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Avoiding the Iranian Trap: Iraqi Shia Are not Loyal to Iran

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Brief Analysis

Iran views a successful, democratic government in Iraq as a threat to its existence.

It is no secret that in Iraqi Shia public opinion, Iran plays a negative role in Iraq. In recent years, Iran has lost its soft power as a model of Shia political Islam. According to the latest polls, over 85 percent of Iraqis, including 82 percent of Shia, say that Iran plays a negative role in Iraq. Meanwhile, only 18 percent of Iraqis overall and only 23 percent of Shia Iraqis believe that Iran is a reliable partner for Iraq.

Although there is apparently a rising current in Iran (within the state and not the revolutionary currents) that realizes that Iran's loss of soft power in Iraq and the region is a result of its revolutionary policies over the past decade which exacerbated Iran's troubles both internally and externally, the revolutionary current continues to push for more hardline policies based on Islamic resistance against Israel, the United States, and their allies in the region.

This current, which derives legitimacy for its survival and dominance over Iran's political and economic capabilities from the idea of exporting Iran's revolution, cannot accept the idea of Iran transforming into a state that is concerned with its internal affairs, focused only on addressing the interests of its citizens without interfering in the affairs of others. Iran, which continues to praise the Islamic revolution and embrace the concept of exporting the revolution more than 40 years after it occurred, established its entire political system around the philosophy of *vilayat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the Islamic jurist. This religious philosophy has been not only a cornerstone of Iran's domestic politics, but also guided and inspired its foreign policy, especially in the vital Shia domain, both in the region and globally.

It would therefore be wrong to think that Iran's intervention in Iraq arises specifically from a desire to protect Iranian vital interests in its backyard or prevent Iraq from recovering from the U.S. siege and occupation in the Gulf War that undermined all pillars of the Iraqi state and prevented it from being a viable threat, or even competition for Iran's revolutionary ambitions in the region. Despite the relevance of these two motives (serving Iranian interests and keeping Iraq weak) in influencing and guiding Iranian policy in Iraq, I believe that the religious doctrinal model of governance in Iran is the more important reason perpetuating Iran's influence in Iraq over the past seventeen years.

Imam Khomeini invented the system of guardianship of the Islamic jurist, which makes the supreme Shia religious authority a deputy of the hidden Imam. The Iranian constitution adopted this concept upon which the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded after the 1979 revolution. Thus, the revolution, which was intended to be exported to Shia all over the world, was a religious and ideological revolution based on the concept of guardianship of the Islamic jurist, making the Supreme Leader of Iran the representative of the 12th Imam for the entire Shia world, and not just Iranian Shia. This requires Qom, the Supreme Leader's spiritual stronghold, to become the supreme authority for all Shia. Herein lies a religious and ideological collision with the Shia religious authority in Najaf, Iraq, which perceives the guardianship of the jurist to be not only a jurisprudential endeavor that challenges Shia jurisprudential principles, but also a major challenge to Najaf's spiritual and even economic status and authority both in Iraq and globally.

Since the Islamic Republic of Iran represented the first model for Shia political Islam in the modern era and the practical application of the concept of guardianship of the Islamic jurist, Iran hoped (and continues to hope) that its political system would become the model adopted by Iraqi Shia when they took over leadership of Iraq's political system in 2003. However, conditions surrounding the emergence and formation of the country's political system after 2003, as well as the nature of Iraqi society, have prevented Iran's wish from coming true. For all its flaws and shortcomings, the Iraqi political system has not adopted an Islamist model of governance.

The secular (or at very least non-religious) basis on which the Iraqi political system was founded following the U.S. invasion in 2003 presents an ideological and existential threat to the Iranian revolution and its ideological underpinnings. The success of Iraq's Shia leadership separate from Iraq's religious elite can provide an attractive alternative to the *vilayat e-faqih* model for Shia worldwide—especially Iranian Shia. Iran's ethnic and religious diversity, in addition to the still deeply held notion of separating religion from politics in Iran, could make the success of a non-religious Shia model of governance in Iraq attractive, thereby threatening the foundation upon which the Iranian regime was based after the 1979 revolution.

Thus, the failure of Iraqi governance, based on democracy and equal citizenship, is an additional factor favoring the continuation of negative Iranian intervention in Iraq. The Iranian state has a legitimate interest in the failure of Iraq's Shia-led government that parallels the interest of Sunni political Islam in the failure of liberal and democratic governance experiments in Islamic countries. If the Muslim Brotherhood adopted the slogan "Islam is the solution" to respond to repeated failures and unjust governance in Sunni countries, deceiving the people of these countries and rising to power in some of them, then Iran has put forward the slogan, "guardianship of the Islamic jurist is the solution," to persuade the Shia world of its own Islamic model of governance.

In recognizing this reality, political actors tired of Iranian intervention in Iraqi affairs are faced with a different approach for dealing with Iranian intervention in Iraq and the region. Whether these players are Iraqi, Arab, or even international, they must boost the capacity of those Iraqi Shias who are not aligned with Iran to adopt a model of civil rule that protects the sect from political interference and also prevents them from falling into the trap of sectarian rule. The cornerstone of this approach is to stop treating all Iraqi Shia as "unpatriotic," "anti-Arab," or "subordinate to Iran." Actors must also stop dealing with Iraq as being either with the pro- or anti-Iranian axis.

In contrast, transforming Iraq into an arena for conflict to undermine Iranian efforts in the region is a poor solution

that will only enhance the perception that the Iranian state is the defender of Shia Islam in the face of Sunni tyranny and U.S. and Zionist imperialism. As such, a more effective and beneficial model for all is to foster an advanced Iraqi state in which all citizens, despite their background, enjoy the full rights of citizenship and high levels of human and economic development. This constitutes the main way to guarantee the end of Iranian expansionism and demonstrate that Shia can govern according to a non-religious political model that makes citizenship, rather than religion or sect, the basis for establishing the just, equal, and prosperous states advocated for by all, including by true Islamic values. ❖



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