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The Turbulence in Iraq: The Iranian Angle

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The success of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in seizing control of key cities in northwest Iraq is also a failure of the other parties involved. It is a failure of the government of Nuri al-Maliki, a Shiite, who has shown himself to be a tyrannical, corrupt, and ineffective ruler, and who above all has continued to alienate the Sunnis and failed to bring about any reconciliation with this sector. It is a failure for the United States, which built large security forces in Iraq, including hundreds of thousands of soldiers and police officers, who were supposed to impose law and order in the country and promote stability though they were unable to defend Iraq from an external enemy. In practice, the security forces have lacked cohesion, determination, leadership, and effectiveness and are unable to cope with the attacks by the much smaller Sunni militia and engage in warfare in urban – particularly Sunni – areas.

The success by ISIS is also a failure for Iran, which in recent years has become the most important and influential external actor in Iraq, particularly since the withdrawal of US forces in late 2011. Iran's goal in Iraq was to build a weak and non-threatening but stable and unified country, dependent on Iran and led by a Shiite majority connected to Iran. To this end, Iran used its ties with many Shiite elements in Iraq, including armed militias, political leaders and parties, clerics, and economic institutions, and nurtured these connections through military and financial aid. This influence had limits, primarily because Shiite institutions had an interest in not being excessively dependent on Iran, and Sunnis had reservations about Iran. However, in all, Iranian involvement in Iraq has been unprecedented in the bilateral relations, and testifies to Iraq's weakness and the Shiites' historic rise to power in the country.

The ISIS takeover of parts of Iraqi territory is a serious cause for worry for Iran, which perceives it as a part of the greater Sunni-Shiite struggle. Instability across the border is not desirable for Iran, because as a country of minorities it could well spill over into its territory. The Sunni organization's success hurts the Shiites, who are the basis of Iran's influence in Iraq, particularly the armed Shiite militias, many of which are supported by Iran. The jihadi outpost in Syria is an important element in the opposition to the Assad

regime, an ally of Iran, and made it necessary for Iran to intervene and provide significant military aid to the Syrian regime, which in turn has sparked criticism from various countries. The worsening situation in Iraq, which also exacerbates the threat to the Assad regime, could prompt Tehran to intervene and become entangled in the fighting in Iraq, even if in a limited way. In the long run, deterioration in Iraq that leads to its division into two or three countries could have a negative impact on Iran, particularly given the Kurdish minority in Iran.

Fearful of continued deterioration in Iraq, Iran's leaders have announced that if requested they will aid the Iraqi government and will defend the Shiite holy places in Iraq. There are reports from Iraq that two battalions from the al-Quds force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have already entered the country in order to aid in the defense of Baghdad and the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, and that the Revolutionary Guards commander has arrived in Iraq for coordination with the security forces and Shiite militias. Iranian security officials have reported that Tehran is considering sending larger forces to aid Iraq and is reinforcing its deployment near the border, and that it will shell any force that comes within 100 kilometers of the border.

For several reasons, the dispatch of a limited number Revolutionary Guards forces to Iraq is a reasonable option: the jihadi stronghold in Iraq threatens Iran as well; Iran is committed to protect the holy places and assist the Shiite militias there; the al-Quds force is also intended for such tasks, and moving forces from Iran to Iraq is simpler than moving them to Syria; Iran will not face international criticism for helping Iraq, as it does for providing military aid to Syria, and on the contrary, some governments concerned by the jihadist threat might welcome this; and along with the risks there is also an opportunity for Iran: intervention in Iraq will further increase Iranian influence there.

In this context, the possibility has been raised of US-Iranian cooperation on Iraq. Because the US administration is concerned by the threat that has developed in Iraq, it has evinced interest – albeit somewhat skeptically – in cooperation with Iran, though under certain conditions. Secretary of State Kerry has stated that the administration is open to a discussion on cooperating with Iran on Iraq and that it does not rule anything out, as long as it is a constructive move that aids stability in Iraq. Secretary of Defense Hagel also favors examining this option. President Obama noted that Iran can play a constructive role in Iraq – though also a destructive one. Reactions on the matter from Iran have been equivocal, which apparently reflects differences of opinion in the top leadership. President Rouhani has stated that Iran is prepared to consider cooperation with the United States if it takes steps against terrorist organizations in Iraq. However, Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and former minister of defense, commented that US-Iranian cooperation on the Iraqi issue is not realistic, and the Iranian

deputy foreign minister believes that there is no need for direct talks between the United States and Iran on this issue because Iraq can take care of its affairs.

How much can cooperation between the United States and Iran focus on the Iraqi issue, if it develops at all? It is unlikely that there will be real military cooperation between the two countries, other than perhaps intelligence exchanges. If the United States takes military action in Iraq, especially air strikes, it will not need Iran's help, nor would Iran be eager to supply it; moreover, the White House emphasized that the United States is not interested in coordinating military action with Iran. Even sending military assistance to the Iraqi government – intelligence, weapons, logistical aid, advisors, and training – does not require cooperation with Iran.

Rather, the administration will be more interested in political cooperation, primarily, in using Iranian influence among the Shiites to replace Prime Minister al-Maliki, or at least to motivate him to work toward meaningful reconciliation with the Sunnis in order to drive a wedge between the Sunni community and ISIS and weaken the organization. However, there are considerable obstacles to cooperation of this kind. There is deep suspicion between the United States and Iran, which have no tradition of cooperation between them, other than limited coordination prior to the US military action in Afghanistan. In addition, while both are eager to curb and eliminate the jihadi stronghold in Iraq, their respective strategic objectives are different, if not contradictory. Washington seeks to build a democratic government in Iraq that will be linked to the United States, reduce Iranian influence, and reassure the Sunnis in the country. Iran, on the other hand, seeks to expand its influence in Iraq, strengthen the Shiites there, and distance the country from the United States. Greater Iranian involvement in Iraq, even in coordination with the United States, particularly if it involves sending troops and military aid, could increase unrest among the Sunnis, and according to reports from Iraq, it is for this reason that al-Maliki opposes Iranian military intervention. Such cooperation might also worry Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. And ultimately, Iran will want compensation for cooperating with the United States, primarily in the form of an acceptable deal regarding the nuclear issue.

The experience of recent years shows that given the geographical proximity and ties to the Shiites, who represent 60 percent of the population in Iraq, Iran has a considerable advantage over the United States in building influence there. This advantage has become even more pronounced since the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Accordingly, an attempt by the United States to cooperate with Iran on Iraq when the objectives of the two countries are contradictory could prove to be a serious mistake.