrangements in the Persian Gulf region, to engage in political and economic cooperation in the context of the OPEC, the exploitation the joint oil wells in the territorial boundaries, cooperation concerning different ports and rivers, e.g. Shatt-al-Arab, and to deal with the Arab world issues particularly the Arab-Israeli peace process. These common interests could lead the relations of the two sides from enmity to a constructive stage. In the author's view, Iran and Iraq will ultimately remain two potential regional rivals, but they are not thereby destined to remain security threats to one another.

B) Features of a Balanced Government in Iraq from an Iranian Perspective
From the point of view of Iran's national interests, a balanced government in Baghdad should be accompanied by the following characteristics:
First. A Non-Ethnic Oriented Government
As previously mentioned, Iraq is an artificial country which emerged to act as a buffer zone region between the Arab and non-Arab states and thus to balance the regional powers. The triple nature of Iraqi identity has always contained the grounds of potential tension and disintegration in itself. The demise of the Ba'ath Party and subsequent developments have liberated the central political fractions in the northern

and southern parts of Iraq. Those that had been suppressed for long years have now seized a proper opportunity to claim their legitimate rights of power division. Although the American troops are now functioning as a counter-weight force, due to the US long-term inability to ground in Iraq, this challenging fundamental issue would factually remain between the different ethnic and political factions and has the potential of pushing the country into instability.

The issue of ethnic orientation and moving toward gaining further autonomy is mostly exemplified by the Kurds. In fact, coincident with the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Kurds have pressed for further political, economic and cultural autonomy as they have reinforced their local position by establishing more communication with the other regional countries, and by attracting foreign investors like the Persian Gulf Arab countries to the Kurd lands (9). Although fully autonomous status has never been officially declared by the Kurdish political groups, there are undeniable signs that their path has been geared towards gaining more autonomy and, finally, full independence as a long term objective.

Given this paper's fundamental assumption which considers Iraq's territorial integrity and its stability as a constant parameter in preserving Iran's national interests, the continuation of the Kurds' autonomy will endanger Iran's interests in different aspects. Firstly, the potent presence of the Kurds on Iraq's political scene will lead to the dissatisfaction of the Sunni minority which had long dominated power in Baghdad and are currently somehow striving to at least regain some part of their lost power (10). At the moment, the presence of the Sunni population in Iraq's oil-rich districts such as Kirkuk is a source of tension between the two sides (11).

In addition, the continuation of the Kurds' autonomy will certainly be a challenge for Iran's national sovereignty. Of course, the coherence and solidarity of the Iranian ethnic factions in context of a great Iran on the one hand and Iran's access to the numerous influential leverage on the other to manage the crisis in Iraq, will reduce any concern deriving from the negative impact of Iraq's disintegration on Iran's national security. From the point of view of Iran's national interests, however, dealing with a gathered collection will definitely be simpler than dealing with distinct identities particularly in a complicated region like the Middle East.

Secondly, granting further autonomy to the Kurds will result in the dissatisfaction of the other neighbouring countries particularly Turkey, Syria, and the Arab world in general. Turkey has always demonstrated that will not tolerate a fully autonomous Kurdish state on its south-eastern boundaries. Turkey's incursion into northern Iraq in the past years, in fact, is the manifestation of this reality. Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian President, has also currently cautioned that granting further autonomy to the Kurds will ultimately lead the region toward instability and Syria, therefore, will not be

welcoming such a development (12). The result of all these problems will consequently be tension and instability in Iran's boundaries which overtly conflicts with Iran's national interests.

Second: A Non-Ideological Oriented Government
For a long time, the traditional position that Iraq's government be only dominated by Sunni, challenged Iran's national interests in different aspects. The turning point of this challenge dates back to the Ba'athist Party and Saddam's subsequent rise to power that immediately resulted in a comprehensive confrontation with Iran. Aiming at the empowerment of Arab nationalism and linking Iraq's destiny to the fate of the "Arab Homeland," the Ba'athist regime strove to acquire the leadership of Arab World (13).

Saddam Hussein marked himself as the hero of the Arab World and introduced Iraq as the first line of battle for ceasing Iranian imperialism and the Persian culture. He therefore attempted to justify its legitimacy and the extremist policies. Iran-Iraq's war and the supportive policy of some Arab countries toward Saddam's regime was, in fact, their misperception of Ba'athism. Iraq's categorical defeat in the first Persian Gulf War was indeed the starting point to questioning the legitimacy of the Ba'ath Party's goals, which finally resulted in the removal of Saddam and the demise of Ba'athism in general.

Essentially, the mixture of Iraq's power foundations with ideological grounds, not only provide the bases of tension in Iraq's internal and mosaic society, but will also challenge other regional powers. Historic experience has proved this assumption about the Sunni's authority in Baghdad. In the new situation, coupled with the liberalisation of Shii power in Iraq's political scene, a new and fresh breath has introduced itself in Iraq's power equations that is now after years of suppression demanding a more active role and a proper power sharing in Baghdad. Given the size of the Shia population on the one hand, and the nature of Shii religion that in itself contains elements of change and evolution and is somehow correlated to politics on the other, the pivotal puzzle is: how would it be feasible to achieve a balance between such a vast liberated power and the other political factions? And, basically, where is the place of Shia forces in the domain of Iran's national interests?

Iran and the Iraqi Shias
In a balanced democratic Iraq, the Shias will undoubtedly play a decisive role in the power division. From an Iranian perspective, therefore, Shii power consolidation should be continued to the level that leads to no virtual elimination of the other political identities. This is substantially the definition of the Shias' place in Iran's national interests, as it is once again needed to prevent empowerment of Arab nationalism by the creation of an inequitable power distribution. In other words, in the long term and at the different internal, regional and international levels, it would be in

conflict with Iran's interests to see a dominating Shia majority in Iraq's politics.
At the internal level, firstly, the Iraqi Shii community is a disproportionate and
fragmented society, and there exist various factions and mentalities such as secular
Communists, moderate, liberal, extremist, independent, urban, tribal Shias, etc. This
classification, of course, came back to the policies of the Ba'athist regime that from
the beginning attempted to create divisions within the Shias in order to control, and
then to reduce, their role and influence, as the Shias were prominently considered as
the leverage of the Islamic Republic's strength in Iraq. Accepting the dominant and
ideological role of Shias, therefore, will result in transferring Shii multi-oriented
political perceptions into the domain of Iranian foreign policy.

Secondly, the Shias' dominating presence will imbalance the power division in
Baghdad, this time in favour of the Shii factions, and will then result in the
dissatisfaction of the other internal groups. This would be particularly the case for the
Sunni minority who has long enjoyed full power in Baghdad. This problem has been
explicitly displayed by the current issue of how the general election should take place.
Although the Sunni and Kurd members of the Iraqi Provisional Governing Council
have firmly emphasised that holding any direct elections is immature, the main reason
behind their unenthusiastic stance is that they are well aware it will naturally lead to
the dominated presence of Shias (14). The result would be the spread of tension, in
conflict with Iran's national interests.

At the regional level, the most imminent reaction would come from the Arab world.
This bloc, indeed, considers Iraq as belonging to the Arab collective. Although the
Iraqi Shias are initially Arabs, it is an undeniable reality that they enjoy an
indiscriminate sympathy towards Iran. Given a 1400-year record and all the common
culture, Iraqi Shias have always been conceived as a basis of the Iranian Islamic
identity, and with the consequent leverage of Iran's influence on Iraq's political scene,
will be so. Accordingly, it would be unbearable for the regional Arab countries to
embrace such a government. For instance, the Saudi Arabian interior minister has
recently expressed Saudi concern about the situations of Sunnis in Iraq. Dissatisfied,
the Arab bloc will assuredly be interested to see once again Iran and Iraq as two
rivals. For Iran, which has been pursuing Détente policy in the region, Iraq's political
scene has the potential grounds to triggering a new round of Iran-Arab world
competition.

Finally, at the international level, it would be intolerable for the Global Governance,
and the US at the top, to see a dominated Shii government since it would be counted
as a leverage of the Islamic Republic's influence in the region or at least another
separate one. Although the recent developments have demonstrated that the Shias
have been less problematic to the US interests in contrast to the Sunnis, the concern
will remain for Americans that the Shias, as ideological and political forces, could in

every moment be activated and threaten the US interests in Iraq. Shias' manifestation of power in the current giant march was, in fact, a thorough warning for Americans. In addition, in attempting to achieve its strategic goal, the termination of the Arab-Israeli peace process, the US would ultimately be in favour of satisfying the Arab public opinion. Acting in interests of the Shias would be in conflict with this very issue. The scope of Shii power realm, therefore, poses a series of unknown tensions towards the US-Iranian current confrontational relations; the conditions that the Islamic Republic would like to avoid.

Conclusion

For several decades, the definition of a dominated Sunni government in Baghdad raised numerous tensions at the internal and regional levels. Saddam's downfall and subsequently the establishment of a new Iraq, has introduced an appropriate opportunity for presenting a new foundation for Iraq's foreign policy in dealing with its neighboring states and Iran in particular. At this end, the creation of a balanced government comprised of all ethnic and political and religious factions is fundamental. Contrary to traditional perceptions, Iran and Iraq are not destined to be permanent and strategic rivals, regional security being achieved by balancing between them. Resolving the existing problems is essentially dependent on the first step that is to be taken by the Iraqi new government. Given Iran-Iraq's power foundations, the fluctuating nature of the regional issues and the countless interests of the Global Governance in dealing with these two core countries, a rate of potential rivalry will remain between Iran and Iraq. From an Iranian perspective, Iraq would be a reliable neighbour that poses no security threat to Iran's national sovereignty.

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