Iran and the New Iraq: Security Challenges and Foreign Powers

Kayhan Barzegar*

The two major functions of each country's foreign policy are establishing security and creating opportunities in the foreign arena. Assessing the extent of the success of a foreign policy is very much dependent upon the degree of the simultaneity and feasibility of the two aforementioned elements. Indisputably, the new Iraq is the most important ground where Iran's foreign policy in terms of the above two functions can be put to test. Understanding the roots of Iran's foreign policy in the new Iraq becomes important since the developments of the last two years in this country transgress the boundaries of bilateral relations and thence affect Iran's interests both regionally and internationally.

This paper aims at analyzing Iran's foreign policy in the new Iraq on the basis of the necessity of regional order and Iran's security concerns; the author maintains that Iran as both an independent power and a key regional player has legitimate security concerns which justify the country's presence in the political arena of the new Iraq.   The main argument advanced here is the view that *Iran's security challenges in the new Iraq is the result of Iran's legitimate concerns in terms of establishing national security on the one hand and creating opportunities for it to walk out of geopolitical isolation and thus consolidate its credit and influence both regionally and internationally on the other*. In other words, Iran's foreign policy in the new Iraq has so far been defined upon eliminating security challenges caused by the new internal developments in Iraq and the presence of foreign intervening forces in the transition era. The success of Iran's foreign policy depends upon its entering the second stage: the stage of creating opportunities to extend its natural credit and influence.

Iran's Legitimate Security Concerns in the New Iraq

Although the new Iraq is no longer a military threat as it used to be, it still contains the potentials to direct tension towards the domain of foreign policy in various aspects. Under the current circumstances, Iraq poses challenges to Iran's interests domestically, regionally, and internationally. Domestically, the challenges are caused by the rivalry of different ethnic and political fractions and the destructive impacts of instability, civil war, extremism, ethnic and religious divisions, and the probability of its disintegration. At a regional level, the challenges are due to the birth of a new Iraq with a different essence defining a new role and stance for itself in the regional security order. The international challenges are produced through the presence of the occupation forces in Iraq led by the Americans which has its own detrimental effects on Iran's national interests.

1. Iraq's Domestic Affairs and Iran's Challenges

Ever since the Baathist Party was established, the issue of Iraq turned into the major challenge of Iran's foreign policy. The traditional preceptions in Iran held Iraq as a traditional threat which would continue to remain a regional rival for Iran always because of its unique demographic, economic, political, and military specificities. Indeed, one of the prime reasons why the ex-regime in Iran strengthened its military machine was the security threats posed by the presence and growth of Iraq's Baathist Party[1]. This eventually led to a large-scale arms race in the region which finally led to the Iraqi aggression and the imposition of an eight-year war on Iran when the latter's military machine was ailing due to the Islamic Revolution and its immediate aftermath.

Albeit that the traditional militaristic threats posed by Iraq have been diminished, the introduction of new variables into its politics and power structure on the one hand and the specificities of its internal political arena on the other still carry the potentials for directing tension towards Iran's foreign policy. This is why Iran has legitimate security concerns in the new Iraq at a domestic level which are discussed below.

1.1. Religious Rivalries

With the rising participation of the Shiites within Iraq's power and political arena, religious rivalries in the new Iraq have entered a new era. In the old days, the Shiite element was not employed as an opportunity for Iran's foreign policy for two reasons. Firstly, the suppressive policies of the Baathist regime and the hegemony of the minority Sunnis neglected the role of the Shiite majority thus marginalizing them for a long period[2]. Secondly, Iran's previous regime failed totally to realize and employ the decisive role of the Shiites in creating opportunities in foreign policy[3] despite the historical and cultural background shared by Iranian and Iraqi Shiites. The new equations in Iraq have paved the grounds to use the opportunity of 1400 years of religious, cultural, and historical relations.

Alongside the opportunities provided by the Shiite element in the two countries' bilateral relations, a number of new and unknown challenges for Iran's foreign policy can be visualized as well. First and foremost, these challenges are caused by the political differences and rivalries between the different Shiite sects, i.e., the Shiite hardliners, moderates, nationalists, independents, communists, pro-West, etc. Obviously, these various sects hold different views when it comes to establishing ties with Iran[4]. For instance, the Shiite groups which are currently within the power structure have constantly stressed that they are not after a government like the Islamic Republic of Iran and favor the separation of religion and state. The important point about all the Shiite sects is that they all have faith in benefiting from Iran's role and influence in creating a balance in the central power arena. This is primarily due to the fact that the Iraqi Shiites do not have any other natural ally and state throughout the region except Iran (unlike the Kurds and the Sunnis). Hence, the general belief is that Iran can be a powerful instrument in establishing a balance to the favor of the Shiites.

A second fountainhead for the challenges is that Iran's presence within the Shiite communities of Iraq would lead to the dissatisfaction of other Iraqi political groups such as the Sunnis who enjoyed state hegemony in the country for a long period traditionally[5]. The fact of the matter is that a sizeable portion of the tensions and unrests currently existent in Iraq is caused by this very shift of power in the central political arena. Under the status quo and after the general elections in which the majority Shiites won, the potentials of tension and rivalry between the Shiites and Sunnis have risen. This new development within the domestic affairs of Iraq can create a new era of rivalries between Iran and the Arab World, the latter of course considering

Iraq as an Arab entity belonging to the Sunni World under any conditions. With respect to Iran's policy of détente in the region, the new Iraq becomes the field for the emergence of new challenges within Iran's foreign policy. Creating opportunities within foreign policy is very much dependent upon the Islamic Republic's approach towards Iraqi Shiites and the degree of support it offers them. In other words, too much support of the Shiites would bring about challenges in Iran's foreign policy in the long term.

1.2. Ethnic Rivalries and Territorial Disintegration

Iraq is a country with prefabricated geographic borders[6]. Ethnic and racial connectedness is poor in Iraq because of the suppressive policies of the previous Baathist regime[7]. The new Iraq is the legatee of problems lingering form the preceding state which has made the new political domain into a " Zero-Sum Game" in which all groups bear a certain degree of distrust towards their opposing sides. Actualizing and encouraging any ethnic rivalry – which is existent mainly among the Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites in the specific geographic areas of the north, center, and south, respectively – allows potential challenges for Iran's national security. The prime issue under the existing conditions is the attempts made by the Kurds to achieve further autonomy within the current political boundaries of Iraq. While the rivalry between the Shiites and Sunnis is increasing, the Iraqi Kurd fractions are gradually and smoothly approximating their ultimate objective: an independent state of their own. Previous circumstances have also contributed to such endeavors[8]. The pretext of having an independent army, regional government and parliament, economy, foreign policy, constitution, flag, language, etc., are all evident examples of the attempts made by political Kurdish groups in advancing towards a strong independent state of their own. The relative success of the Kurds in the recent elections through which Jalal Talebani became the president was yet another step towards the further fortification of the stance held by the political Kurdish groups in Iraq's power structure[9]. If this were to happen, alongside the harmful effects it would bring for Iran's national security, foreign forces would be stationed around the strategically sensitive western borders of Iran. At the same time, Iran's rivals and enemies would be granted the chance to enforce pressure and influence on the country. One of these countries is of course Israel which has launched a broad range of activities to extend its infiltration in the region following the fall of Saddam Hussein[10].

2. Iran's Regional Challenges

Iran's security challenges in the region and its foreign policy can be analyzed from three perspectives:

- Eliminating the traditional threat of Iraq and transforming it into an opportunity in foreign policy,

- Revising the traditional equation of the regional balance of power, and

- Redefining Iran's regional role as a power and player in the region.

2.1. Eliminating the Traditional and Military Threat

The defined and prevalent existence of a state in Baghdad for a long period was the foundation of tension and instability within Iran-Iraq relations and generally in the region[11]. The emergence of a new Iraq with different interests and entity under the status quo has raised appropriate opportunities for the redefinition of Iraq's regional relations. These potential opportunities are remarkably important for Iran's foreign policy since Iran and Iraq are two prominent countries in the region without which no regional security order and arrangements would remain to be continuous and dynamic. In other words, cooperation or non-cooperation and tension or détente between the two states would establish a significant impact on the region's security, political, and economic stability and order.

Another important challenge for Iran's foreign policy is the pursuit of the policy of stability or instability in Iraq's domestic politics. With respect to the traditional military threats of Iraq against Iran and the two countries' war and rivalry, there are currently different views on how to pursue Iran's foreign policy[12]. Yet all these differing views base their arguments on two common premises: how to first gain security and then create opportunities. In other words, the question at stake is over the kind of policy which would strengthen Iran's security and invulnerability vis-à-vis Iraq. Despite the fact that certain views based on the tradition of pessimism towards Iraq consider this country as a permanent threat which would become Iran's rival at any given moment, the official foreign policy of the Islamic Republic has always targeted the consolidation of stability in its western neighbor[13].

2.2. Revising the Traditional Equation of the Balance of Power

Another key challenge of Iran's foreign policy is walking out of the traditional definition of the balance of power in the region. The prime objective of the British foreign policy when establishing Iraq back in 1932 was controlling the non-Arab states of the region, particularly Iran. This role and policy was further pursued and strengthened by the international system led by the United States even after the withdrawal of the British from the eastern zones of the Suez Canal. One of the major examples of this policy was the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war which was an attempt from the international system to control Iran's Islamic Revolution through Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime.

Under the existing circumstances, the new Iraq is again introduced by the international system led by the Americans as the key element to moderate Iran's role through adopting the doctrine of simultaneous containment. Based on this new policy, a democratic Iraq will be the main instrument of pressuring and moderating Iran's conduct and influence in the region[14]. The author believes that such a definition of Iraq's role in the region is not based upon the natural realities of the region and would thus consequently generate a new era of the dangers of tension and distrust in the relations of the two countries; this is evidently to the favor of neither the regional nor the international order. In contrast, the new conditions have also allowed the most favorable circumstances for creating opportunities and trust within the two countries' relations. The objective of Iran's foreign policy in the last two years in accordance with geopolitical realities has been moving away from this traditional equation. Iran and Iraq are not one another's permanent and strategic rivals; the roots of previous animosities were first and foremost caused by the role of foreign intervening powers. The new Iraq is a favorable ground for setting up relations founded upon mutual trust and respect. The two countries' relations are far beyond political and strategic issues and enjoy a legacy of centuries of historical, cultural, and religious connectedness. The current influence of Iran in Iraq is the product of such connectedness, not Iran's meddling in Iraq's internal affairs.

2.3. Redefining Iran's Regional Role

Unquestionably, Iran is the most prominent player and power of the Persian Gulf region due to its security, economic, and social infrastructures. Its exclusive geopolitical standing in the center of the Middle East linking the sub-systems of the region have made the country

indispensable for both regional and international systems. Accordingly, Iran could have a constructive role as part of the regional order or a non-constructive role should it be put aside of this regional order. In spite of the attempts made by the international system and the regional states in extending the regional isolation of the Islamic Republic, this country has so far had positive effects on the stability and security of the region[15]. This is primarily caused by Iran's need for order and stability since any disorder first imperils this country's security and so far Iran has paid a heavy price for the insecure environment around itself.

In the last two decades, the presence of foreign powers around Iran's borders has disrupted the natural balance of power around the region thereby leading to distrust between nations and states. One such instance is the intervention of foreign elements in the regional order of the Persian Gulf which has brought about disorder. The West's sponsorship of the Shah's regime augmented the arms race in the region and support of Saddam Hussein led to his occupation of Kuwait. The US presence in the region to much extent created a pseudo sense of confidence among the regional governments to ignore the natural power equations in the region.

The new Iraq is another field of challenge in causing a divide between Iran and the Arab World on the one side and within the Arab World itself on the other. Indubitably, resolving the problem of how to approach the Arab World is one of Iran's major challenges in terms of its foreign policy. The existing optimistic and pessimistic views inside Iran raise a different rationale in regulating the kinds of relations with the Arab World. Regardless of all the existing viewpoints, the destiny of Iran and the Arab World is very much tied to one another because of their common religion, geographic proximity, grounds for mutual political endeavors, and the communication bridge they provide with the international system. The new Iraq as Iran's link with the Arab World is an appropriate ground for departure from the traditional stage of mutual threat and pessimism and entrance into the new era of raising opportunities based upon understanding the existing realities.

3. Iran's International Challenges

Iran's legitimate security concerns at the international level are mainly due to the ever-increasing presence of foreign forces led by the Americans around its boundaries. The presence of these forces in the new Iraq has directed new challenges from several angles to Iran's foreign policy.

3.1. The US's Regime Change Policies

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the hostile policies of the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran entered a new more serious era. This policy which became the official strategy of the Bush Administration under the label of the "Axis of Evil" has been pursued and emphasized at numerous times. The new Iraq is the center stage of America's pressures and threats against Iran and as George W Bush himself has stressed on various occasions that a new different Iraq is a pressure tool against Iran in order to make this country revise its political orientation[16]. In other words, the new Iraq will serve as the prototype for regimes in the region. The dangers of adopting such an antagonistic policy are primarily subjected to the Islamic Republic. The major challenge for the Islamic Republic would be how not to be threatened by the US through Iraq. There is evidence galore on the Americans' determined state of mind to conduct their regional policies in order to minimize Iran's stance and influence. The statements made by, the Iraqi Defense Minister, Hazem Shalan – who was appointed by the US – on Iran's interference in Iraq's domestic affairs aim at establishing a divide between Iran and the Arab World on the one hand and Iran and the Iraqi nation on the other. Another instance is the recent speech made by the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in which he reversed the initiator and aggressor in the Iran-Iraq war by saying that if Iran once again decides to go to war with Iraq, the latter country would need time to have enough power to deter Iran. Again another example of the US's hostile approach towards Iran is its espionage above the Iranian borders by their spy airplanes through Iraqi territory; this of course is a serious threat which has emerged recently[17].

3.2. Disrupting the Natural Order of the Region and Extending Insecurity

The presence of foreign intervening forces in the natural political power structure of the region causes a divide between the different states and nations there. The outcome of this development would be the growth of distrust between states through further investment in and reliance on the intervening forces; this process would itself disrupt the natural order of the region in the long run. The political arena of the new Iraq is in effect a ground for the aggravation of distrust and instability. The outbreak of war in Iraq first and foremost created a profound split among the Iraqi nation and other Arab nations and their states. At the same time, a new era of rivalry between Iran and the Arab World is emerging as a consequence of the policies of the

foreign intervening forces. Iraq's present-day status is very much reflective of the potentials for the aggravation of insecurity. As the terrorist groups linked with Al-Qaeda – Al-Zarqawi in particular – have repeatedly declared, the new Iraq is the favorable ground for jeopardizing the interests of the Americans and its allied forces on the one hand and fighting the Shiites (as the prime enemies of the Sunnis) on the other[18]. The outcome of all the above-mentioned issues is simply the extension of a climate of distrust, suspicion, and insecurity eventually encompassing the whole region thus ultimately disrupting the natural power structure there.

3.3. Weakening Iran's Natural Influence in Iraq

The international system led by the United States has sought and continues to seek the reduction of Iran's credit and influence in the new Iraq. This natural influence is the result of centenaries of historical, cultural, and religious connectedness between the two countries' nations especially among the Shiites who had lost this bond due to the suppressive policies of Saddam Hussein's regime[19]. The new developments together with the opening of the borders have once again increased the cultural and political relations of the two nations returning them to their natural route. Currently, a huge bulk of the cultural and religious exchanges is happening within the context of visiting the two countries' holy Shiite shrines – Karbala and Najaf in Iraq and Mashad and Qom in Iran. In the economic arena as well, the two sides have started exploiting the bilateral potentials.

The major concern of the international system and the Americans is over the possibility of the formation of a kind of regional coalition between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the future Iraqi government comprised of majority Shiites. This would of course bear inevitable effects on the region's geopolitics, geo-economy, and geo-culture. One example of such cooperation could be accessing all the key zones in the Middle East and thence influencing the regional crises including the Palestine-Israel peace process, accessing near 30% of global oil reserves, and establishing a dynamic Shiite culture in the framework of a new kind of democracy and its impact on the region's conservative states.

The concentration of such exclusive specificities in one region is evidently in contradiction with the requisites and objectives of the US and the international system. This is why any attempt on the side of Iran to further its influence and prestige in the new Iraq is not accepted by the international system. In the last two years, the US Administration has

transformed Iraq into the main ground for exercising pressure on the Islamic Republic. Introducing Iran as the agent opposing stability in Iraq, attempting to create a divide between Iran and the Arab World, opposing the continuity of Iran's peaceful nuclear program, increasing Iran's isolation, pressuring the country in the international community, etc., are all examples of the existing threats which have become only possible following the presence of the Americans in Iraq.

Conclusion

Like any other independent regional power and player, the Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys legitimate security domains and grounds for creating opportunities. The new Iraq is the most important field of both security challenges and opportunities for Iran. From the wake of the crisis in Iraq, Iran's foreign policy has sought to eliminate the threats caused by this period of transition in Iraq and to create opportunities. So far, this foreign policy has not been able to perform its appropriate role thereby entering the stage of creating opportunities because of the specific regional circumstances and the opposition of the international system led by the US. The roots of Iran's foreign policy in the new Iraq can be analyzed from two long- and short-term perspectives. The most significant objective in the short-term is preventing the dangers of the Americans' presence in Iraq and its direct threats against the Islamic Republic. In the long run, Iran's foreign policy seeks to walk out of geopolitical isolation and redefine its natural role in the region's security equations; Iran has been put outside these equations so far due to various factors.

The new circumstances are an appropriate opportunity for the relations between Iran and Iraq to move away from the traditional distrust and threats thus entering a new stage of opportunities to strengthen the regional role of the two countries. Iran's pursuit for creating opportunities in Iraq should fulfill two orientations. First, the instruments for Iran's natural influence in Iraq which are mostly based on the pretext of the two countries' historical, cultural, and religious interdependence should be strengthened. Second, a balanced government comprising all the political groups of Iraq who could moderate the role and stance of all these groups should be supported. Balance within the central government would definitely prevent Iraq from another round of militarism and extremism and secure the interests of this country's neighbors, particularly Iran and the Arab World. Iran and Iraq are not two permanent strategic

enemies or rivals. The main roots of the previous tensions were the self-interested policies of the international system and the intervening powers to establish rivalry and enmity between the two states.

* PhD, Assistant Professor of International Relations, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Campus

Notes

1   For further reading, please see Assadolah Alam's Yad-dashthayeh Alam (Alam's Memoirs), Tehran: Maziar Press, 2003.

2   Amatzia Baram, "Two Roads to Revolutionary Shiite Fundamentalism in Iraq," in Martin E Marty and R Scott Appleby (eds), Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994, p566. See also: Faleh A Jabar, The Shiite Movement in Iraq, London: Saqi, 2003, pp235-8.

3   Graham F Fuller, The Center for the Universe: the Geopolitics of Iran, Westview Press: Oxford, 1991, pp50 and 62.

4   Kayhan Barzegar, "The New Iraqi Challenge to Iran," Heartland, the Iranian Hub, No 10, 2004.

5   Ibid, pp87-88.

6   The modern map of Iraq (and generally speaking, the Arab region of the Middle East) was originally drawn by a female member of the British Intelligence Services, Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) who provided the preliminary information for T E Lawrence (known as Lawrence of Arabia). For more information on this, please see Janet Wallach, Desert Queen, US: Anchorbooks, 1999, pp290-377.

7   Phebe Marr, "Iraq: Balancing Foreign and Domestic Realities," in Diplomacy in the Middle East, ed, L Carl Brown, London: I B Tauris, 2001, p193.

8   Gareth, R V Stansfield, Iraqi Kurdistan, Political Development and Emergent Democracy, London: Routhledge Curzon, 2003, pp 28 and 83.

9   Jackie Spinner, "A Step towards Autonomy?" Washington Post, 30 January 2005, at http://home.cogeco.ca/~kurdistan. See also Khaled Salih, "What Future for the Kurds?" MERIA, Vol 9, No 1, Article 7, March 2005.

10 For further reading on Israel's activities in Iraqi Kurdistan, please see: Ellis Shuman, "Israel Establishing Intelligence Base in Kurdistan," 21 June 2004 in www.israelinsider.com.

11 Barzegar, op cit, p81.

12 For further reading on the different views concerning how Iran should approach Iraq and the Arab World, please see: Barzegar, "Irano Aragheh Jadid: Chalesh-ha Va Forsathayeh Pisheh Rooy (The New Iran and Iraq: Existing Challenges and Opportunities)," in Law and Politics Quarterly of Islamic Azad University, Science and Research campus, Vol 1, No 1, Winter 2005, pp 39-44.

13 Amir-Ali Abolfath, "Iran: The Constructive Player," Hamshahri Diplomatic, No 19, Feb 2005. As Iran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi stresses, "Iran, as a neighboring state of Iraq which enjoys strong historical and religious bonds with that country and despite the eight-year war, stresses the principles of respecting sovereignty, independence, national unity, peaceful coexistence, and non-interference in domestic affairs." www.irna.ir, 1 May 2005.

14 Thomas L Friedman, "Buy One, Get One Free," The New York Times, 22 June 2003.

15 Barzegar, "Iran and the West: A Foe or a Potential Ally against Terror?" The Monitor, Vol 3, No 10, Dec 2004/January 2005, pp16-17.

16 Please see www.whitehouse.gov/news/release/2002/11/20021106-html.

17 www.Iranmania.com/news/articleview.

18 Barzegar, "Roots of the New Terrorism in the Middle East," National Interest, Vol 1, No 1, Winter 2005, p49. See also "Excerpts: Al-Qaeda Tape, Threatens and Attacks," BBC News, 6 April 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3605593.stm.

[19] Majid Khadduri, <u>The Gulf War</u>, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp21-5.