

## **Iran's Foreign Policy towards Iraq and Syria**

*This paper investigates the roots of Iranian foreign policy toward Iraq and Syria after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Because of its geo-strategic location, political-cultural characteristics and energy sources, Iran is a pivotal state in shaping the international politics of the Middle East. Since the September 11th events, Iran has increasingly had impact on the issues such as regional crises in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon as well as the war against global terrorism, which are currently the most significant agenda items of international security. The author argues that Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq and Syria is primarily geopolitical, oriented at building a secure environment at its borders, for strategic-pragmatic purposes.*

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There are two approaches that can be taken towards understanding the foreign policy Iran conducts toward the Middle East region. The first approach is from the viewpoint of great powers, who consider Iran to be a malcontent player in the international system, and therefore believe Iran's foreign policy especially toward the Middle East must be changed. According to this reductionist perspective, all of Iran's issues can be analyzed from a viewpoint that is suspicious and pessimistic about the Islamic republic created following the 1979 revolution. Based on this approach, the great powers conclude that Iran's attitude must be in conflict with international peace and security.

The second approach which is from inside Iran considers Iran's political, cultural and geopolitics realities without focusing on any particular predominant factor. Under this approach, the crucial point to understand the Iranian foreign policy is the demands on Iranian society from the region and outside world, along with the expectations of the Iranian government. When analyzed using the second approach, Iran can be seen as a nation that critically affects international politics in the Middle East because of its centuries-long profile in the region. This unique position will bring Iran both challenges and opportunities. Understanding the roots of Iranian foreign policy toward the region and especially Iraq and Syria, requires applying the second approach, thus allowing for an understanding of the cultural, political, and security demands of Iranian society at present as well as an appreciation for Iran's position in the Middle East region especially after the September 11th events and the Iraqi crisis.

The events of 9/11 and the developments in the region that have followed have created new ground for Iran's foreign policy: The new events have enabled Iran for the first time since the Islamic revolution took place to proactively influence the interests and concerns of the international community in the foreign policy domain. Historically, The IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran) has always felt threatened by Western powers. Although, in the wake of recent events, new opportunities have entered Iran's foreign policy domain, again a major part of Iran's current diplomatic energy and strength have focused on how to react to perceived external threats.

### **Iran's new significance**

Since 9/11, the Middle East issues have been the focus of international politics. Among the Middle Eastern countries, Iran's role has also been at the center of Middle Eastern issues. Iran's newly significant roles in shaping international politics of the Middle East include:

1. Acting as a balancing political force in regional crises such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon;
2. Its geopolitical posture in the battle against global terrorism and being situated between the two major bases of global terrorism i.e. Afghanistan and Iraq;
3. Its influence among the Shiite factions who are currently at the center of the Middle East's shifting politics.

There have always been two significant challenges for Iran in its foreign policy conduct. The first challenge has been regulating relations with the great powers and the larger international community. The Iranian perception of international relations has compelled the country to balance its political, economic and cultural affinities between East and West. Although many Iranians, especially intellectuals and elites, admire the West and desire to some extent to live, think and act like people in Western nations, there are certain geographical, cultural-societal, religious and political elements that attach Iran to Oriental traditions. Iran's look towards the Islamic world as well as its "East-look policy" and its efforts to expand relations with Russia and China are derived from this reality.

Iran's second foreign policy challenge has been regulating its relations with the Arab world. There are differing perspectives, both idealistic and pragmatist, towards the Arab world within the Iranian society that affect Iran's foreign policy conduct. Although the outward-looking nature of the Islamic revolution ensured that Iran would become more involved with the Arab world, this development has upset those within the Iranian society who oppose expanding Persian-Arab relations.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these ideological differences among Iranians the underlying reality is that, even before the Islamic revolution (since at least 1970), relations with Arab world has been a significant focus of Iranian foreign policy. This is firstly due to the various religious-cultural, historical and geographical connections between Iran and its Arab neighbors as well as (more significantly) to the fact that the particular issues pertaining to the Arab world also impact Iran. Secondly, by its presence in the Arab world politics especially in the Persian Gulf region, Iran has balanced its relations with the great powers.

In this context, regulating relations with Iraq and Syria is an especially important aspect of Iran's Middle East policy.

### **Iran's Relations with Iraq**

Iran's Iraq policy is currently affected by two primary goals. The first aim of Iran in the new Iraq is establishing security. Attempts by Iran to establish security in Iraq are based on many underlying realities of the two countries' relations. First, within Iranian society, there exists a kind of traditional threat perception regarding Iraq, particularly with respect to the painful memories of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Thus, the new developments stemming from the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its aftermath have prompted Iran to become motivated to eliminate the traditional Iraqi threat by enhancing firm security and political cooperation with the new government. In this sense, from the standpoint of the Iranian elites, having a political-strategic relationship with a Shiite friendly government can help Iran to withdraw from its traditional threat perceptions of Iraq as an strategic military adversary.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about Factionalism and regional rivalries in Iraq," see Kayhan Barzegar "Understanding the Roots of Iranian Foreign Policy in the New Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Summer 2005, pp. 50-53.

Second, although the new Iraq is unlikely to present the military threat that it did in the past, there are still some new threats which stem from Iraq's domestic situation and the current power struggle (probable fragmentation, civil war, factional rivalry, etc.) that could have a profound impact on Iranian foreign policy. Given its relations with the Arab world and other regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with respect to Iraq, the IRI should thus be wary of the effects of these tensions.<sup>2</sup>

Third, threats emanate from the U.S. presence in Iraq. As a major part of its strategy, the Bush administration has never denied its regime-change policy – nowadays implying military confrontation – regarding Iran. Since 2003 the language used by the US towards Iran has been consistently threatening, albeit with ups and downs. Today it is even tougher, discussing the option of a military attack to deal with Iran's nuclear program. As such, a part of Iran's current Iraq policy is shaped according to and in response to U.S. goals and actions in the region, and what Iraq's role could be in a possible military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran. Furthermore, any long-term presence of foreign powers in Iraq will block not only Iran's natural influence in that country, but also in the entire Persian Gulf region. As a constant, no Iranian government has been or will be in favor of allowing the presence of or enhancing the role of foreign powers in the region. For instance, even the former Shah of Iran, who was the West's closest ally in the region, talked of downsizing the role of foreign powers in the region by arguing that Iran and other regional countries would be better able to settle their issues without external oversight. Given these facts, it is imperative for Iran to pay attention to the kind of government that assumes power in Baghdad and how this government will conduct future relations with Iran.

The second pillar of Iran's policy towards Iraq is creating economic-cultural opportunities. This aim is based on two presumptions. First, Iraq has emerged as the focal point around which opportunities have arisen for Iran to proactively affect regional and international relations since 9/11. The IRI is uniquely positioned to have a balancing role in establishing stability in the new Iraq, and the international community is well aware of this reality. How Iran's constructive role is used will depend upon how the U.S. and its allies envision Iran's position in the region. As mentioned, the new situation has provided Iranian foreign policy decision-makers with a new level of confidence, convincing them that they have a real opportunity to not only have a friendly government in Iraq but also influence the resolution of their existing disputes with the US. The crucial point discussed nowadays among Iranian political, military, and academic elites concerns what Iran would receive in return for helping the U.S. to secure Iraq. What is the real purpose of the U.S. in conducting rounds of direct negotiations with Iran? Will it be like Afghanistan, where Iran helped establish the new government, but in return was threatened and branded as a member of the so-called "Axis of Evil"?<sup>3</sup> No doubt there are some who believe that the Bush Administration's policy of portraying the IRI as a destructive player will do little but further increase tension and distrust among the nations in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See George W. Bush's Speech at National Endowment for Democracy, at: [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html).

Second, the establishment of a new Iraq with a different power dynamic, featuring empowered Shiite factions, has presented new possibilities for Iranian foreign policy. Enmity is no longer an assumed condition between the two countries, and it is even possible to envision the gradual emergence of a new kind of coalition in the region. No longer sworn enemies, instead of strengthening their armies against each other, the two countries may focus their energy and resources on advancing and enhancing economic and security cooperation. Realization of the prospect of Iran and Iraq working together for the first time in almost 35 years would be a great achievement and a watershed event. Furthermore, the strengthening of a friendly Shiite government in Iraq and its relations with Iran would balance the emerging Sunni radicalism in the region. The practical effect of these opportunities will depend on how the international community uses them constructively to balance against Sunni radicalism and Al-Qaeda terrorism, which are currently seen as the most dangerous threats to global peace and security. Finally, the toppling of Saddam Hussein has greatly affected Iran's regional position. Much of the tension and distrust among the countries in the region was related to the past reality of Iraq.

### ***Factors influencing Iran's Iraq policy***

The character of IRI policy towards the new Iraq is pragmatic, and it accords with Iran's security and regional concerns. All the existing signs show that such a policy will remain unchanged, because the following factors, among others, militate toward such a policy:

1. *The Iranian People*; Many at the grassroots level of Iranian society want good, stable relations between Iran and Iraq because of their cultural-religious priorities, which include having the freedom to visit the sacred cities of Karbala and Najaf. This strong interest exists on the Iraqi side too. As an example, in summer 2006, some 3000 visas were issued daily by Iranian consulates (Baghdad, Basra, Najaf) for Iraqi pilgrims to visit Mashhad and Qom and other sacred places inside Iran.<sup>4</sup> Since the opening of borders after the removal of the Baathist regime, the Iranian government has been under pressure to preserve an adequate amount of cooperation with Iraqi authorities to secure the routes of pilgrims to the Shiite areas and to provide public services. Simultaneously, the families of those who lost their lives in the Iran-Iraq war would like the IRI government to pursue a policy towards Iraq that ensures that the victims were not killed in vain, and it is worth noting that the painful memory of the war lingers throughout Iranian society, thus also affecting policy options. Trade with Iraq is also a priority; Iranian merchants and businessmen consider certain parts of Iraq, especially predominantly Shiite areas such as Basra, to be ideal markets for Iranian exports. Today, the range of economic activities between the two sides is around 2 Billion annually and is sharply increasing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Asghar Khaji, ex-representative of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Iraqi affairs. For further information in this respect see also Baztab site(in Persian) at: [www.baztab.com](http://www.baztab.com) September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.rajanews.com/NEWS/?15413/917/2007>, cited from the Associated Press. For further information on Iran-Iraq trade relations see *Iran-Iraq Trade Analysis: Existing Trade and Potential*

2. *Academic Elites and Intellectuals*; Given the historical background and the record of threats from Iraq, these segments of society have maintained their traditional stance that Iraq can be again a strategic threat if its political issues are not handled well. They believe that Iran needs to work with the new Iraqi government – whether dominated by Shiites, Sunnis, or Kurds – in order to counter the threat of a potentially hostile and re-armed neighbor. According to this view, Iraq’s economic, geopolitical, and cultural significance is such that it will always present a potential threat to Iran’s national security. Thus, the intellectuals believe that it is critical for Iran to establish the type of relations with Iraq that will make it as little disposed as possible to endanger Iran’s regional interests.<sup>6</sup> Also, establishing positive ties with the new Iraq could be a significant point of convergence between Iran and the U.S., and could assist Iran’s efforts in balancing its power with the rest of the Arab world.

3. *Political, Military, and Religious Elites*; These elites believe the new Iraq presents a combination of challenges and opportunities. Iran’s Iraq policy is made in Iran’s National Security Council, where all government bodies have representatives and seek to balance one another. Undoubtedly, the Iranian government would like to see a secure, stable, balanced, and united Iraq that is not in a position to threaten its eastern neighbor. Since the start of the current Iraqi crisis, the U.S. presence and the attendant threats posed to IRI security have led to many fluctuations in and complications of Iran’s Iraq policy.

4. *Principles*; The IRI’s idealism and pragmatism may converge in the new Iraq, yet, Iran’s delicate geopolitics forces Iran to act pragmatic in its policy towards Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Iran’s actions, including those aimed at expanding its presence in the region (which it views as its immediate circle of security), are dictated more by good faith security concerns rather than expansionist designs. Since the onset of the crisis, Iraq has been a base for rivalries among regional players as well as those from the international community. Each actor involved has been doing their best to expand their presence in the country: the Arab world (particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt), the United States, the European Union, and, perhaps most importantly (because of its many commonalities with Iraq), the IRI. Many believe that, if the Arab world could influence Iraq’s politics further, it undoubtedly would. Additionally, if the U.S. could stabilize Iraq without Iran’s help, it would seek that course. Thus, Iran’s Iraq policy is dictated by the facts and realities of region’s power politics. As demonstrated, it is hard the new Iraq to be stabilized without addressing Iran’s security concerns as well as Iran’s constructive and balancing role. Yet, the U.S. presence in Iraq presents a threat to the IRI and its interests. Indisputably, Iran and the

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*Opportunities*, research conducted by SCN Firm, Tehran, September 2005. available at: [www.AraEnterprise.com](http://www.AraEnterprise.com)

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the standpoints of Iranian academic and intellectuals in this regard see for instance Ahmad Naghibzadeh, “Rectification of Iran’s Foreign Policy Shortcomings during Khatami’s Presidency”, *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.3, No.3 (winter 2002), pp.85-100.

<sup>7</sup> See R. K. Ramazani, “Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran’s Foreign Policy”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No 4, Fall 2004, p. 550.

U.S. both believe that if developments in the new Iraq go their way, the other's national interests in the region can be endangered. This is a result of bilateral threat perceptions that have existed since the onset of the Islamic Revolution. Accordingly, both countries are fearful that the new Iraq will become a staging ground for the other to threaten their national security. As such, Iran's policy in Iraq is based on a pragmatic approach aimed at securing its immediate borders and the creation of new opportunities such as greater economic activity in the region.

### **Iran-Syrian Relations**

There are two perspectives in Iran toward conducting foreign policy with Syria. Those who subscribe to the dominant perspective consider Syria to be a strategic ally with fundamentally common interests, and therefore believe that the IRI should work closely with it. This perception is founded on the recent history of close relations and existing regional realities on the one hand, and the perceived threat stemming from the U.S. presence in the region on the other. Syria was the only Arab country which sided with Iran in its eight-year war with Iraq, and it consequently sacrificed much of its prestige in the Arab world as a result of that position. Indeed, this position shattered the Arab world's consensus regarding how to deal with the IRI. Furthermore, the two governments are linked religiously, as the ruling classes of both countries are Shiite. Although Shiite culture has not significantly influenced the closeness between Iran and Syria, the combined hostility of the supposedly secular leadership of the Sunni Arab countries has acted to reinforce their religious bonds. Thirdly, Syria and Iran have common strategic interests in the region, particularly with respect to Hezbollah in Lebanon. But, despite these seemingly substantive factors, one should not exaggerate the bond between Syria and Iran as a major precursor for foreign policy actions in the region.

Those who subscribe to the second perspective believe that the two sides have fundamentally different kinds of enemies and interests and that any alliance between Syria and Iran is temporary and contextual. According to this view, Syria, as an Arab country, has its own specific security and political concerns, and as such Iran should not unduly entangle itself in Syrian affairs when they do not directly pertain to Iran's own national interests. On occasion, the two sides - particularly Syria - have acted at variance with one another based on differing policy concerns, such as in the aftermath of the first Persian Gulf War. Those who hold to this perspective view the present cooperation between Iran and Syria as simply an outgrowth of the current mutual needs and expectations of the two sides, which, for the time being, are in harmony because of the perceived common threat presented by the United States and the shared desire to bolster the position and efforts of Hezbollah. It can be argued that for the time being, because of the common U.S. threat, current relations between the two countries will remain unchanged and could even get closer. Relations between the two nations will stay strong as long as they both believe that firm cooperative efforts can further influence important regional political-strategic issues (such as tensions with Israel and other general national security questions) in a positive way for both countries.

With respect to Iranian foreign policy towards Lebanon, the issues regarding Lebanon have always been bound to Iranian-Syrian relations. Although Iran has traditionally had good cultural and political relations with Lebanon, its greatest interest in Lebanon has to do with the degree of influence Hezbollah has within the country as well as the perceived Israeli threat. There is no doubt that Hezbollah and Iran both have strategic interests in maintaining their alliance. From the standpoint of Iranian elites, Hezbollah assists in keeping the regional balance of power especially against the Israeli threat and surely the IRI will continue its support of Hezbollah in the future. For Hezbollah, the IRI is a major source of support, allowing it to balance its regional and international relations. At the same time, the ideological factor acts as a stimulus in connecting people morally and winning hearts and minds as well as obtaining occasional mutual political support.

## **Conclusion**

The nature of Iranian foreign policy towards Iraq and Syria has been pragmatic and in accordance with geopolitical and political-cultural realities of the region especially after the 2003 Iraqi crisis. As long as the U.S. war policy continues, there will be more focus on stronger alliance in the region. In addition, Iran's foreign policy will insist on a stronger regional presence in accordance with Iran's larger economic, cultural, and political power. The events that followed 9/11, such as regional crises in Iraq and Afghanistan and the battle against global terrorism have made Iran more significant. In fact, because of the shifting nature of power and politics in the region, Iran is becoming the connecting point of the Middle East security and global politics. Under these circumstances, like any other regional player, Iran seeks to enhance its security and create opportunities to proactively shape international political realities according to its national interests.