

The Iraq War and the New Iran-Iraq Relations

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Abstract: *As the Iraq War gets stalemated, the Shiite force's rising in Iraq has transformed Iran-Iraq relations. In this new situation, Iran has shifted its Iraq policy in order to eliminate the traditional hostilities between the two nations and to develop its connections with Iraqi Shiite groups. Relying on its close ties with the Iraqi Shiites, Iran is trying to exert its influence on the Iraqi internal affairs so as to prevent the U.S. from changing Iran's political system and threatening Iran's national security.*

Key Words: *Iran-Iraq relations; the Iraq War*

It might be still too early to foretell what the Iraq War would finally turn out to be, but it is obvious that this war has unintentionally rendered Iran an unexpected benefit: as the U.S. is dragged deeply into the post-war Iraq reconstruction, Washington could hardly afford to bring Iran to the brink of war. The collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime not only releases Iran from its long containment of Iraq, but also helps the Shiite majority in Iraq to become the dominant political force after being suppressed by the Sunnis for many years. Such a potential change would be of very special significance to Iran and has given Iran a good chance to construct a Shiite force sphere in the Persian Gulf and even to expand its influence in the whole Middle East. Therefore, how to build new relations with Iraq has recently become one of the most important foreign issues for Iran.

The Rising of the "Shiite Crescent" in the Persian Gulf Region

After the Iraq War, the rise of the Shiite force is the most dynamic change in the Persian Gulf region situation. When interviewed by a reporter of *The Washington Post* in December 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan made it clear that a "Shiite Crescent Area" is appearing in this region.¹ This means that the Iraq War has the potential to change the political power structure in this nation and the Iraqi Shiites are becoming a dominant political force with a majority of the population. It also implies that the new Shiite political force which has arisen in Iraq will join hands with the Shiites in Iran and Shiite forces in other nations to form a new power for

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¹ Juan Cole, "Outlook: Shiite Iraq," *Washington Post*, Online Chat, August 16, 2004, http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/04/r_outlook081604.htm.

Islamic sect in the Persian Gulf region. With the Shiites' rise in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, this new Shiite force will break the traditional power balance of the Islamic sect in the Middle East and lead to a new religious geopolitical pattern.

In 1979 the Islamic Revolution broke out in Iran leading to a Shiite theocratic regime in this nation. However, the other nations led by Sunnis in the Persian Gulf region were alert to the possible exportation of the Iranian Islamic Revolution pushed by the Shiites. Dominated by the Sunnis and intending to exert the biggest possible influence in the region, the Saddam regime of Iraq launched an 8-year war in the 1980s to reduce and hopefully diminish the influence of the Shiite fundamentalism in Iran. Then the governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and even the U.S. all supported the Saddam regime against Iran in this war. In this prolonged war, the Iranian Shiite force was devastated. Consequently, the Shiite fundamentalism was strictly restrained from expanding to the neighboring nations. The invasion of the U.S. upon Iraq in 2003, however, has greatly changed this alignment situation. With the crumbling of the Iraqi Sunni regime, the geopolitical balance in Persian Gulf has been significantly tilted. As the once weakened and contained Iran has now become a major power in this region, Iraq naturally takes the Shiite Iran as its supporter and protector to strive for domestic power against the Sunnis and the Kurdish. The union of these two major powers both led by Shiites will impose a strong influence on the development of religion in this region, politics and economy alike.

With the Iranian Shiite government expanding its sphere of influence and the Shiite force gradually controlling the regime in Iraq, the Shiite minority in the Islamic world has gotten rid of their weak and long suppressed situation and has now held dominant position in the two powers in the Persian Gulf. Under the encouragement of this development, the Shiite people in other nations under the reign of Sunni monarchy regimes also are beginning to struggle for more political rights. As a rule, the Shiite insisted on opposing the monarchy system in the Arab nations and calling for theocratic regimes with religion and politics mixed as one. Thus the tendency of this evolution is now rapidly expanding in the Persian Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain.

The monarchy government of Saudi Arabia especially feels that it has lost an important ally in opposing the Shiite force in the region. The Saudi Islamic sect Wahhabis usually see the Shiites as "unbelievers" for they do not follow the requisite tenets and don't allow them to practice their rituals in Saudi Arabia. Now they can "only gnash their teeth as they see the Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq come to power next door."² In September 2005, the Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Faisal clearly expressed his worries of the

² Juan Cole, "A 'Shiite Crescent'? The Regional Impact of the Iraq War," *Current History*, Jan. 2006, p.25.

government. He pointed out, "We fought a war together to keep Iran from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason."³

In Jordan, the aboriginal people were Bedouins who lived to the east of the Jordan River, most of whom were Sunni Muslims. After the Cold War, the sanctions of the United Nations on Iraq and the Iraqi regime's suppression over the Shiites before the Iraq War caused more than 500,000 Iraqi Shiite people to escape to Jordan. These refugees, representing 10% of Jordan's population, are making a major ethnic group in this nation. For many years, the Hashemite Kingdom has been trying to avoid involving itself in the conflict with the Sunnis and with the Shiite Iran as well. But now it has to face the Shiites in Jordan, who, encouraged by the Shiites in Iraq having acquired the regime they wanted, demand more political rights from their government.

The situation in the Kingdom of Bahrain is the same as that in Jordan. Under the leadership of the Sunni dynasty, Bahrain is a small island nation with only 450,000 people. However, more than two-thirds of the population in Bahrain claim themselves as Shiites. These people even proclaimed their political requirements when the Islamic Revolution broke out in Iran in 1979. But the political campaigns for more political rights launched by the Shiites in Bahrain have all been suppressed by the secret police in the past years. Inspired by the Shiites' victory in Iraq after the Iraq War, the Shiites in Bahrain are now striving for an independent parliamentary election. They support Sistani's idea about the election and believe that the one-person-one-ticket election accords with the Islamic law. They also expect more democracy and less monarchy in Bahrain. Led by King Hamad Al-Khalifa, now the Sunni regime is under more and more serious pressure from the religious political influence caused by the Shiites in Iran and Iraq. Under such an influence, the Shiite people in Bahrain have changed their traditional attitude toward politics. They have begun to realize that they have gotten "from George W. Bush and Grand Ayatollah Sistani a message that parliamentary Shiism is a legitimate goal."⁴

Such a series of changes in the Persian Gulf region means that Iran is facing a totally new situation after the Iraq War. In the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Shiite clergymen established a religious regime in Iran and substituted the Shiite religious law for the temporal law. After the Revolution, Khomeini's followers wished to extend this system to the whole Islamic world in the 1980s. But their efforts had been contained in the Arab world until the Iraq War in 2003. As the Iraqi Shiite political parties have gained the national authority through various general elections, the Iranian Shiite idea has a good chance to affect the policy of

³ Saud al-Faisal, "The Fight against Extremism and Search for Peace," *Newsweek International* Sept. 20, 2005.

⁴ Juan Cole, *ibid*, p.26.

the new Iraqi government and the drafting of the new Iraqi constitution. Now a new situation is appearing in the Persian Gulf region. It can be seen that the Shiite force is replacing the Sunnis and becoming the main political power in this region.

The Factors Affecting Iranian Policy toward Iraq

With the ending of the Iraq War, the traditional hostile and conflicting relations between Iran and Iraq have changed dramatically. As an influential power in the Middle East region, Iran naturally hopes to build up its own sphere of influence in the region and to maintain its own security environment. After being contained by the Arab nations led by Iraq for so many years, Iran is now in a favorable situation to reestablish its dominant position in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. To achieve this goal, it is necessary for Iran to set up a new relationship with the post-war Iraq. In pursuance of a new relationship with its former adversary, Iran must be very concerned about the situations related to the new relations. Actually, the situations are still complicated for Iran to deal with. In Iraq, the contradictions and conflicts among different religious sects and ethnicities are very likely to lead this nation to civil war or disintegration. The solution to these problems will depend not only on the political positions of the different religious sects and ethnicities in Iraq but also on Iran's attitude toward the issue of the Iraq reconstruction after the war. In the Persian Gulf region, the security situation is unstable and uncertain. Iran must find a way to cooperate with Iraq and win support from other Gulf nations so as to establish a new security structure in this region. In the international community, Iran has to be very cautious to face the threat of the interference from the U.S. army in Iraq. In particular, Iran should be aware that it is possible for the Bush administration to take military actions to attack Iran in the coming two years. So Iran's relations with Iraq are also very important for its own security.

In Iran, the traditional political opinion has always taken Iraq as a kind of threat to Iran's security either in the past or in the future. The basis of this opinion is on the overall estimation of Iraq's influence of economy, culture, military and ideology in this region. This opinion stresses that the threat of Iraq has been growing continually since the Baathist Party came to power in Iraq in the 1970s. Therefore, Iran also had to expand its military power in the past years against the threat from the Iraqi Baathist Party regime. The military competition between the two nations eventually led to the war in the 1980s. In the conflict and war between the two nations, the Western nations with the U.S. as the leader hoped that Iran and Iraq would contain each other to maintain the balance of power in this region. They have regarded the balance of power between Iran and Iraq as the guarantee to keep regional politics, economy and geopolitical relations stable.

After the Iraq War, it seems that the military threat of Iraq to Iran has greatly

decreased, but the new Iraq may still pose a series of challenges to Iran. In such a transitional period, the crucial point of Iran's policy is to change Iraq from the threat in the past to a partner of cooperation in the future. Recently, to realize this goal, a lot of problems between the two nations have to be taken seriously. First, the contradictions and conflicts among ethnicities and sects in Iraq will also lead to dangerous threats to the Iranian national interests. Secondly, since Iran and Iraq are in a dispute about the border of the political influence sphere in the region, there is a possibility for the two nations to become hostile in power competition. Thirdly, what way the Iraqi government will take to deal with the relations with Iran in the future will, to a great extent, depend on the relations between Iraq and the U.S.

Within that context, the Iranian government should be very cautious about the following three problems in implementing its policy in Iraq. The first problem that the Iranian government will take care of is the conflicts among the ethnicities and sects in Iraq. In Iran, there is a strong opinion stressing that the Sunnis in Iraq who once occupied the ruling position for many years have posed the major threat to Iran's national interest. Under the Sunni's domination, the Iraqi government not only suppressed the Shiites and the Kurds, but also stressed the tendency of Arabianization. "This led Iraqi governments, particularly the Baathist regime, to adopt the posture of antagonism towards Iran."⁵ As a result, the policy of the Iraqi government triggered a war between the two nations in 1981. Therefore, most of the Iranian people hope that the new Iraqi government will limit the power of the Sunnis in the post-war period and keep a balance with other sects.

The second problem confronting the Iranian government is the separatist tendency of the Kurds in Iraq. As a minority in Iraq, the Kurds have made efforts to establish an autonomous nation and tried to become a sovereign state for a long time. Ever since 1991, "the Kurds have indeed achieved a great deal--a de facto state."⁶ However, the Iraq War provided an important chance for the Kurds to win more autonomy in the reconstruction of Iraq. Now the Iranian government, on the one hand, should be very careful in dealing with the possible division in Iraq, and on the other hand, must be aware of which nations the Kurds will ally with if they really became independent. Since there is a Kurd issue in Iran as well, what the Iranian government mainly worries about is that the Kurds in Iraq will likely ally with Israel if they win independence in the future. It is obvious that "such a development would jeopardize Iran's national interests and pave the way for new instability and tension within Iran's borders."⁷

⁵ Kayhan Barzegar, "The New Iraqi Challenge to Iran," *Heartland, The Iranian Hub*, No. 10, 2004, p. 81.

⁶ Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan, Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 28.

⁷ Chatham House, "Iraq in Transition: Vortex or Catalyst?" *Middle East Programme*, Sept. 2004.

The third problem which the Iranian government has to cope with is how to establish connections with the Shiites in Iraq. After the Iraq War, the Shiite sect in Iraq has already become the center of the new political power. But this fact also makes the situation more complicated and the Iranian government finds it harder to deal with it, because "their ambiguous relations with Iran will pose unknown tensions and opportunities in the domain of Iranian foreign policy."⁸ Therefore, the Iranian government should be both idealistic and realistic in dealing with the relations with the Shiites in Iraq. It is clear that the Shiite sect in Iraq has provided a good chance for the Iranian government to influence the political development in Iraq, but the various sub-sects inside the Shiites in Iraq will bring trouble to the Iranian policy toward Iraq. For the Iranian government, it is not easy to predict whether its efforts will serve to promote the reunification of the different Shiite sects in Iraq. After the war, the Shiites in Iraq have taken Iran as their natural friend in this region. Consequently, either the extreme right sect led by Ahmad Chalabi, or the extreme left sect led by Moqtada al-Sadr, or the moderate sect led by Al-Sistani and Al-Hakim, tries to develop a close relationship with Iran and wishes to rely on the support from the Iranian government so as to strengthen its position in the political competition for power. This means that if the Iranian government tries to play any influential role in Iraq's postwar reconstruction, it will probably get involved in the interior contradictions among Shiite sects in Iraq and even cause unexpected crises.

Besides the problems inside Iraq, the Iranian government is also alert to the interference from outside the Gulf region. As a fact in history, "the dominant presence of a Sunni government in Baghdad has long caused tension between Iran and Iraq and throughout the region" before the Iraq War.⁹ For many years, Iraq has been regarded by the Western nations as a strong power to contain the non-Arabian nations in this region, especially Iran. Therefore, Iraq's role to contain Iran is the result of the British foreign policy in the early 20th century. After the 1970s, the U.S. carried forward this policy. This shows that the hostile relations between Iran and Iraq were deliberately arranged by the West as the security structure in this region. Today even though Iran's relations with Iraq have changed considerably after the Iraq War, this fixed structure arranged by the Western countries may still be a root to the tension between Iran and Iraq.

The policy of the Western countries toward Iraq and Iran over the years can be divided into several periods. Before 1922, the Western countries' policy was to keep the balance of power between the two nations. The goal of their policy was to keep Iran and Iraq as equal powerful military forces and to maintain the security in this region. However, this policy finally led to the military competition beginning

⁸ Phebe Marr, "Iraq: Balancing Foreign and Domestic Realities," in Carl Brow, ed., *Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004), p. 183.

⁹ Kayhan Barzegar, *ibid*, p. 81.

from the 1970s and gave rise to Iraq's attack on Iran after the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. From 1992 to 2001, the West changed its policy toward Iran and Iraq. In the 1990s, the goal of the U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East was to weaken the military force of both Iran and Iraq at the same time. But "this approach resulted in not only fewer achievements but also heightened tension at the regional level."¹⁰ From 2001 to 2003, the U.S. government put both Iran and Iraq into the list of the so-called "axis of evil" nations. The U.S. even legalized its action of interference in the Middle East nations in the name of anti-terrorism after 9/11. The concept of "axis of evil" proclaimed that Iraq, Iran and North Korea are the enemies of global peace. So the U.S. has the legal right to require them or to force them to change their behavior. At last, the U.S. overthrew the regime in Iraq by force and now may be planning to take Iran as the next target. However, due to the large number of casualties of American soldiers in Iraq after the war as well as the worse security situation in recent Iraq, the U.S. government dares not run the risk of taking new military action against Iran until now.

According to its ultimate goal, the U.S. has been attempting to push Iran and other Middle East nations to change their political systems. As for Iran, it is very clear that the U.S.'s military presence in this area has become a serious threat to Iran's security. Meanwhile, "Iran is currently seeking neither to export its revolution nor to use an ideological approach to determine its regional policies."¹¹ Like any other independent nations, Iran recently is very concerned about its own security and its right to protect itself as a sovereign nation. But in its Greater Middle East Initiative, the U.S. government attempts to use Iraq as an activator to impose pressure on the whole Islamic world and to force them to accept the reform of democratic politics. Therefore, "Iran sees the Iraqi political scene as the front line for the new challenges and will do its best to confront the threat posed by the United States through the new Iraq."¹² This surely will make the Shiite force in Iraq become an important factor for Iran to rely on in opposing the U.S. impact on Iraq. After the Iraq War, the Shiites in Iraq have become the most important force in the Iraqi political power. As the majority of the Iraqi population, the Shiites have taken over the central position in national political life through district and national elections. Now the Iranian government is trying to keep a moderate position on this issue and to equally develop its relations with different religious sects in Iraq. Simultaneously, the Iranian government is paying much attention to

¹⁰ Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, *The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Some Conceptual and Practical Dimensions* (Tehran: The Institute for Political and International Studies, 2002), pp. 158-159.

¹¹ R.K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Autumn 2004, p. 557.

¹² Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2003, p. 124.

relying on the Shiites in Iraq to prevent the U.S. from threatening and interfering with Iran.

Iran's Policy Alternatives toward Iraq

Though Iran's surrounding circumstance has changed a great deal since the Iraq War, "the Iran's foreign-policy decisions are intimately affected by internal factors."¹³ Basically there exist two different opinions in Iran about how to develop its relations with Iraq. The first one emphasizes that Iraq has long been the root of the security threat to Iran. With its great amount of oil resources, diversified nationalities and ethnicities, and geopolitical position, Iraq is still a threat to Iran after the war. At least, it is an actual competitive adversary to Iran in the Persian Gulf region. In addition, this opinion also notes that Iraq is the main battlefield for Iran to confront the U.S. threat. So the people in favor of this opinion require Iran's government to take advantage of the downfall of the Iraqi Baathist Party to exert its influence on Iraq to eliminate this threat forever. In addition, if the reconstruction in Iraq cannot resume its security and stability, the U.S. will have to postpone or even cancel its military action against Iran. As the U.S. army is now being entangled into the conflicts among the ethnicities and sects in Iraq, Iran should increase its influence on the main political force represented by the Iraqi Shiites. Such a situation will be helpful for Iran to strengthen its position to bargain with the U.S.. So it is reasonable for the Iranian government to participate in and affect the interior affairs in Iraq.

The second opinion in Iran is just the opposite. Those for this opinion point out that the unstable situation in Iraq will make the nation disintegrate among ethnicities and sects. If Iraq is divided into north, central and south parts, the instability in Iraq will challenge the integration of the Iranian territory, too. And it will also cause a serious threat to Iranian national interests. At the same time, this opinion stresses that the instability will give the U.S. government a good pretext to keep its troop in Iraq. The existence of the U.S. army in Iraq will block Iran from bringing into play its influence in this region and form a direct threat to the Iranian security. The instability in Iraq will also bring about more foreign military presence in this nation and lead to a more serious imbalance of power in this region. Consequently, the traditional position of Iran in the regional security structure will decline further.

Affected by the above two opinions, Iran's Iraq policy has been in constant swings since the Iraq War. As the Iranian government is most concerned about the threat from the U.S., Iran's policies toward Iraq before and after the Iraq War have maintained four principles as follows. First, the Iranian government proclaimed

¹³ Abbas Maleki, "The Iranian Foreign Policy Decision Making," *Heartland, The Iranian Hub*, No. 10, 2004, pp. 16-23.

before the war that it would keep neutral in the Iraqi crisis. When the U.S. troops attacked Iraq, Iran made clear again that it would not get involved in the internal affairs in Iraq. However, at the same time, the Iranian government also noted that it would like to play an active role in solving the Iraqi crisis. So the Iranian foreign minister proclaimed that Iran's standpoint was "neutral but not indifferent."¹⁴ Second, Iran has never supported the U.S. and Britain to attack Iraq. Iran always opposed the attack and occupation of Iraq by U.S. and British coalition forces from the beginning of the war, though "Iran stigmatized Saddam's rule as a brutal regime that deserved to be overthrown and punished."¹⁵ The Iranian government is afraid that the occupation of the coalition forces will create a puppet government in Iraq which will help the U.S. fight Iran. Third, the Iranian government has kept close contact with Iraq after the war. Since the coalition forces overthrew the Saddam regime, the possibility for the U.S. army to aggress against Iran has increased greatly. Thus the Iranian government has to keep its engagement with the different religious sects of Shiites in Iraq to block this tendency. At the same time, Iran is also searching help from the Shiite groups in Iraq to eliminate the attempt of the U.S. government to suppress Iran. Fourth, the Iranian government has insisted on promoting the social security and stability in Iraq. Initially, influenced by the dominant domestic opinion, the Iranian government also believed that the U.S. would not be able to wage a war against Iran if it could not build up security in Iraq. For this reason, the Iranian government was inclined to keep the chaotic situation in Iraq. With the development of the situation, the Iranian government changed its policy and made clear that it would support Iraq to maintain its stability. The Iranian government even has tried its best to help solve the conflict between the Iraq Shiite militia and the coalition forces. Under the pressure from Iran, the Iraq Shiite began to disband the militia gradually and ask them to hand in the arms. The Iranian government has also given strong support to the election in Iraq in 2005 and accepted the result of the election. In this way, the Iranian government has expressed clearly that it supports the power distribution in the Iraqi political area.

Regarding Iran's policies toward the Sunnis, the Kurds and the Shiites in Iraq, the Iranian people also have two different points of view. The first one emphasizes that the hostile relations among the three sects will lead to the tense situation in this nation for a long time. With Saddam's regime being overthrown, it is not likely for the new regime in Iraq to suppress any minor ethnicity or religious groups, but the hostility among different ethnicities and sects will not be eliminated automatically and easily. The contradictions among these groups will stimulate

¹⁴ Kayhan Barzegar, "Understanding the Roots of Iranian Foreign Policy in the New Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 121, No. 2, Summer 2005, p.52.

¹⁵ Javad Vaeidi, "Exemplary War," *The Diplomatic Hamshahri (Farsi daily)*, No. 2, December 2003.

each of them to seek more power in the new power distribution. In such a situation, Iran will get a chance to play the role as a coordinator. This opinion also emphasizes that Iran should help limit the influence of the Sunnis in Iraq in the power center and keep it in balance with other groups. As for the Kurds, the Iranian government should support them to get the proper rights and power. This policy will be helpful for the Iranian government to control the Kurds in Iran itself in the future. The Iranian government should cooperate with all Shiite groups in Iraq. The close relations with the Shiite groups will be very important for Iran to exert pressure on Iraq.

The other opinion, approved by the Iranian government, points out that the Iranian government should work with the international community to support all ethnicities and sects to share equal power in the Iraqi central power institution. Then these groups will gradually accept the reality of the existence of the other different ethnic and sect groups in Iraq. This point of view also stresses that keeping a balance of power is a reasonable strategy. It will be helpful to eliminate the possibility of conflicts among ethnic and sect groups in Iraq. As for the Shiites in Iraq, people who approve this opinion require the Iranian government to keep close relations with various groups of the Shiites, especially those moderate ones.

On the basis of different opinions, the Iranian government has noted clearly that its policy toward Iraq will adapt to the new circumstance, cooperate with the Iraqi government in the transitional period, help create a secure situation in Iraq, and maintain a power balance among different sections. Among these aims, the most urgent one for the governments of Iran and the surrounding Gulf nations is to restore stability and security in Iraq. Many Middle East experts have pointed out that Iraq must build up its security before it begins to establish any democratic institution or implement any economic and social reform. The establishment of the security situation will be very important for the legal position of the Iraqi government in the transition. The insecure situation would surely lead to more riots, which were so frequent that the legal position of the Iraqi government couldn't remain stable in transition. The new government will be believed unable to maintain the stability of the society. As the nation that shares a long boundary with Iraq, Iran will also be affected by the instability in Iraq. So the Iranian government would like to cooperate closely with the Iraqi government in transition to eliminate various riots.

To realize security and stability in Iraq, the crucial point of Iran's Iraq policy is to maintain the power balance among different ethnic and sect groups. But the various ethnicities and sects in Iraq have very different understandings of Iraq's policy. The Iraqi Sunnis believe that Iran, as a Shiite nation, will surely support the Shiites in Iraq to expand their influence. As a sect that has lost its power in the war, the Sunnis naturally doubt Iran's motivation to play a positive role in Iraq after the war.

The Kurds in Iraq have always taken Iran as a barrier to their autonomy and independence. But now they have realized that they can rely on Iran to expand their power in the Iraqi reconstruction. As for Iran, it is determined to prevent the Iraqi Kurds from becoming independent. It also supports the Iraqi Kurds to obtain equal right and position in the Iraqi political distribution, because Iran as well needs the Kurds to mitigate the tension between Iran and the U.S. Hence, the Kurd leaders Hoshiyar Zebari and Jalal Talabani stressed that Iraq should take a realistic policy and keep a balance in the conflicting interests among different groups.

As far as the Shiites in Iraq are concerned, they have seen Iran as their supporter in pursuing political power and influence in Iraq after the war. The Shiites reiterated that they would establish close connections with Iran. In the eyes of the other sects, however, Iran's influence on Iraq has almost reached the extent of interfering with the internal affairs in Iraq. As a matter of fact, the Iraqi Shiites understand that it is more important for them than for Iran to establish close relations between the Shiites in the two nations. Yet, it seems that the both sides have to deal with this relationship carefully. On the one hand, the sects among the Shiites in Iraq are very complicated; on the other hand, the reasonable selection for Iran's policy toward Iraq is to cooperate with all ethnic groups and sects including the Shiites and support the political balance of power in Iraq.

In the long term of development, the Iranian government, aiming at establishing and maintaining the power balance in Iraq, should deal with the comprehensive relations with the Iraqi government through an active interaction between each other. After the war, the new Iraqi government is totally different from the old one. A friendly Iraq should look for coordination and cooperation with Iran. Furthermore, the Iraqi government should strive to solve the problems left by the war and to coordinate with Iran in dealing with regional issues with goodwill. Especially, "the new Iraq must be aware of Iran's alert towards U.S. policies in the region."¹⁶ In such a situation, the Iranian government and the new Iraqi government should abandon the traditional notion that one party tends to take the other side as the target to be contained in this region. Both sides should strive to establish a constructive relationship through economic and cultural exchanges. Moreover, the two nations can also work together to develop their oil project and strengthen cooperation in the OPEC.

Either looking back or forward, Iraq will be the nation that Iran should pay most attention to in this region. As a power in the Gulf region, Iran should adapt itself to the new circumstance after the Iraq War so as to readjust its Iraq policy. Under the precondition of self-protection, the main purpose of Iran's policy to Iraq is to diminish the threat from the U.S. troop in Iraq. The U.S. government has made

¹⁶ Kayhan Barzegar, "Understanding the Roots of Iranian Foreign Policy in the New Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 121, No. 2, Summer 2005, p.56.

clear that Iraq is only the first step in its Middle East strategy that aims at keeping its presence in this area and changing the political regime in Iran at last. In this case, if Iraq provides a way for the U.S. to exercise pressure on Iran, it will lead to a new round of hostile confrontations between the two nations. Therefore, it is also necessary for Iran to push various political forces in Iraq to decrease the possibility that the U.S. may use Iraq to threaten Iran. So the Iranian government should give up its traditional hostile notion to Iraq and accept that Iraq is also a key power in this region. As a matter of fact, Iran cannot build up the security framework in this region alone without the cooperation and participation of Iraq. To protect the national interests of both sides, Iran should support Iraq to establish a stable government. The instability in Iraq not only increases the costs of security for Iran but also attracts more foreign forces to step in this region. Iran should remember that the foreign forces have been trying to contain it with the democratic pattern established in Iraq and to use Iraq as an activator to change the political system in Iran. In a word, the Iranian government should help the Iraqi government understand that the most important issue is to rebuild social security and stability but not "fast democracy" in Iraq. Though Iraq has already held a national election, it is just the first step of the prolonged democratic process. In the future, the fate of democracy in Iraq will rest upon its social security and stability. Without the cooperation of Iran, it is unlikely for Iraq to achieve any real security and stability.