

# Changes in Iran's Strategic Posture

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Several developments in the region since 2003 have prompted major changes in Iran's strategic posture. The events in Iraq represent the most important development, as the 2003 war effected a dramatic change in Iran's most important neighbor. Iraq currently houses a large and threatening American force, sent there to overthrow a regime that at the time was perceived in the United States as developing weapons of mass destruction and heavily involved in terror. The American threat appears even more ominous when considering that at the end of 2001 the US overthrew another Muslim regime, the Taliban in Afghanistan. The result of the military action in two neighbor states is that Iran is encircled by states connected to the US, some of which are still housing American forces. The signal to Iran was clear: if Iran did not cease developing weapons of mass destruction and promoting terror, it too could be subject to the threat of military action.

The pressure on Iran is primarily focused on the question of its nuclear program. Since 2002 numerous details have surfaced that leave little doubt as to Iran's drive to develop nuclear weapons. The result was heavy pressure, spearheaded by the United States and backed by European nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency, to cease all activities that could lead to the development of nuclear weapons. Even Russia, a major supplier of nuclear technology for Iran, has changed its stance. Once the Russians understood the Iranian regime's drive to develop nuclear weapons, they criticized the regime publicly for its actions and agreed in principle to impose sanctions on Iran. This pressure led to the transfer of the issue to the UN Security Council, which decided in December 2006 to impose economic sanctions on Iran unless it complied with the demand to halt all suspicious nuclear activities.

This article seeks to examine the changes in Iran's strategic posture in light of the pressures exerted upon it and the implications of these changes.

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## The Situation in Iraq

The developments in Iraq since 2003 have serious implications for Iran's strategic status and its ability to cope with the ensuing pressures. From the outset it was apparent that the conquest of Iraq posed a serious American threat towards Iran, but at the same time offered new opportunities. The more time went by, the more it became clear that the balance was tipping towards the opportunities.

Regarding capability, the American military threat toward Iran has not decreased. Large American forces are still operating in Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan, all of which are capable of striking strategic Iranian targets. This situation will not change in the near future. The American government is not rushing to remove the bulk of its forces from Iraq, and even when it does it will leave considerable strength in the Gulf area in order to assist in stabilizing Iraq, as well as to maintain pressure on Iran. It can be assumed that Iran is worried by the recent American decision to take steps, albeit limited, against the Iranian strongholds in Iraq. The US is also building up its naval and air forces in the Gulf with the addition of a second aircraft carrier and Patriot anti-missile batteries. These steps increase the pressure both on Iran and on its European partners and Russia to help by strengthening the economic sanctions against Iran. First and foremost, the Iranians are taking into account the possibility that the United States, perhaps with the cooperation by Israel, will attack their nuclear installations, as well as other strategic sites.

Yet the American threat of late has lost something of its urgency and intensity. Iran, like many others, likely feels that the United States is in no hurry to initiate military action against Iran in light of its entanglement

in Iraq. A record of failure does not encourage new military action, not to mention the fact that the Iraqi story is far from finished and is still exacting high human and financial costs from the United States. Without a doubt a military ground option in Iran has been completely discarded, in light of what has unfolded in Iraq. Currently, all the governments involved prefer to pursue the diplomatic efforts to stop the development of Iranian nuclear weaponry. As long as diplomacy remains the preferred arena, there is no justification for military action against Iran; at the moment even military action against the nuclear sites, by the United States or by Israel, faces the additional difficulty of lacking support from any other state, and there is little reason to think that this picture will change in the near future.

The situation in Iraq disturbs Iran for another reason as well. The instability, violence, and terror in Iraq could spill over into Iran and affect its own stability. Iran's primary Iraq-related fear centers on the Kurdish issue. Iraq's Kurdish population has earned broad autonomy and has a considerable degree of influence in the central governing bodies – first and foremost the presidency, which has been granted to the Kurds. There is a real possibility that the Kurds would achieve an independent state were Iraq to come apart. These developments are likely to influence the Kurdish minority in Iran, which numbers close to five million, and to encourage them to become more vocal in their demands for greater autonomy within Iran. The rise in Iraqi terror, especially the increasingly violent Shiite-Sunni fighting, is also likely to spill over into Iran.

Yet these concerns are eclipsed by the opportunities that opened up to Iran in light of the 2003 war. Iraq was already weakened

by the 1991 Gulf War, a process that intensified with the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime and the destruction of his military machine. The 2003 war erased the strategic conventional and non-conventional military Iraqi threat that hung over Iran for many years. It removed the only force in the area capable of restraining Iran in the Gulf and offsetting its strategic power. Since then Iran is the single major regional power in the Gulf, and only the United States can balance its struggle for hegemony over the area. This development increases the pressure on other Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia, which since the eighties relied on Iraq as well as the United States to resist the Iranian threat.

No less important is the opportunity that has opened up with the Shiites' change of status in Iraq. Iran has struggled to strengthen the standing and influence of the Shiites in order to create Iraqi-Iranian Shiite power centers, which will give Iran strategic depth and help promote its own interests. With this in mind it encouraged the Shiite leaders to participate in the political process led by the Americans, which was seen in their eyes as the most promising way of turning the Shiites into an important and influential part of the Iraqi system. Iran thus developed considerable influence within the coalition of Shiite leaders (the United Iraqi Covenant) that has dominated the two parliamentary elections in Iraq in 2005. The coalition includes the main Shiite forces aligned with Iran, the Supreme Council for an Islamic Revolution in Iraq, most of whose members spent time in exile in Iran, and the al-Dawa party. Iran's greatest ally is the leader of the Council, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, who supports legislation that would lead to the establishment of a federation of Shiite areas in southern Iraq, which would in effect create a large rela-

tively autonomous Shiite district. Iran favors this idea, as a large Shiite district in Iraq will serve to strengthen the economic and political connections with Iran.

In parallel to fostering links to the political Shiite leadership, Iran has established connections with the Shiite militia, mostly by providing monetary and military support and activating hundreds of Revolutionary Guards and Iranian intelligence agents who have infiltrated Iraq. The most important militia that has connections to Iran is the al-Badr Organization, which was founded and trained in Iran by the Revolutionary Guards and transferred to Iraq after the fall of Saddam's regime. Iran is also trying to forge connections with the Mehdi Army led by the young charismatic leader Muqtada al-Sadr.

Notwithstanding its interest in stability in Iraq, Iran's support of the Shiite militias and efforts to strengthen the Shiite sector have served to continue to destabilize the situation. Because of the violent inter-ethnic struggles, Iran's overtures toward the Shiites have weakened the chances of Sunni-Shiite understanding and undermined the United States' efforts to create a stable Iraqi government. The increased Iranian influence on Iraqi politics has additional implications: Iran has created another front for putting pressure on the American forces in Iraq, which could otherwise have served as a restraining force against Iran. Therefore, if the American government were to consider military action against Iran, it must also take into account that this will lead to an increase of Shiite militia attacks on American forces in Iraq. Thus the current situation in Iraq may be useful to Iran: the threat of an American military attack exists, but the imbroglio in Iraq limits the Americans' ability to act against Iran, continues to lower their standing in the re-

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gion, and gives Iran more leverage over the Americans.

Recognizing Iran's growing influence in Iraq, the Americans have considered establishing channels of communications with the Iranians in order to stabilize the situation in Iraq. So far these efforts have failed. The Baker-Hamilton report, which proposes a new American strategy for exiting the Iraqi quagmire, acknowledges the importance of speaking with the Iranians in order to stabilize the situation in Iraq. However, for several reasons there is room for doubt whether this initiative will advance the cause of the Iraqi crisis. First, the main focus of the proposal is to improve the regional and international standing of the United States by means of stabilizing the situation in Iraq. Second, there is almost no doubt that were Iran to agree to enter meaningful negotiations with the United States regarding the future of Iraq, the quid pro quo it would ask for would be the end of international pressure on its nuclear program. This would be in absolute contradiction to the American stance. Third, the underlying problem in Iraq is internal – the inter-ethnic violent conflicts. The outside influence on developments in Iraq, primarily interference from Iran and Syria, are of relatively minor importance. Even if it were possible to harness Iran (and Syria) to assist in stabilizing Iraq at the cost of conceding central pillars of American policy in the area, it would contribute little to solving the internal problems of Iraq. These are apparently the reasons that the US administration rejected the recommendation.

### **The Regional View: Shia vs. Sunna**

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all the way to Lebanon that includes a compact with Syria and the Palestinian Islamic organizations, and constitutes a challenge to the moderate Sunni camp. The elements in this picture include the expected increasing severity of the Iranian nuclear threat; the appearance of Shiites as the dominant force in Iraq; the increased influence of Iran in Iraq and the escalation of the violent Shiite-Sunni conflict there; and the sense that Hizbollah's standing has improved as a result of the Lebanese war and its efforts to secure a dominant position in the Lebanese government. Added to these components are the ongoing weakness of the Western world, which for years has been unable to form a coalition capable of operating together against this force, and the image of a United States weakened in the region and around the world. These developments have contributed heavily to the impression that Iran is engaged in strengthening its regional position.

The developments in Lebanon are important in Iranian eyes, which perceive them as reflections of the war between Islam and the Judeo-Christian West, and the struggle within the Muslim camp between the Sunnis and the awakening Shiites. Iran founded Hizbollah in 1982, and views the organization as the most successful export of the Islamic Revolution and as the force behind the Shiite awakening and the demand for ethnic recognition. Various developments have helped widen Iran's freedom of maneuver in Lebanon in recent years: the Israeli Defense Forces' withdrawal from Lebanon, the departure of Syrian forces from Lebanon, the weakness of Bashar Asad's regime, and the ongoing weakness of Lebanon's government. Iran considers Hizbollah's military growth, particularly the acquisition of a comprehensive long range rocket array and the establish-

ment of fortifications across southern Lebanon, as strengthening its deterrent ability toward Israel, especially should Israel attempt to attack Iran's nuclear sites. The fact that Hizbollah is seen as a viable deterrent, or at least as a force that successfully confronted Israel, is presented by Iran as another victory in its march to weaken Israel and the West.

Iran's activity in Iraq and Lebanon is complemented by increasing involvement in two additional areas. Since the beginning of the intifada Iran's influence has grown in the Palestinian arena, in terms of political connections, military and financial aid to the Palestinian organizations, and encouragement of terror attacks, both directly and through Hizbollah. Hamas' rise to power, its partial isolation by the West and the international community, and its urgent dependence on financial support has supplied Iran with the opportunity to strengthen its connection with Hamas and increase its influence in the movement. In the past Hamas attempted to limit its connections with Iran and its reliance on financial aid, in order to maintain its own independence. But under the pressure of international isolation, Palestinian leader Ismail Haniyeh saw fit to declare during his visit to Tehran that Iran is the Palestinians' strategic depth.

Iran has taken advantage of the instability in Afghanistan to increase its influence there as well. Until the United States campaign in Afghanistan, Iranian activities there were limited, due to the antagonism between Iran and the Taliban regime. The removal of the regime in late 2001 created an opportunity for Iran to increase its influence in western Afghanistan by way of distributing funds, investing in infrastructure, and promoting activities of the Revolutionary Guards.

But the regional balance of Iran is not

one-sided, and the final picture has not been drawn. The meaning of the conflict in Lebanon will largely be decided by Hizbollah's ability to increase its power in the political structure and rebuild its military strength, among other ways with Iran's help. Hizbollah used its rocket system against Israel prematurely, which will allow Israel to prepare for it better in the case of an Iranian-Israeli conflict over nuclear development, thereby reducing Iran's deterrent effect. Israel's ability to inflict extensive damage on the long range rockets that Iran supplied Hizbollah, combined with the demonstration of the Israeli air force's capabilities, have likely aroused concern in case of a future conflict with Israel. The connection between Iran and Hamas is likewise not guaranteed in the long term.

Iran's growing power also has a detrimental side. Today there is a broad front, even if not organized and unified, that seeks to restrain Iran. Iran's increased influence in Iraq and the war in Lebanon, with Iran's potential achievement of nuclear weapons in the not-so-distant future lying in the background, arouse considerable concern within the main centers of the moderate Arab world, which fears the outbreak of Shiite unrest. In the past this fear centered on the Iranian export of the Islamic Revolution to additional Muslim states; today the concern is more with the possibility of Iran undermining governments in moderate states and pressuring them to embrace the Iranian line. These fears have not yet sparked organized Arab activity against Iran, nor is it clear that they will. But the situation is uncomfortable for Iran and has planted seeds of concern. It damages its image, encumbers its maneuvering in the nuclear question on the international stage, and contributes to the international organization against Iran.

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## Iran under Pressure on the Nuclear Question

The main issue troubling Iran's foreign policy is the pressure on Iran to cease its efforts to develop nuclear weaponry. Iran's diplomatic position is worse than it was in 2003. Indeed, Iran was surprised by two developments. First, in light of revelations of Iranian nuclear plans since 2002, European governments have moved closer to the American position, and Iran finds it harder than in the past to maneuver between them. Second, the issue has moved to the Security Council, which, with the agreement of China and Russia, agreed to impose sanctions.

The sanctions imposed by the Security Council in December of 2006 will likely not push Iran to desist from its nuclear development plans. The sanctions are designed to prevent the supply of materials, equipment, and technology that Iran needs to develop nuclear weapons. But the measures are partial, full of cracks and loopholes, and easily circumvented, and thus they will not encumber Iran to any measurable degree, either in the nuclear or the economic realms. Iran announced immediately that the sanctions will not prevent it from continuing the nuclear development program, and even threatened that in response to the sanctions it will adopt its own measures, including a reevaluation of both its willingness to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency and its attitude to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The most far-reaching statement was made by the head of the Iranian National Security Council, Ali Larijani, Iran's chief spokesman for nuclear issues, when for the first time he acknowledged implicitly that Iran was working towards acquiring nuclear weapons. He claimed that Iran was committed to using nuclear technology for peaceful

purposes, though the situation could change if Iran found itself subject to threats. And in order to stress Iran's commitment to continue its nuclear program, Iran announced that by March of 2007 it intends to have completed the assembly of 3,000 centrifuges for the enrichment of uranium in Natanz.

Nonetheless, there are also positive aspects to the sanctions, and in effect the struggle has been elevated to a level that was hard to even imagine a year ago. It reflects a change of direction on the part of Russia and China, apparently arising from their understanding that Iran is in fact attempting to produce nuclear weapons. December 2006's resolution also opens the door to additional sanctions by the Security Council if Iran fails to accept its demands. The Council's resolution added to the Iranian internal argument over how decisions within the Iranian leadership have been made, which includes criticism of President Ahmadinejad's militant manner that was likely a contributing factor leading to the sanctions, particularly the rhetoric on the destruction of Israel and the denial of the Holocaust. Finally, the process of pressuring Iran in recent years has its own dynamic, and it seems likely it will gain momentum in the future. It is a reasonable assumption that this has already aroused concern in Iran and may lead to a change in its overall tactics.

Yet none of these is in and of themselves reason for much optimism. Even if the Security Council would strengthen the sanctions, it is hard to believe they will be sufficient to bring about a significant change in Iran's position. Sanctions can be avoided and circumvented, and the United States will be hard-pressed to find ways to compensate countries reluctant to uphold the sanctions due to the heavy economic damage they incur. Iran has



lived under unilateral American sanctions for many years without having changed its position. It can continue to assume that there will be a limit to the severity of the sanctions imposed, in light of Iran's influence on the world oil market and the hesitancy of various countries to threaten their economic interests with Iran. Even the internal criticism leveled at Ahmadinejad relates to tactics of achieving nuclear weaponry and not to the strategy, since the nuclear program is considered a national goal that enjoys an overwhelming consensus.

Iran is also able to presume that military action against its nuclear facilities is not close at hand: Robert Gates, the new American secretary of defense, stated in mid-January 2007 that military action against Iran is a last resort, and that the United States at this point has no plans for immediate military action against Iran. The bottom line is that the conditions for stopping the Iranian move towards building nuclear weaponry have not yet been attained, neither on the diplomatic nor on the military front.

### The Internal Iranian Debate

Developments in Iran's strategic arena since 2003 have unfolded in parallel to important internal developments. The main direction of these changes was the strengthening of the radical elements of the regime. This was given clear expression in the loss of the three power strongholds of the moderate regime since 1997: the presidency, lost with the election of the ultra-radical Ahmadinejad in place of the moderate Khatami; the loss of the majority in parliament; and the loss of the majority in many village and municipality councils. The strengthening of the radicals in Iran, including the harsh approach of Ahmadinejad, has contributed to the image of Iran as a world

threat – both in Israeli eyes and in the eyes of other countries.

Since late 2006 and early 2007, there have been signs that could indicate a possible change of direction. Ahmadinejad's supporters suffered a blow in the elections for the



Assembly of Experts, which is responsible for overseeing the spiritual leader and even has the authority to remove him. Reformists achieved notable victories in the municipal elections of December 2006. Ahmadinejad has attracted considerable criticism for the manner that brought sanctions on Iran by the Security Council, expressed not only by the Reformists but from the pragmatic branches of the radical wings as well. There are also indications that the spiritual leader Khamenei is distancing himself from the president's policies. The criticism is connected to a public discussion that has developed around the question of Iran's tactics regarding its nuclear policy, though as yet it has not expanded to include the question about the wisdom of

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developing nuclear weapons, about which there is no disagreement whatsoever.

It is still premature to assert that these signs indicate the beginning of a serious change in the internal stance of Iran or the strengthening of the Reformists. The relative success of the Reformists is limited, and at this stage is insufficient to unseat the radicals who control the government. Their success in the 1990s was far more impressive, yet nonetheless the radicals succeeded in repealing their changes. The wave of protest and the student riots that Iran saw during June and July of 2003 have not repeated themselves. Criticism of Ahmadinejad is important and if it swells, it could lead to unseating him, or at least to a reappraisal of the Iranian tactics toward the nuclear question. Yet for this to happen, there will need to be considerable organization, dedication, and demonstration of leadership from the moderate elements in Iran.

### **Conclusion**

Iran's current strategic posture is on the upswing. The leading cause of this trend is Iraq's instability. The American threat to Iran is still a reality, but the disappearance of Iraq as a military factor and the American entanglement in the Iraqi quagmire play into Iranian hands. There is no other force in the Gulf that can balance Iran's strength, and numerous opportunities have presented themselves that Iran has been quick to exploit: expansion of influence in Iraq; attempts to build a Shiite axis, extending from Iran through Iraq to Lebanon, by way of Syria, Iran's partner; increase of influence on the Palestinian system in light of Hamas' rise to power and its need for external assistance; and a strengthened presence in western Afghanistan, in light of the fall of the Taliban. The current status of

Iraq is relatively convenient for Iran, enabling it to pressure and deter the United States; the US administration has recognized that the situation calls for an attempt to develop a dialogue with Iran in order to stabilize Iraq. The impression that the regional strength of the United States is on the decline also helps Iran move into the vacuum that has formed.

The most ominous issue for Iran is the increasing pressure to suspend its suspected nuclear development project, which has become the focus of the Security Council's sanctions. This pressure is apparently uncomfortable for Iran but not yet unbearable. The sanctions imposed are not sufficiently painful, even if they become more severe in the future, and the military threat does not seem immediate. The internal criticism on the question of the tactics that brought the sanctions upon Iran, in parallel with the signs of an awakening of the Reform movement, are both still insignificant, and in any case, don't relate to the question of Iran's intention to achieve nuclear status. At this point, Iran is persisting tenaciously in its plans to develop nuclear weapons and even to accelerate their development in the near future.

One must assume that the change in Iran's strategic posture will continue to evolve with future developments. The most likely major influence in the near future is the status of Iraq. If the United States were to withdraw the majority of its forces from Iraq without first achieving stability, additional opportunities would open up before Iran. If Iraq is divided, the Shiite entity is likely to become an Iranian partner, at least in the initial stages. At later stages, as the Shiites have less and less need for Iran, conflicts could develop between them. Ultimately, the majority of Iraqi Shiites do not want to find themselves under Iranian influence.



Several other possible future developments could have an influence on Iran:

- Significant increase in political and economic pressure on Iran over the nuclear question could weaken its position and lead it to reconsider its tactics. The United States has initiated moves to increase this pressure, both on the ground and through political-economic channels. If the Americans fail to enlist serious cooperation from other states there is reason to doubt whether this will have an influence on Iran.

- A successful military action against the nuclear sites could weaken Iran and terminate its nuclear weapons program. In the meantime ripe conditions for such a move seem to be lacking.

- An additional military conflict between Israel and Hizbollah could also influence Iran's standing. If Hizbollah is perceived to be the loser, this could damage Iran's standing in Lebanon and the sense of progress from which Iran currently benefits. The opposite is also true.

- The moderate Arab camp could organize among itself with the support of the Americans and the West, in an attempt to restrain the Iranian-Shiite momentum, for the most part in Iraq and Lebanon.

- The world oil market could influence developments, as Iran's economy relies

heavily upon it. A disruption of Iranian oil exports, the import of refined oil to Iran, or a major change in the price of oil could radically affect the Iranian ability to maneuver.

The development that would have the greatest effect on Iran's strategic position would be the achievement of nuclear weapons. If this were to occur, Iran would solidify its position as the central pillar of the radical camp, promote its strength within the Shiite axis, pose a threat to the moderate Arab states in its vicinity, and exert pressure on them to become more extreme in their relations toward Israel and reduce their dependence upon the United States.

Can Israel help block Iran from continuing to improve its standing? Israel cannot influence what is happening in Iraq. Despite their shared interest, it is doubtful whether the moderate Arab camp would agree to cooperate with Israel regarding Iran. But there are possible situations where Israel could take on a major role in the future in stopping Iran. Practically speaking, these steps could include dealing Hizbollah a serious blow, if necessary; achieving a peace agreement with Syria; weakening Hamas; and above all, taking military steps to remove Iran's nuclear sites. These are all serious developments in their own right and worthy of further analysis.