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The Iraq Quagmire: The Subtext of the Security Sub-Committee

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8 August 2007

AS EARLY as 2005, the United States has concluded that Iran is providing assistance to Iraqi militias, and is in reality using Iraq to fight a proxy war against the US. While continually accusing Iran of fuelling the insurgency, Washington has also begun an engagement policy with Tehran, forming a loose tripartite framework involving the US, Iran and Iraq with the aim of collectively resolving the conflict in Iraq. Since May 2007, two rounds of formal talks have been held, the latter resulting in the formation of a security sub-committee with the specific aim of containing the Sunni insurgency and the threat of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Engagement is a useful diplomatic channel to seek cooperation with Iran. However, juxtapose the move against the backdrop of US military officials' constant accusations of Iran as an irrational, ulama-controlled rogue state bent on sustaining conflict in its neighbourhood, the subtext of this strategy seems to be something else -- that most of Iraq's problems can be solved once Iran cease meddling in the country. Despite evidence of Iranian sponsorship to Shiite militias, the US has overstated its case. It is the Sunni insurgency and al-Qaeda elements in the country that are the most active against coalition forces and linked to the majority of the violence in the country. Therefore, while admitting Iran's disruptive involvement in Iraq, one should assess the blame on Iran carefully, and refrain from charging Iran for all of Iraq's troubles.

Assessing Iranian involvement in Iraq

For instance, one of Washington's frequent accusations is that Tehran is giving ad-hoc support to al-Qaeda. However, one needs only to understand al-Qaeda's fundamentally anti-Shiite ideology to realise that such sponsorship is highly unlikely. Al-Qaeda's intolerant ideology considers Shiites not as Muslims, but as unbelievers who warrant the wrath of the al-Qaeda jihadists as much as the "crusaders". Under the former leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda movement operating in Iraq had specifically attacked Shiites. Even though the core al-Qaeda leadership led by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have disagreed with this tactic, this is only because they fear a decrease in the popular support deemed essential for winning the asymmetric war against the US, and not because they are opposed to al-Zarqawi's fundamental anti-Shiite ideology.

It may nevertheless be speculated that despite the clash of ideologies, Iran still has a motive for sponsoring al-Qaeda. Iran may have recognized that unlike other local resistance groups, which have distinct localised political aims that may open them up to negotiations, al-Qaeda will never agree to peace negotiations with the Iraqi government. Reasoning that engaging with the "infidels" has never produced any positive results, al-Qaeda has heavily criticised anyone who wishes to participate in the political process. Further, with an objective that extends beyond the local, al-Qaeda's method and purpose is to wage jihad until all Muslim lands are unified under the leadership of a just (Sunni)

Caliph. In this context, al-Qaeda, unlike the other resistance movements, is a guarantee to sustained disruptions to US forces operating in Iraq. With the US held up in Iraq, Iran would be able to pursue its hostile policies in the region.

Logical Speculations?

While these speculations are not impossible, they are either irrational or short-sighted. Supporting a group that is ideologically incompatible with oneself is logically dangerous since the movement can boomerang back to hit Iran. Even Saudi Arabia, which is guided by the same religious fundamentalism that informs al-Qaeda, suffers the consequent delayed response in cracking down on the movement, giving al-Qaeda the opportunities to conduct more elaborate attacks within the country since 2003. Where attacks were previously conducted outside the country, the Saudi royal family did not think that al-Qaeda would now concentrate attacks within a country recognised for its Sunni Islamic authority. This serves as lesson enough for any state who wishes to support the movement.

Secondly, as constantly reiterated by Iranian officials, Iran has a vested interest in Iraq's internal stability and national unity. Iran does not want the Sunni-Shiite strife, which al-Qaeda promotes, to spill across the borders, especially since it too has to grapple with tensions between the two factions. Further, Iran's role in aiding the Iraqi government in reconstruction efforts has often been understated. Iran's interest in the current arrangement of a Shiite-dominated government, if not actually engineered by Iran, is surely a bonus for Iran.

While distancing Iran from al-Qaeda elements does not absolve Iran of its disruptive role in Iraq, the point made is that the extent of Iran's disruption in Iraq's nation-building effort should be discriminately attributed.

Security Committee positive for US-Iran relations

In spite of the limited utility of the security sub-committee in addressing the problems in Iraq, this is an encouraging development for regional stability. This is insofar as the committee provides a framework for US and Iran to engage in talks and cooperate on a less sensitive issue within the context of escalating tensions between the two nations. Washington and Tehran have ceased diplomatic relations since the Iranian revolution and the subsequent disastrous US Embassy hostage crisis in 1979. While relations improved during Khatami's reformist presidency, Ahmadinejad's election to office in 2005 renewed tensions between the two countries. His fiery rhetoric on Iran's insistence to nuclear technology despite fears that the technology would be used for the manufacture of nuclear weaponry has resulted in the imposition of US-initiated economic sanctions and the threat of military incursion looming. Another tricky issue between the two nations is Iran's sponsorship of non-state actors operating against Israel, highlighted in last July's military conflict between Hizbullah and Israel.

The common engagement on the issue of Iraq provides a good reason for both countries to begin talks within a framework, which could in the future, extend to discussions on other issues that have plagued US-Iran relations. Indeed, it has to be realised that the two critical points of contention at hand, namely Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology and its hostility towards Israel, are highly sensitive issues within Iranian domestic politics. Public polls have indicated Iranians' nationalistic perception that the development of nuclear fuel is Iran's indisputable right as a sovereign state. Moreover, Iran also claims it has a legitimate reason for pursuing the technology, citing the prospect of an energy crisis.

With regards to hostility towards Israel, Iran's revolutionary rhetoric and self-perception as a true Islamic state responsible for protecting Muslims against the alliance of the Israel-US "oppressors" still influence its foreign policy today, resulting in its unbending hostility towards Israel. On the contrary, assisting in the reconstruction of Iraq does not require Iran to wrestle with the problem of identity. In fact it promotes Iranian self-perception of the country as a successful Muslim state that is always eager

to lend a helping hand to the Muslim Umma. Iraq is therefore a good starting point for Washington and Tehran to begin diplomatic engagement.

In conclusion, while recognising that engaging Iran is essential for regional stability, one should understand the limits of the security sub-committee in containing al-Qaeda elements and the Sunni insurgency. As with any good realist state, Iran no doubt wishes to exploit opportunities to extend its influence. However, Iran's Iraq policy and the extent of Iranian disruptions need to be assessed carefully.

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