

Iran Gets Negative Reviews in Iraq, Even from Shiites

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Brief Analysis

Two months after nationwide elections, Iraq's government formation process is still on hold. The final voting results have yet to be announced as disputes over recounts and candidate disqualifications linger. Nor is it clear how a governing majority will be formed, and power shared, among the four major party alliances, each of which garnered somewhere between 16 percent and 28 percent of the vote: the Kurdish bloc and its affiliates; the largely Sunni or secular Iraqiyah party led by a former prime minister of Shiite origin, Ayad Allawi; incumbent prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's largely Shiite State of Law Alliance (SLA); and SLA's rival Shiite/Sadrist list, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), a coalition that includes the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.

As a result of this impasse, Iran appears to have become an important political matchmaker, with delegations from all four alliances visiting Tehran in recent weeks. It is often assumed that many in Iraq's Shiite community accept or even welcome Iranian political influence given their shared sectarian affiliation with the Islamic Republic. The results of a new poll, however, show that even Iraqi Shiites are mostly opposed to such intervention.

Iran's Immediate Political Objective in Iraq

Most observers believe that Tehran seeks to unify the predominantly Shiite SLA and INA. Iran also reportedly opposes any government led by Allawi. For example, the Tehran daily Jomhuri-ye Islami, known to reflect the government's hardline views, explicitly warned that "if Nouri al-Maliki takes the reins of power for the first two years and Iyad Allawi takes charge for the following two years...no opposition figure will be able to find his way into parliament. He is a secular figure who does not try to hide his irreligious beliefs and is ready to cooperate with the remnant of the Baathist regime."

Charges and countercharges about such meddling in this precarious process continue to fly in the Iraqi media and other regional outlets. On May 1, for instance, an Iraqi daily headlined accusations that Iran was preparing Hizballah bombers to strike at various sites in order to tip the political balance. Two other Iraqi papers, from opposite points

on the political spectrum, featured statements from leading cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's office opposing foreign interference in his country's postelection maneuvering.

Poll Results: Shiite Rejection

Until now, detailed, credible data about Iraqi views on Iranian machinations has been sorely lacking. This gap is now filled by new results from a survey commissioned by the Princeton-based Pechter Middle East Polls, conducted in late March by a prominent Iraqi research center and focusing on a representative national sample of 3,000 Iraqis.

Among Shiite respondents, a large plurality expressed a negative (43 percent) rather than positive (18 percent) view of "Iran's ties with Iraqi political leaders." Although pockets of hardline support for Tehran persist (e.g., in some neighborhoods of Baghdad's Shiite enclave of Sadr City), Iraqi Shiites as a whole clearly lean against Iranian intervention in their affairs.

This finding is all the more notable because a solid majority (58 percent) of Shiite respondents perceived a "big" or "very big" Iranian influence on campaign finance during the March election. Pluralities also saw a large Iranian influence on other aspects of the electoral process, including militia activities, religious guidance, and links with individual Iraqi politicians. For example, 48 percent believed that Iran had a "big" influence on militia activities, while 33 percent said it was "small." Furthermore, a mere 17 percent voiced favorable views of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad; just over half (52 percent) had a negative opinion, with the remainder saying they were neutral, unsure, or unwilling to answer.

Iraqi Shiite opinions were less clear-cut but still relatively negative regarding certain other Iranian policies. For example, Ahmadinezhad's denial of the Holocaust received 38 percent negative versus 16 percent positive ratings; his "position on Iran's nuclear program" received 36 percent negative versus 31 percent positive ratings; and his "allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei" received 29 percent negative versus 17 percent positive ratings (with around half choosing not to answer that question). More than half voiced no opinion about Ahmadinezhad's "position on Iran's internal political issues." They split down the middle regarding "inexpensive Iranian goods coming into Iraq" but had relatively favorable opinions of Iran's policies regarding religious pilgrimages to Iraq and "water rights in areas bordering Iraq." A significant exception was Basra, where views on water were sharply divided (probably because of recent local disputes with Iran about the issue) and views of Ahmadinezhad's allegiance to Khamenei were especially negative (52 percent vs. 11 percent).

Sunni Views Even More Negative

Much less surprisingly, the survey found that Iraqi Sunni opposition to Iranian influence was even more pronounced almost across the board. Two-thirds of Sunni respondents expressed dislike of Iran's ties with Iraqi political leaders. Solid majorities also disapproved of inexpensive Iranian exports to Iraq, and even of Ahmadinezhad's Holocaust denial. In addition, 60 percent or more felt that Iran had a big or very big impact on every aspect of the Iraqi electoral process mentioned in the survey; for example, 74 percent perceived a large Iranian role in militia activities during the elections.

Within Iraq's overall Sunni population, however, Kurdish respondents had a more nuanced view of Iran. They were somewhat less likely than Arab Sunnis to voice negative opinions and somewhat more likely to claim indifference or ignorance -- perhaps because they also perceived somewhat less Iranian influence inside Iraq. Even so, 67 percent of Kurds opposed Iran's ties with Iraqi politicians.

Sources of Grassroots Opposition

So far, Tehran's overall strategy has proven relatively successful -- its influence in Iraq has increased greatly since 2003, on multiple levels. Many of Iraq's current leaders and major political parties have close ties with Iran, and

several Iraqi militias are reportedly funded and trained by the Iranian government. Additionally, Iraqi-Iranian official trade jumped from \$4 billion in 2008 to \$7 billion in 2009.

As shown by the poll results, however, the Iraqi public is suspicious of Iran's long-term intentions. Iraqi Shiites are Arab, not Persian, and more sympathetic to Iraq's own ayatollahs than to Iranian ones. These sentiments have likely been aggravated by recent Iranian actions. For instance, on December 18, 2009, eleven Iranian soldiers and technicians crossed the border into Maysan province and occupied an oil well in the Fakka field. Although the well is not operational, it is part of the giant Maysan fields, which hold more than 2 billion barrels of reserves.

Following condemnation -- initially timid -- from Baghdad, the Iranian contingent withdrew, but not before the incident triggered an unprecedented grassroots reaction in Iraq. Local politicians across the country capitalized on the incursion to express frustration with Iran's actions in Iraq. Abbas al-Musawi -- Karbala's first deputy governor and a close ally of Prime Minister al-Maliki -- called for closure of the city's Iranian consulate if the Iranian forces did not withdraw. Largely Shiite southern Iraq witnessed similar anti-Iranian protests, as did the Sunni Arab-majority provinces of Anbar and Ninawa. Additionally, a tribal gathering in Basra announced the formation of "God's Conquering Lions Brigade" with the intent of "regaining Iraq's stolen rights if the Iraqi government was not able to do so."

The oil well takeover was but one of many Iranian actions perceived as provocative by Iraq. In fact, Iraq's incumbent minister of foreign affairs, Hoshyar Zebari, has said that his ministry's largest file focuses on Iran. For example, Iranian forces occasionally shell Kurdish villages inside Iraq under the pretense of targeting Iranian Kurdish insurgents. Iran has also been manipulating the water flow into the Karun River in southern Iraq, resulting in shortages and a lack of sanitary water, especially in Basra. And in November 2009, Tehran demanded that Iraq cease using the Khor al-Amayah offshore terminal south of Basra, claiming that it falls within Iranian maritime territory. Finally, Iraq remains concerned about Iran's announced intention to build ten new nuclear facilities -- according to rumors circulating in Iraq, these may include locations near the common border.

Conclusion

The findings of the Pechter poll are contrary to the conventional wisdom regarding Iranian intervention in Iraq. Such efforts face substantial popular resentment even among Iraqi Shiites, who are wrongly presumed to share Iran's interests due to their common sectarian background. Of course, public opinion is only one among many factors in Iraq's volatile political picture. But as the jockeying to form a new government continues in the weeks ahead, Iraqi and American leaders would do well to consider the Iraqi public's surprisingly broad opposition to Iranian interference.

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