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IRAN AND THE WAR IN IRAQ

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The war in Iraq will have far-reaching implications for Iran's policy and standing in the region. It took place in a neighboring country in which Iran has vital interests. It was waged by Iran's archenemy, the United States. And while it might advance certain Iranian interests, it also implies serious challenges, depending on the identity, stability and policy of the new regime in Iraq, the post-war status of Iraqi Kurds and Shi'is, the degree of American involvement, and the impact on the oil market. Thus far, the course of the war has tended to exacerbate the risks while producing few of the potential benefits, and though its full meaning has yet to emerge, it is already clear that the reality on Iran's borders has changed significantly, and so far not to Iran's advantage.

Iran had no great affection for Saddam Hussein, and hostility to Iraq, with which Iran fought a protracted and bloody war, is deep. But though the war against Iraq was appropriate in Iranian eyes, it was waged by the wrong party – the "Great Satan." America's status as the sole superpower and its inclusion of Iran in the "Axis of Evil" in January 2002, along with the Bush Administration's assertive posture towards Iran, constitute a serious threat. Many of the stated objectives of the war in Iraq – elimination of

weapons of mass destruction, suppression of state-supported terrorism, regime change through external intervention, democratization through military means – could easily be applied to Iran. Consequently, Iran persists in its two-track policy: vigorous criticism of the United States, coupled with pragmatic measures to safeguard its interests after the war. Iran has worked hard to strengthen its links to the Iraqi opposition (Shi'ite and Kurdish), to deepen its dialogue with Europe, to tighten its ties with Russia, and even to reassure opinion in the United States. It has also refrained from inciting popular opposition to the war: anti-war demonstrations in Iran were fewer and less intense than those that took place in Europe.

Although pre-war criticism of the United States was almost universal, the reformers and conservatives adopted notably different tones. The latter used particularly crude language, attacked the U.S. for threatening to violate Iraqi sovereignty, and accused it of a conspiracy to steal the region's oil. The former, though also harshly critical, avoided ideological demagoguery and chose their words more carefully. In effect, Iranian opinion about American-Iranian relations remained divided. The reformers wanted a change but couldn't

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bring it about; the conservatives could have promoted change but showed no interest in doing so.

As the war drew nearer, the contrast in Iranian and American interests came into sharper relief. Unlike the U.S., Iran would have preferred a difficult and protracted conflict that would provoke a storm of anti-Americanism – in Iran, other Muslim countries, and the rest of the world – and weaken both the United States and Iraq. Visions of "the day after" were also entirely contradictory. The U.S. wanted to play a central role in the rehabilitation of Iraq and hoped to transform it into a bridgehead for democracy throughout the region. Iran was apprehensive about the prospect of a prolonged American presence or the spread of liberal ideas among disaffected Iranian youth, particularly from the direction of Iraq. For Iran, the worst-case scenario was the disintegration of Iraq. It saw the emergence of an independent Kurdish entity as the most serious threat. And though it was more ambivalent about the idea of Shi'ite independence, it also had doubts about whether Iraqi Shi'ites would submit to Iranian hegemony. Past experience showed that they tend to act more as Iraqi Arabs than in a spirit of pro-Iranian Shi'ite solidarity.

In the aftermath of the war, the demonstration of American military might, the collapse of the Iraqi Army, the shock in the Arab street and the relative quiescence of Europe (at least for the time being) do not serve Iranian interests. Nor do the biting American criticism of Syria or the declarations of concern about Iran's nuclear program voiced by Administration officials even during the course of the fighting. For their part, Iranian officials have condemned America for occupying Iraq, inflicting casualties, and causing civilian hardship. Iran almost certainly hopes for further complications in the American war plan,

including growing Iraqi resistance and European and U.N. pressure. And it will probably draw the conclusion that a non-conventional capability is the best way to spare it from a fate similar to Iraq's. Ironically, acting on that conclusion is also likely to provoke the strongest and most direct American response.

Iran is currently working to establish links with various factions in Iraq but refraining from doing anything to attract American ire. It is even moderating the tone of its public rhetoric. A particularly interesting example is former President Rafsanjani's pronouncement on the possibility (however theoretical) of restoring ties with the United States after a referendum. Although Rafsanjani's statement was made in a pre-war interview, it provoked a heated debate when it was published on April 12. And while it is not clear what is behind that declaration, the very fact that it was made by someone like Rafsanjani is itself significant. After all, Rafsanjani may have been very pragmatic about the U.S. in the 1980s, but he has been clearly identified with the conservatives in recent years. This suggests that Iran's leaders already appreciate the degree to which the war in Iraq may affect the entire region.

Even if its post-war policy is not yet clear, Iran will continue to view developments in Iraq as affecting its vital interests and will probably be guided more by national interests than by past dogmas. America's presence in both Afghanistan and Iraq, its influence along Iran's other borders, its global stature, and the determination it has shown in the war against terror do not augur well for Iranian interests. These factors do not inevitably lead to changes in regime policy or the strengthening of reformist forces in Iran. But they do mean that the 25-year old revolution will be forced, more than ever, to reassess its path and search its soul.