

The Three-Way Game: Iran, Iraq, and the United States

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Brief Analysis

The July 16–18 visit to Tehran by Iraqi prime minister Ibrahim Jafari and ten other members of his council of ministers has been hailed by some as the beginning of a new era in Iran-Iraq relations. In fact, the pattern of near-term relations was set during Iraqi defense minister Saadoun al-Dulaimi’s preparatory visit to Iran on July 5–7. At a joint press conference on July 7 with his Iranian counterpart, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, the Iraqi official fell victim to the oldest trick in the Iranian diplomatic playbook. Speaking well beyond what had been agreed by the two sides, Shamkhani announced “wide defense cooperation” and alluded to the imminent conclusion of a defense pact between the two countries (as Iran has done in the past with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia). Al-Dulaimi was likewise forced to clarify the limited nature of the discussions while also taking pains to state, “Iraq will not be a source of insecurity and instability for any of its neighbors. Nobody can use [Iraqi territory] to attack its neighbors.” The message to both Tehran and Washington was clear: the three-way game between the governments of Iran, Iraq, and the United States has begun again. With Iraq caught in the middle, Baghdad intends to play an increasingly autonomous role as the game unfolds.

Balancing Interaction and Sovereignty

Since Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iran and Iraq have experienced increasing social, economic, and ideological interaction. At the demographic level, tens of thousands of Iranians live in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, many thousands more former Iraqi citizens exiled to Iran in recent decades will have their Iraqi citizenship reinstated under planned constitutional clauses, and hundreds of thousands of Iranians visit Iraq on pilgrimage every year. At the economic level, Iraq has become a major market for Iranian consumer goods, foodstuffs, electricity, and vital oil derivatives (e.g., cooking gas, heating oil, vehicle fuel). At the theological level, the new freedoms enjoyed by the Shiite Hawza (Islamic school) in Najaf has invigorated the interplay between Iraqi and Iranian seminaries, providing “quietist” clerics in Iran with access to likeminded colleagues in Iraq. As democratic institutions slowly take root in Iraq, the country may become an exporter of political as well as theological ideas to Iran. Moreover, the high-level visits to Iran by Iraqi officials are a sign of increasingly fraternal relations between the

two governments. Decisionmakers with close political and intelligence ties to Iran are now seeded throughout the Iraqi government.

These decisionmakers now need to learn to deal with Iran at a new level—not as clients, but as sovereign officials entrusted to pursue Iraq’s national interests. The recent Iraqi visits to Tehran illustrate the challenges that such decisionmakers face. The Iraqi delegations have spent considerable time making symbolic apologies for Saddam-era crimes. The Iranians, however, have been all business. For example, during al-Dulaimi’s visit, Defense Minister Shamkhani immediately sought to broaden the debate from a limited, mutually agreed-upon five-point plan for border cooperation and minefield clearance to a wider agenda. He advised Iraq to request the withdrawal of multinational forces, stating, “The Iraqi government and people should not allow foreign powers to consolidate their presence in the region and thereby reinforce the security of Israel.” He added that American use of military bases in Iraq could not be intended “solely for the purposes of the battle against a minor revolt like that of al-Qaeda,” raising the possibility of U.S. attacks against Iran from these bases. Al-Dulaimi later rejected direct Iranian training of Iraqi security forces and restated Iraq’s sovereign right to accept security assistance from any country it wished. Nevertheless, the Iraqi Transitional Government learned a lesson in forceful diplomacy, and Iran’s agenda was made clear: to replace Iraq’s de facto U.S. security “umbrella” with Tehran’s long-sought Persian Gulf security arrangement.

Future Iran-Iraq Security Issues

As the Iraqi government takes on greater security responsibilities, it is beginning to recognize the four sets of interrelated external security issues that it will be called upon to resolve:

U.S. basing. Iraqi policy on this issue is beginning to emerge. On July 12, Prime Minister Jaafari stated, “We can begin the process of withdrawing multinational forces from certain cities to outside the city as a first step that encourages setting a timetable for the withdrawal process.” Similarly, President Jalal Talabani stated, “I’m in favor of reducing the number of U.S. troops. In return, we should expand the Iraqi Army. If the Americans want to stay longer, they could withdraw to individual bases—just like in Germany.” Although Washington is highly unlikely to seek permanently manned main operating bases in Iraq, it might seek long-term access rights for a small network of periodically manned forward operating sites and cooperative security locations. Such permission would probably be sought once a constitutionally elected government is in place in 2006. Once Jaafari and Talabani’s comments are considered alongside al-Dulaimi’s commitment that Iraqi bases would not be used to threaten Iraq’s neighbors, the bare bones of a future basing policy come into view.

Iraqi military development. Iraqis are impatient to develop strong armed forces capable of deterring and defeating both domestic insurgents and external aggressors. Even the relatively pacific Jaafari has stated, “We don’t want to turn Iraq into an arsenal. We don’t want the military to return to a strategy of aggression. But we want Iraq to be strong enough to return assaults from others. There must be an army with reasonable weapons that can make the country safe, so no one can assault it.” Iraq is currently receiving its first T-72M1 main battle tanks; Hungary offered seventy-seven of the vehicles as a means of improving its contribution to NATO burden-sharing (i.e., not as part of a carefully thought out force-design process). This influx of armored vehicles has delighted the Iraqi military, which could potentially become the central focus in the rebirth of Iraqi national pride.

Crossborder irritants. Although countering shared threats (e.g., smuggling of drugs and other contraband) should theoretically be a point of convergence for Iraqi and Iranian interests, corrupt elements on both sides have their own interest in slowing such cooperation (e.g., Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps conducts smuggling activities in the Gulf). Substate actors such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq, Sunni extremists fighting in Iranian Khuzestan, and terrorists transiting Iran will also remain points of contention. Moreover, increasing Kurdish autonomy in Iraq will likely cause concern in Iran, which fears the awakening of similar aims within its own Kurdish community. The

emergence of a rival theocratic center in Najaf could also cause tension between Baghdad and Tehran. Finally, Iran's crossborder meddling and penetration of Iraqi political and municipal structures may yet give rise to bilateral tension.

Territorial disputes. Although increasing economic interaction (e.g., oil transfer from Basra to Iran's Abadan refinery) is making shared use of the northern Gulf littoral a reality, these arrangements may eventually become strained again due to high-volume Iraqi oil exports through the Shatt al-Arab waterway, the proximate cause for the Iran-Iraq War. Indeed, the two countries have yet to sign a full peace treaty.

Policy Implications

Iraqi politicians are learning valuable lessons about how to draw boundaries between the sympathies that some harbor for their former ally, Iran, and their responsibility for protecting Iraqi national interests. Within reasonable limits, the emergence of closer relations between Iraq and Iran—whether political, economic, religious, or social—is a positive development. It is also a political reality to which the United States must accommodate itself if it hopes to use its current influence as a means of guiding Iraqi government relations with Iran. The Iraqi government position in dealings with Iran has been broadly correct from Washington's perspective: that is, kickstarting crossborder cooperation and establishing a basis for future low-level U.S. basing that Tehran will not view as provocative. Recognizing that Iran and Iraq are unlikely to be the best of neighbors and that tensions will persist, Washington should ensure that future unstructured grants of military equipment do not increase the momentum of Iraqi military rearmament or skew its purpose of creating a defensive force.

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