

America's Iraqi follies, Iran's opportunities

Ghassan Atiyyah — bitterlemons-international.org, 7 July 2005

Commenting on the announcement of his victory, Iranian President-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad remarked that, "This is the dawn of a new Islamic revolution in the world." Ahmadinezhad's election ends a period during which the Iranian religious leadership was forced to retreat in the face of the American storm let loose by September 11, opening a space for a reform movement undertaken by the Khatemi presidency. This had helped not only to absorb America's rage, but also to build bridges of cooperation without allowing for genuine change inside Iran. But with the election of Ahmadinezhad, a true revolutionary, the presidency regains its militancy in both form and spirit.

In spite of the Iranian-American antagonism, it was Iran that was the prime beneficiary of America's wars in Kuwait, Afghanistan, and most recently Iraq. These wars rid Iran of its two greatest adversaries--the Taliban and Saddam--without it having to fire a single bullet.

The American occupation of Iraq, however, brought with it the fear that America's quick victory would succeed in establishing a prosperous democratic system that would return Iraq to its former strength--strength that it might again be able to use against Iran. The positive change in Iraq also carried with it the possibility that further pressure would emerge from within Iran demanding opening up and democracy. Furthermore, the occupation also gave rise to fears that Iran could be America's next stop after its victory in Iraq. This fear quickly led Tehran to build bridges of cooperation with Sunni and Shi'ite insurgents in Iraq. Once the United States became embroiled and bogged down in Iraq with no victory in sight, however, Iran adopted a policy to entrench and broaden its influence in Iraq.

Once entangled in Iraq, America was not in a position to undertake any military action against Iran. Rather, in order to maintain stability and order in Shi'ite controlled areas, mainly in southern Iraq, it became dependent on Islamist Shi'ites subordinate to Iran.

America needs these Shi'ite forces, as represented in Iraq's High Council of the Islamic Revolution under the leadership of Hakim, even though it knows that the Council was founded in Iran in the early eighties and that, with the cooperation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, it has created a militia known by the name of "Badr". Today Badr has become an effective power in Iraq, such that its numbers have risen to more than 100,000 fighters. At the same time, the Bremer decisions and transitional administrative laws insist on the disbanding of all militias by no later than January 2005. Nevertheless, just a few weeks ago, the Badr militias were celebrating their second anniversary in Baghdad with the participation of the president of the republic,

the prime minister, and many other members of the Iraqi government.

Rather than serving to help or mediate between the communities constituting the Iraqi people (Shi'ite, Sunni, Kurd, Turcoman, etc.), America's policy in Iraq has given rise, deliberately or not, to a Shi'ite-Kurdish alliance. The decisions that it has taken (such as doing away with the army and de-bathification) have rendered the Sunni Arabs victims.

Thus, in its confrontation with the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq, America finds itself more reliant on Shi'ite Arabs and Kurds. In consequence, it is a prisoner of both rather than the arbiter among different Iraqi factions.

Washington was forced to become more and more dependent on the Shi'ite religious leader Sistani and the two Kurdish leaders in order to make last October's elections a success and ensure the participation of the greatest number of voters possible. One of the ironies is that the liberal and secular left in Iraq became a victim of the electoral process, without the elections having achieved the hoped-for stability.

It is in these circumstances that "revolutionary" Iran, rather than "reformist" Iran is now engaged in expanding its influence in Iraq, which today remains limited to southern Iraq, especially Basra. With the election of a member of the Revolutionary Guard and someone who fought in the Iran-Iraq war, the margins of Iranian society have been brought together and the competing centers of power have merged in favor of the president of the republic. The game of playing various roles has ended in favor of an extremist Iran that is the carrier of a "message" to the Islamic world and is armed with nuclear power.

The United States' rush to authorize a permanent Iraqi constitution and hold elections in Iraq at the end of the current year will further tempt Iran to expand its influence for the advent of an Iraqi Shi'ite government that will be its ally if not its subordinate. This it will do before the American efforts to build bridges with the Sunni Arabs succeed. Meanwhile, the inter-Kurdish competition between Talibani and Barazani will keep the former in need of Iran.

There remain many unresolved issues between Iran and Iraq as, until today, no peace agreement has been signed between the two countries. Iran continues to demand compensation concurrent with UN Security Council Resolution 509, and also to insist that Iraq announce its compliance with the 1975 accord that redrew the borders in Iran's favor.

America's frustrations in Iraq serve Iranian extremism both inside and outside of Iran. Unless there is a reconsideration of American policies in Iraq, the latter could end up as a de-facto partitioned state with southern Iraq under the influence or direct control of Iran.- Published 7/7/2005 (c) bitterlemons-international.org

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