

Iraq and Iran:

Crosswinds?

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Brief Analysis

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Although there are various players with different agendas in Iran's foreign policy bureaucracy, all those with real power agree on the unattractiveness of the situation in Iraq. Hence, Tehran has become increasingly involved in postwar Iraq. In addition to providing humanitarian assistance to Iraqis, Iran has been very active in spreading its message throughout the country, especially through direct radio and television broadcasting. Most of the radio stations that can be heard in Baghdad are sponsored by Iran, and the television signal that can be most readily received there is from an Iranian-run station. The theme on most of the Iranian radio and television programs is that Iraqis and Palestinians are facing similar conditions, that the coalition troops are occupying Iraq to help the "Zionist entity," and that the Iraqi people should confront these forces. Iran also tries to influence events in Iraq through its proxies in the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), whose Badr Corps military wing is linked with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Washington could take several significant steps to counter Tehran's attempts to destabilize Iraq. First, the United States could help improve Iraqis' day-to-day lives through the restoration of law and order and essential social services. Second, U.S. personnel could engage leading Iraqi ulama and secure their support. Third, officials in Iraq could launch a vigorous radio and print media campaign to make Iraqis aware of the advantages that a stable post-Saddam Husayn regime could present.

The relationship between the United States and Iran has raised important political questions about who determines Iranian foreign policy: the executive branch (i.e., the president and the foreign minister) or the unelected revolutionary power centers. In particular, former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, who heads the Expediency Council, remains a powerful figure. His recent statements about restoring relations with the United States have often been misinterpreted; what he actually said was that this issue should be taken out of the hands of the executive branch and decided by a referendum or by the Expediency Council under his direction. Expediency Council Secretary Mohsen Rezai, an important Rafsanjani aide, recently met with a just-retired U.S. official responsible for Iran policy, furthering the council's bid to assume control over foreign relations. Although Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi frequently argues that the executive branch is responsible for handling relations with the United States, he must justify any contacts with Washington against hardline attacks. Hence, he is careful to stress that his contacts are made in the context of international sessions, not bilateral meetings.

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Iranian opinions on post-Saddam Iraq vary. The pragmatic view suggests that Iran should cooperate with the United States to ensure the rights of the Iraqi Shi'i population, while the cooperative view focuses on the importance of Iran's well-established infrastructure of influence in Iraq. The radicals, however, would like to see the United States experience problems in Iraq; such problems, they argue, would impede U.S. intentions to topple the Iranian regime

or to dramatically alter Tehran's policies.

Overthrowing Saddam was the easier part of the Iraqi crisis. The more difficult aspect for the United States is to avoid being perceived as an occupying force, which could in turn help prevent the growth of radicalism in the form of terrorism. In this regard, the United States has an interest in supporting moderate clerics in Iraq. The clerics have the potential to become an organized force, setting the agenda for a shattered Iraqi society. Rivalries led to intense fights among clerics prior to the occupation, but they are now trying to reconcile their differences because of the U.S. presence, which they all see as unacceptable. It is in Washington's interest to steer the clerics toward uniting around a position that discourages Iraqi imitation of Iran's system of clerical rule.

Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer al-Hakim of SCIRI is close to Tehran, but he knows from his years living in Iraq that clerical rule is a disaster for both the state and for Islam. It is uncertain to what extent SCIRI and al-Hakim will do Iran's bidding. For instance, the Badr Corps have been trained, armed, and supported by Iran, but it is not at all clear what they would do if a disagreement emerged between al-Hakim and Iran.

In addition to discussing postwar Iraq, Tehran and Washington should address claims about the presence in Iran of senior al-Qaeda officials, Iran's growing nuclear program, and Tehran's role in supporting terrorism and disrupting Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. The current atmosphere in the region presents a very good rationale for the two states to engage in talks. One can imagine a deal of some sort unfolding. For instance, President Muhammad Khatami went to Lebanon recently and asked Hizballah to be a political rather than a military force; such actions could form the basis for an understanding.

Yet, any such understanding would require the United States to recognize Iran's legitimate security concerns. For example, Iranian missiles currently have a range sufficient to hit not only Baghdad but Israel. The United States could first acknowledge Iran's need for such missiles, then ask Tehran to deploy them only in the eastern part of the country, where they could still reach all of Iraq without threatening Israel. Similarly, in order to convince Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions, Washington should be prepared to address broader Iranian security concerns. For instance, the United States could guarantee that it would protect Iran from nuclear attack; alternatively, Washington could facilitate the establishment of a collective security arrangement for the region that reduces all parties' forces and military postures.

Another delicate issue in the U.S.-Iranian relationship is the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) in Iraq. The United States made a great mistake in agreeing to a ceasefire with the group, both morally and politically. MEK has killed civilians as part of its opposition to the leadership in Tehran, and such actions are wrong regardless of how terrible the regime in question is. By agreeing to a ceasefire, the United States creates justifications for others to act in the same manner. Moreover, MEK supported Saddam, and the United States should not be siding with Saddam's allies.

Most important, the United States should make clear that it does not view the U.S.-Iranian relationship as a zero-sum game and that it is not pushing the Iranian government into a corner. Iran is not in a pre-revolutionary state in which there could soon be a social upheaval that topples the Islamic Republic. It is in Washington's interests to promote a moderate Iran by talking to the Iranian government and elite. Cutting off the talks with Iran, as the Bush administration did recently, is in neither side's interests.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Pemra Hazbay.

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