

Will Iraq Be an Ally of the United States or of Iran?

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On September 20, 2008, Ghassan Atiyyah, Reuel Marc Gerecht, and Michael Knights addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Atiyyah is a former visiting fellow at the Institute and director of the Iraq Foundation for Development and Democracy. Mr. Gerecht is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, focusing on Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as on terrorism and intelligence. Mr. Knights is a Lafer international fellow with the Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Ghassan Atiyyah

Although toppling Saddam Hussein was the right decision, the immediate post-Saddam period was clearly full of mistakes. Many U.S. officials approached Iraq with certain misconceptions. One of the most unproductive was thinking of the country in primarily Shiite and Kurdish terms. Other mistakes included the de-Baathification law, the disbanding of the army, and the establishment of a highly sectarian and ethnically divisive governing council. Such policies turned the Sunnis into enemies of the new system.

These errors were compounded by the premature introduction of new electoral processes, which harmed rather than helped national reconciliation efforts. The election results marginalized the Sunni population and exacerbated ethnic and sectarian tensions. To make matters worse, the United States sided with pro-Iranian Shiite parties such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and Dawa, while elements of the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization infiltrated the Iraqi Security Forces. Such a shift in the composition of the security forces in turn led to ethnic cleansing in Baghdad. Before the war, the capital was 50 percent Shiite; today that figure is 70 percent, a development of great consternation to the Sunnis. Moreover, Sunnis who entered the political process based on the

promise that various laws would be amended were further antagonized when that promise went unfulfilled.

The upcoming provincial elections provide a new window of opportunity. The strong sectarian overtone in Iraqi politics is beginning to fade, and the elections could accelerate this trend. Other trends are moving against the Islamists now, including the emergence of a variety of political parties of all stripes -- mostly with nationalist agendas. The United States should do all it can to maintain this momentum and ensure that the elections are free and fair. Although no electoral problems are anticipated in the northern provinces or in the Sunni areas, the southern provinces will likely prove more difficult. In those provinces, the city councils are controlled by members of entrenched parties. However, the elections will be at least a good opportunity to replace those elements with new leaders who are more representative and have more of a national agenda than the incumbents.

Otherwise, we must ask ourselves what kind of Iraq will exist after the departure of U.S. forces. Will Iraqis begin fighting over places like Kirkuk, or will a stable country emerge? Clearly, without free and fair elections, the Iraqi situation will devolve, and Iran will pick up the pieces, forcing the United States to repeat the "surge" in order to achieve its ultimate goal of stability for the country.

Reuel Marc Gerecht

Although Iraq may well fall apart, it is unlikely to become Iran's stepchild. At present, the Iranians are facing difficulties in Iraq, and the United States would do well to understand the reasons behind this fact. It was truly shocking to see how much trouble the Americans had differentiating Shiites and Sunnis in the early postwar period. Everyone else in Iraq knew who was Shiite and who was Sunni. They did not always say it, but they knew it. This was an extremely important part of their identity, and the United States should have known it as well.

In general, the Iraqi heart is not secular in nature -- it lies in the mosque and other religious establishments. Thus, if the United States hopes to oppose Iranian influence, it should do so through Iraq's religious Shiites. There are several key differences between Iraqi and Iranian Shiites. For example, very few Iraqis support the doctrine of clerical rule, while in Iran it has become part of the orthodoxy. The distance inherent in such differences will only grow as more Iraqis begin to view Iranian interference as threatening. The Iraqi Shiite Arab community is too large to be controlled by one ideology, and the growing distance between the Iraqi Shiites and Iran may not emerge immediately, but a backlash will most likely materialize in the long term. Such divisions will be beneficial to many parties, including the Iraqis and the Americans. This is not to say that Iraqi Shiites will become a bastion of U.S. support, of course, but they will not support the Iranians either.

From a practical standpoint, the United States has an essential role to play in the development of an Iraqi national identity -- namely, providing enough troops to ensure that the provincial elections in the south are free and fair. The elections will have the benefit of bringing new faces and new blood into Iraqi politics. We should be prepared to protect these new leaders because Iran will attempt to assassinate them if they are not aligned with Iranian objectives. We should also be comfortable with the new system that emerges in Iraq even if it is not pro-American.

Michael Knights

Looking at the situation of the United States in Iraq now, one cannot help but be struck by the historical parallels of a disengaging colonial power, going through many of the same processes that we have seen in places where colonial powers held a mandate for some time. On the one hand, there is a deep and immediate need for the Iraqis to demonstrate full, genuine independence. The craving for such independence is already apparent in Baghdad's handling of issues such as the status-of-forces agreement and the timeline for U.S. withdrawal. On the other hand, as we have seen in other cases of disengaging colonial powers, the two countries still share areas of deep engagement. This connection did not exist five or six years ago, but it exists now, and it may persist there for a long time to come.

Historically, Iran has a longer connection with Iraq than does the United States, but it is marked by suspicion -- from

1980 to 1988, Iraq and Iran fought one of the longest ground wars in history. At times, Iran may intervene in what could be called a peacemaking role, as it did in March 2008, when it served as a mediator between the Sadrists and the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government. Yet such interventions simply reinforce the degree to which Iran can destabilize Iraq. The evidence of Iran's involvement in Iraq is thoroughly convincing, not just to outsiders but to Iraqis as well. Iranian weaponry has been used to target both American forces and Iraqi officials, including provincial governors and police chiefs. Those officials represented ISCI, which is supposedly very close to Iran, so it is certainly a very complex relationship. ISCI and other movements spent most of the 1980s in Iran but now seem to be parting ways with the Islamic Republic. Iran is also deeply involved in the Iraqi economy, especially in the southern and central parts of the country. The Iranian government provides refined oil to Iraqi provincial governors, thereby increasing the influence of Iran and the provincial governors.

Looking at Iraq's provincial politics, it is obvious that Iran has been meddling in the Iraqi political scene. These activities are not limited to assassinations and intimidation of local elections workers; they also include efforts to spread messages through the media. Moreover, given the lack of Iraqi legislation governing contributions to political parties, Iran can financially support whatever factions it likes, giving them a much better chance of winning seats in the elections. Tehran cannot and does not wish to influence the general Iraqi population. Instead, it depends on the support of narrow political elites to achieve its objectives. ❖

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