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**Shia and Iranian Ascendance:
Sunni and American Perceptions**

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Introduction

Regardless of the political and ideological diversity in disputes that engulf many of the Islamic nations of the Middle East today, the Shia versus Sunni conflict is gradually defining most of them. It appears that the United States administration and its Arab allies do not distinguish between the Shia phenomenon – its rise and potential – and aspects of Iranian foreign policy. To them, the Shia ‘threat’ is part and parcel of a larger problem, a potential Iranian threat.

Notwithstanding many observers arguing that it would be a catastrophic mistake to confuse containing Iran with containing Shia Islam, a US-led policy of containing

Iran is increasingly being fused with the latter. As a consequence, the Middle East is arguably on the verge of witnessing a profound shift in the power balance that could alter/determine the geopolitics of the region for decades to come.

The primary aim of this paper, however, is not to account for the historical/political rise of Shiaism or of Iran, or even debate the existence of the so-called ‘Shia Crescent,’ but to examine instead, the perceptions of Sunni Arab states and the US, who feel threatened by a pan-Shia movement. It is in this respect that this paper seeks to add to existing scholarship.

Sunni Fears

Many analysts feel the West, led by the US, is sowing seeds of division between so-called 'moderate' Arab states and Shia Iran, in a bid to arrest Tehran's growing influence. The weapon of choice has been the age-old 'divide and rule' policy, pitting Sunni Arabs against Persian and Arab Shias. The result? A perceived threat of an ascendant pan-Shia movement aimed at undermining Sunni leadership.

Although the above viewpoint offers an often-heard leitmotif, Sunni Arab fears – whether perceived or real – of an ascendant Shia phenomenon need to be examined from a politico-historical context. Historically, the differences between the Shia and the majority orthodox Sunni community can be divided into three different categories – political, theological and ethnic. Shias have been deprived of real political power since the theological split in the seventh century; power has instead rested with Sunni dynasties, down to present times. It is this dominance which Sunni Arab states perceive today to be in decline, attributable primarily to the strategic challenge emanating from Shia Iran and her proxy allies. Second, Sunni Arabs look upon Shia Iran with a great deal of animosity; this animosity is embedded in the ideology of Arab nationalism. Third, Sunnis have suffered traumatic psychological and political, blows over the past three decades. Damascus, in 1970, was lost to Alawite soldiers – bitter rivals of the Sunnis; Beirut saw the rise of the Shia Hezbollah; and finally, in present-day Baghdad, a Shia-dominated government was put in place following the overthrow of a Sunni dictatorship. Add to this list, the recent loss of the Gaza Strip to Iranian-backed Hamas militants. Amidst such turmoil, Iraq occupies a special place in the Arab political psyche. The Sunni Arab states are worried that the emergence of an Iran-Iraq nexus

(over the long run) could challenge Sunni dominance of Persian Gulf-Levant affairs.

The US overthrow of Saddam Hussein put Iraq's 60 per cent Shia majority in control of the country for the first time in modern history. The 2005 elections in Iraq were touted as an outstanding success and not just for America – the new Iraqi government is dominated by a Shia alliance led by the Islamic Daawa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). From the standpoint of Shia-ruled Iraq as an external threat to Sunni regimes, many Arab officials point out that most Iraqi Shias have consistently seen themselves as Iraqis first and Shia second, and have therefore not been receptive in the past, to manipulation as surrogates for the Iranians agendas.¹ Regardless, Iraqi Shia emancipation is disturbing to many non-Shia Arab countries. The alliance has intimate ties with Shia Iran – both Daawa and SCIRI were previously based in Iran, and SCIRI's leader has endorsed Lebanese Hezbollah that functions as a militant proxy for Iran. A 2005 report by the United States Institute of Peace, a Washington-based think tank, pointed out that Iran's leaders meet with Iraq's most influential Shia personality, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who refuses to meet the Americans.² Moreover, the second largest Shia faction in Iraq is led by the anti-American Shia leader, Moqtada al-Sadr. Although al-Sadr has

¹ Joseph McMillan, "Saudi Arabia and Iraq: Oil, Religion, and an Enduring Rivalry," United States Institute of Peace, January 2006, p. 9, <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr157.pdf>, accessed on 10 July 2007.

² Geoffrey Kemp, "Iran and Iraq: The Shia Connection, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Factor," United States Institute of Peace, November 2006, p. 10, <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr156.pdf>, accessed on 6 July 2007.

himself not run for any political office, his bloc holds thirty seats in Iraq's assembly, controls two ministries, and wields a decisive swing vote. Iraq's current Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki (whom Saudi officials consider an Iranian agent), and his predecessor, Ibrahim Jaafari, both owe their jobs to al-Sadr's support. Al-Sadr, it must be mentioned, reportedly fled to Iran following the US invasion of Iraq.

In light of such developments, Teheran is thought to have a firm grip on the levers of power within Iraq's government. The Sunni Arab leaderships are highly suspicious of Iraq's Shia-led government, believing it to be biased against Sunnis. Thus, the abovementioned optimistic assessment – of Iraqi Shias not functioning as Iran's proxies – is increasingly being superseded by expressions of alarm at the assertion of Iranian influence. Sunni leaders, the traditional holders of power in the Arab world, are warning of a 'Shia Crescent' – joining Hezbollah, Syria and Iran – across the Middle East, and of sectarian conflict spreading with it. Many have expressed the fear of Shia insurrections – perhaps fomented by Iran – in Sunni-ruled states. In December 2006, a meeting of delegates of Iraq's Arab neighbours issued a statement that contained veiled references to the fears of Arab governments that Iranian 'cultural influence' is growing in Iraq and that Iraq might break up or lose its Arab (read Sunni) identity. This fear or perceived threat has been periodically echoed by Sunni leaders; Saudi King Abdullah warned in January 2007, that, "We are aware of the dimensions of spreading Shiism and where it has reached."³ Most recently, on 6 May 2007, Iraq's Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi called on Egypt and other Arab states to reopen their embassies in Baghdad

³ "Rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia now in talks to defuse regional tensions," *International Herald Tribune*, 5 February 2007.

to help preserve what he termed Iraq's "endangered" Arab identity.⁴

Today, Shia leaders – Iraq's al-Sadr and Lebanon's Nasrallah – are household names who enjoy support that crosses national lines, and help unite the faction of Muslims who are its adherents. Following the Israel-Lebanon war last year, Hezbollah (led by Nasrallah) found itself in the role of vanguard of the Palestinian cause. Vali Nasr, professor at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, argues Sunni forces, aware of the increasing popularity of Shia militias, were critical of Hezbollah's actions in the crisis. Nasr has explained that the Sunni countries feared losing their status as 'Arab defenders.'⁵ Similarly, across the sectarian divide, even al Qaeda (a Sunni organization) worries that the Islamic world associates Sunni Arab leaders with the Western camp, while Iran's Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah's Nasrallah are seen as the defenders of Islam. Al Qaeda, therefore, sees the growing Shia influence as a threat. In a May 2007 video broadcast, al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri chastised Iraqi Shias in the government as the "spearhead of the Americans and their claw with which they combat the Mujahideen and torture the Muslims."⁶

The above-discussed Sunni perceptions help explain why Saudi Arabia attempted to broker negotiations between Israel and

⁴ "Iraq calls for Arab states to open Baghdad embassies," *Reuters AlertNet Foundation*, 6 June 2007.

⁵ Robert Grace and Andrew Mandelbaum, "Understanding the Iran-Hezbollah Connection," United States Institute of Peace, September 2006, http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/0922_iran_hezbollah.html, accessed on 12 July 2007.

⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Iraq timetable for withdrawal a victory," Interview, *Northeast Intelligence Network*, <http://www.homelandsecurityus.com/Zawahiri050607>, accessed on 8 July 2007.

Palestine in February 2007.⁷ Iran is one of the top state supporters of Palestinian terror organizations and Saudi Arabia moves toward the resolution of the Palestine crisis will deny Iran leverage in the region, thereby leading to its political marginalization.⁸ From a US policy perspective, once Iran's increasing influence is arrested it will be forced to ease its anti-Israeli/American rhetoric.

Finally, Iran's military capability is a cause of immense concern. At one stage in the 1980s, relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia had deteriorated to such an extent that there was talk of imminent war. According to Nasr, the destruction of the Iraqi army – the only army in his opinion capable of containing Iran – by America, has left Iran a regional heavyweight with a military strength currently at about 450,000 troops.⁹ In addition, Sunni Arab states share the West's fear of a nuclear-armed Iran. Although many analysts, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials, agree that Iran is three to eight years away from possessing its first nuclear warhead, owning the bomb would make Iran the sole nuclear-capable Muslim country in the Middle East. Naturally, this would tip the scale of regional balance in its favour, giving Iran further leverage

⁷ Saudi Arabia has also taken a new role in mediating in the Palestinian power struggle between Fatah and Hamas hosting a summit between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah and Hamas leader Khaled Meshal in February 2007. Observers say one of Saudi Arabia's main concerns – and that of the US – is that Hamas enjoys the patronage of Iran.

⁸ Saudi Arabia, along with Jordan and Egypt, are worried Iranian animosity towards Israel will undermine the consensus they have developed on Arab policy (of co-existence an accommodation) towards Israel.

⁹ Vali Nasr, "Sunni vs. Shia: Religious Rivalry in Iraq and Beyond," Council on Foreign Relations, 3 November 2005, http://www.cfr.org/publication/9164/sunni_vs_shia.html, accessed on 12 July 2007.

American Suspicions and Manoeuvres

Suspicion of Iranian intentions and the possible rise of Shia dominance in the Middle East has been a source of constant threat not only to Sunni Arab nations, but to the US as well.¹⁰ US diplomatic relations with Iran have effectively been frozen since the Islamic Revolution; the perception of Iran as a destabilizing force was congealed in the US imagination and has endured. During the 1980s, Shia Islamist groups such as the Hezbollah were the main terrorist threat to the US.¹¹ Hence, historically, both the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations took a serious view of the threat from Iran and Iran-inspired Shia extremism.

Following the invasion of Iraq, the threat of Iran-inspired Shia extremism returned to haunt the US. Since 2003, Washington has accused Iran of interfering in Iraq and fomenting violence there through support for Shia militias; the Pentagon accuses Tehran of providing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) and training of Shia militants to fight against US forces. Similarly in Afghanistan, the Bush (and Blair)

administrations have claimed the Iranian government is following a deliberate strategy of aiding the Taliban campaign, an allegation that runs counter to Iran's decade-long anti-Taliban policy.

Enter the controversy over Iran's nuclear intentions. In brief, Iran claims it is trying to establish a nuclear fuel cycle to support a peaceful, civilian energy programme, but this same fuel cycle could also be applicable to a nuclear weapons development programme. Officially, Tehran states it does not intend to build weapons of mass destruction. Iran's strategic concerns, however, may oblige it to do precisely that. The prospect of being surrounded by hostile countries is a constant source of anxiety and tension for the Iranian regime,¹² and Tehran is cognizant that its best insurance/deterrent against such a threat is achieving nuclear weapons capability.

¹⁰ US, Iraqi, and international officials have commented on the large number of issues between the US and Iran, including the latter's nuclear program, its support for terrorism, and its influence in Lebanon, Iraq and the wider region. James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, "The Iraq Study Group Report," United States Institute of Peace, 6 December 2006, p. 25.

¹¹ By contrast, during the same period, the US barely registered/recognized Sunni Islamist groups as threats to its national security. In fact, it actively financed Sunni Islamist parties, including one led by the infamous Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Not until after 9/11 were Sunni radical groups viewed as the main US adversary. "A Shia Crescent: What Fallout for the US?" Forty-first in the Capitol Hill Conference Series on US Middle East Policy, *Middle East Policy Council*, Washington D.C., 14 October 2005.

¹² To the east, Afghanistan's Taliban has been replaced by a pro-Western government which supports a large US troop presence. Pakistan, another immediate neighbour, possesses nuclear weapons and is a major US ally in the War on Terror. Along the Persian Gulf littoral, the US has military relations with most Arab states – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. To the north, Turkey also serves as a deterrent to Iran; Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and a US ally. And finally to the west, there is Iraq with its 180,000-strong US troop presence. In addition, Iran does not want to see *new* threats emerge from the Iraq crisis. These threats could manifest in a number of ways – the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq which could encourage Iranian Kurds to embark on a secessionist campaign; Tehran is also unnerved by the prospect of a pro-US government in Baghdad offering permanent basing rights to US forces.

The US administration, on the other hand, claims that the primary purpose of Iran's nuclear programme is developing nuclear weapons:

The United States does not agree, [given] the past history of the Iranian regime, its support for terrorist organizations, and the covert nature of the Iranian nuclear program – whose uranium enrichment facilities were revealed only after a dissident group disclosed their location to the IAEA – Iran is not developing its fuel cycle for peaceful purposes and thus does not have a right to develop it under the NPT.¹³

The US therefore considers a nuclear-armed Iran its “greatest strategic threat,” and argues it creates the need for other countries in the region to develop nuclear capability, thus endangering international peace and security.¹⁴

The real significance of an emerging Shia crescent is that Iran (along with her cohorts/proxies) will challenge the strategic dominance of the US. Increasingly, not only does Tehran seek an acknowledgement of its status and interests, but recognition of its influence and power. Seymour Hersh thus claims President Bush, along with his British and Israeli allies, decided early in 2007 to work together with so-called ‘moderate’ Sunni governments – Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan – in an effort to counter Iran.¹⁵ Pirouz Mojtahedzadeh, from Tehran's Tarbiat Modares University, believes the Americans are trying to “engineer a scenario,” by way of using the Shia-Sunni divide, so as to convince Iran's Sunni

neighbours of the benefits of military intervention.¹⁶

The US administration's policy for containing Shia Iran, however, seems to complicate (and possibly undermine) both its strategy for winning the so-called “war on terror,” as well as for constructing a stable Iraqi state. This paper will now briefly analyze US policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Iraq

US foreign policy regarding Iraq appears beset with paradox. The numerical domination of the Shia populace has forced the US administration to recognize their political aspirations while marginalizing Sunni wishes. However, America fears the Shia political community, seemingly controlled by Iran, will come to monopolize post-Saddam Iraq; that is, Shia parties will structure Iraq according to their (Iran-inspired) ideology and not to US specifications. Nevertheless, it is the Shia community of Iraq, including a majority Shia government, that the US considers its strongest indigenous ally. The upshot – a US foreign policy which fears Shia domination and yet relies heavily on their support.

This paradox is compounded by allegations of Iranian Revolutionary Guard operatives training and arming insurgents in Iraq. As mentioned earlier, US officials have long complained that Iran is supplying Shia militants with lethal explosives and other materiel used to kill American soldiers. Iran's disappointing track-record – Tehran has trained/supported militant groups in Lebanon, Palestine and even Bosnia – notwithstanding, credible evidence incriminating the Iranian leadership remains scanty. American officials too tend to confuse the issue by blaming elements

¹³ Kemp, n. 2, p. 3.

¹⁴ R Nicholas Burns and Robert Joseph, “Briefing on the Iran Nuclear Issue,” U.S. Department of State, 21 April 2006, <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2006/64945.htm>, accessed on 10 July 2007.

¹⁵ Seymour Hersh, “The Redirection: Is the Administration's New Policy Benefiting Our Enemies in the War on Terrorism?” *The New Yorker*, 25 February 2007.

¹⁶ Pirouz Mojtahedzadeh, “Iran-Saudi strengthen ties despite US plot to sow division,” Interview with SaudiDebate.com, *SaudiDebate.com*, 25 August 2006, http://www.saudidebate.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=259&Itemid=123, accessed on 14 July 2007.

within the Revolutionary Guard Corps (presumably operating without the knowledge of Tehran), instead of holding President Ahmadinejad directly responsible.¹⁷

Afghanistan

With respect to the crisis in Afghanistan, the backing for US allegations of Iranian involvement should be viewed as part of the wider process of garnering domestic US opinion as well as Arab support for a hard line approach to Iran. The question that inevitably arises at this juncture is – what possible gains does Tehran envisage by playing both sides? Many analysts argue that Iran is content to see a low-level insurgency keep NATO and US forces preoccupied. Keeping US and NATO forces engaged in a war of attrition against Taliban insurgents eases off American pressure on the Iranian regime and on its perceived anti-Western (including nuclear) policies.

However, it is not in Shia Iran's long-term security interest to see Sunni organizations like al Qaeda, or the Taliban, gain strategic ground in the on-going war. The reasons are plenty in number. First, when the Soviet-backed Afghan regime in Kabul was being toppled, Iran had predicted that a strong Sunni fundamentalist regime in Kabul would come into conflict with Shia Iran. Sure enough, the Sunni Taliban organization was vehemently anti-Iran; seven Iranian diplomats serving in Mazar-e-Sharif were killed by the Taliban in August 1998. The ouster of the Taliban by Coalition forces was therefore a direct gain for Iran. No longer does a hostile Sunni regime flank Iran's eastern border and today, Iran feels far more secure with a government in Kabul that is not hostile. Consequently, the continued security and stability of Afghanistan is of concern to Tehran.

¹⁷ Bruce Riedel, "Questioning Iran's Role in Iraq Insurgency," Interview with NPR, *Morning Edition*, The Brookings Institution, 13 February 2007, <http://www.brookings.edu/views/interviews/riedel/20070213.htm>, accessed on 15 July 2007.

Second, Iran lent NATO forces tacit support for the war in Afghanistan. Towards this Tehran has conducted reconstruction projects of various types and dimensions in Afghanistan, pouring in vast amounts of aid money. Iranian Foreign Ministry officials place the total amount of aid to Afghanistan since 2001 at approximately US\$600 million. These projects have led to strengthened inter-state relations. Deliberately undermining this strategic partnership (by supporting the anti-Iranian Taliban), therefore, does not make sense. Third, inter-state trade is a major component of the emerging strategic cooperation between Tehran and Kabul. Afghan cities offer an outlet for many Iranian goods, the sale of which has helped provinces such as Herat generate handsome revenues. Currently, Afghanistan receives key imports such as electronic equipment, cars and spare parts, food, clothing and other essentials from Iran. Fourth, Shias comprise 15 per cent of the Afghan populace and Iran enjoys close contacts with the community. It needs be mentioned that back in the late 1990s, in Afghanistan, there was a slaughter of Shias by the Taliban. If anything, Iran would like to see Shias receive/enjoy fair dispensation in all aspects of Afghan life, be it political, religious or economic. By supporting the Taliban insurgency, Iran would not only be jeopardizing the aspirations (and security) of the Shia community, but also risk losing their goodwill.

Given the above arguments, it is difficult to believe Tehran is playing a hedging game, simultaneously cooperating with both the Karzai administration and Taliban elements – waiting to see who comes out on top. The US administration's failure to understand Iranian geopolitical and strategic concerns has thus led to a quagmire of instability in the region.

Is there a Shia Crescent? The Iranian Perspective

When probed about the existence of a Shia Crescent, Iranian diplomats are quick to indicate that they believe in “one Islam,” and as such have no interest in encouraging or promoting a pan-Shia sectarian movement. These diplomats also argue Iran’s geopolitical concerns – their proximity to Sunni Arab states – necessitate the maintenance of good relations with neighbours. Sectarian adventurism, in their view, would be detrimental to friendly and mutually beneficial inter-state relations.¹⁸ Moreover, Iran’s population is only slightly more than 50 per cent Persian; it has a large Azeri minority (24 per cent of the population) as well as Sunni Kurdish and Arab minorities. Worst-case scenarios in Iraq could thus inflame sectarian tensions within Iran as well, with serious consequences for Iranian national security interests.¹⁹

Ray Takeyh argues Tehran has refrained from denouncing (and plotting the overthrow of) the Sunni-dominated, pro-Western regimes in the Gulf. According to him, Tehran is more concerned with the Arab states’ external relations with the US (vis-à-vis Iran) than with the internal religious/ethnic composition of these countries.²⁰ Taking the cue from Takeyh, this author posits the overthrow of the Taliban and Saddam regimes have finally allowed post-Revolutionary Iran to seek out opportunities for regional security long denied to it. It would be imprudent to assume Arab countries (or the US) are unaware of Iranian concerns. Tehran supports Iraqi-Shia parties/leaders such as

SCIRI and Moqtada al-Sadr, not because it hopes to export the Iranian Revolution, or because it desires an anti-American/Arab government in place, but because Iran hopes to prevent the rise of a Sunni-dominated, Saddam emulating, Baathist regime. Iranian support for armed Shia militias in Iraq should therefore be viewed and analyzed against this milieu.

Concomitantly, Iran *does* entertain aspirations for regional hegemony. But, as former Indian diplomat M K Bhadrakumar argues, Iran does *not* view the Shia versus Sunni divide (vis-à-vis a resurgent Shia movement) as a means to achieve this objective as it does not serve Iran’s national interests to see a consolidation of an anti-Iran, anti-Shia wall around it. Instead, Iran aims to consolidate its sphere of influence by best exploiting its history, culture, strategic location, natural resources, human capital, and so on.²¹

Iranians therefore dismiss claims and theories of an ascendant pan-Shia movement, let alone Tehran’s alleged desire to lead, as myths. Despite the rhetoric that emanates from anti-Iran/Shia elements in Sunni Arab regimes, Iranian government officials cite improved bilateral relations with countries like Saudi Arabia as proof that refutes a fallacious argument.

¹⁸ Interview with Ainollah Soury, Counsellor, Embassy of the I.R. of Iran, New Delhi, India, 20 June 2007.

¹⁹ Baker and Hamilton, n. 10, p. 37.

²⁰ Ray Takeyh, “Time for Détente With Iran,” in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 2, March/April 2007, pp. 22-23.

²¹ Quoted in “Iran-India Energy Relations: Strategic Dimensions,” Article No. 2221, Report of the IPCS Seminar held on 27 February 2007, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, <http://ipcs.org/newKashmirLevel2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=2236&subCatID=null&mod=null>, accessed on 15 July 2007.

Prospects for Accommodation

Arab considerations

Presently, sectarian conflict is one of the principal challenges to stability in the Middle East. There are two apposite (albeit converse) strategic considerations that may compel Sunni Arab states to (re)consider the prospect of accommodation with Shia Iran.

First, if Sunni politico-economic aspirations are not accommodated within an Iraqi state, it will have severe ramifications far beyond Iraq's borders. Sunni politics, as a result, may become radicalized in neighbouring countries like Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In response, marginalized Shia communities could erupt, provoking a series of civil wars. Such a scenario will lead to the Middle East becoming polarized along religious (sectarian) lines. Arab states are aware of such a possibility and are worried the conflict in Iraq, if not managed, will engulf them as well. Saudi Arabia, for instance, fears its 15 per cent Shia minority, who incidentally populate the oil-rich areas, will become increasingly rebellious. Consequently, the Saudi leadership has periodically considered bolstering Iraq's Sunni armed groups fighting Shia militias. The Saudi government has even warned senior US officials such as Dick Cheney that Saudi Arabia may provide backing (financial or other) to Iraqi Sunnis in any eventual war against Iraq's Iranian-backed Shia militias.²² The Saudis have, however, assured the international community that they will not assist Sunnis in Iraq but such restraint, may well be an essential quid pro quo for similar forbearance on the part of Iran.²³

Second, widespread anti-Americanism is making it increasingly difficult for many Arab governments to cooperate with the US, or allow a Western military presence on

their soil. The Arab states are thus mindful – with the passage of time they may no longer be able to rely on America for security. Such a strategic consideration may force Sunni Arab countries, especially those which share contiguous borders with Shia Iran, to opt for accommodation rather than confrontation.²⁴

Iranian Considerations

With regard to Iran-Arab relations, Iranian diplomats emphasize sectarian violence in Iraq will *not* spread into neighbouring countries because the concerned nations, Shia or Sunni, understand the need for containing the conflict. However, despite limited dialogue between Arab states (such as Saudi Arabia) and Iran on Iraq, whether talks actually generate a measure of stability remains to be seen.

Where Iran-US relations are concerned, despite the differences between the two nations, both “share an interest in avoiding the horrific consequences that would flow from a chaotic Iraq, particularly a humanitarian catastrophe and regional destabilization.”²⁵ Ali Larijani, head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, speaking in a recent interview with the American magazine, *Newsweek*, said the Islamic republic was open to more negotiations with the US over restoring stability in Iraq. Commenting on the usefulness (and rewards) of diplomatic talks and possible cooperation between Iran and the US, Larijani said, “We are serious in this matter, and we do find it quite useful for the security of the region.”²⁶ Envoys from

²⁴ Takeyh, n. 20, p. 20.

²⁵ Baker and Hamilton, n. 10, p. 32.

²⁶ Ali Larijani, “We Are Not Pursuing Adventurism,” Interview with *Newsweek*, 21 June 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19355051/site/newsweek/>, accessed on 18 July 2007; “Iran says has no preconditions for US talks,” *Reuters*

²² Helene Cooper, “U.S. Officials Voice Frustrations With Saudis, Citing Role in Iraq,” *New York Times*, 27 July 2007.

²³ Baker and Hamilton, n. 10, p. 35.

Tehran met their US counterparts in Baghdad on 25 July for talks concerning Iraq's worsening security situation following a first round of talks held in May 2007.

American Considerations

Unlike Ali Larijani who, in his interview, emphasized Tehran's reluctance to set preconditions for future diplomatic talks (vis-à-vis the Iraq crisis; escalating sectarian strife), the US administration has repeatedly called on Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment activities as a precondition for engaging in wide-ranging bilateral talks. Despite such US preconditions, envoys from Tehran have met with their US counterparts as mentioned above and it was encouraging to note that negotiations led to both sides agreeing to set up a trilateral security sub-committee to help improve security and stability in Iraq.

Despite possessing vast fuel reserves, Iran lacks refining capacity and is thus forced to import 40 per cent of its petroleum. And as part of its hard-line strategy to pressure Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment activities, the US administration might make use of Iran's dependence on oil imports as political leverage. Additional Security Council-approved sanctions may include provisions which prohibit oil-exporting countries from supplying refined fuel to Iran. Such a measure will definitely lead to a stifling of the Iranian economy and cause massive inflation. In addition, the US is applying financial pressure, threatening international energy companies that do business (or are planning to) with Iran with extensive fines and other penalties if they develop Iran's gas and oil reserves.²⁷

AlertNet, 22 June 2007, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/BLA240611.htm>, accessed on 18 July 2007.

²⁷ Mark Gregory, "US warns firms trading with Iran," *BBC News*, 13 June 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6747193.stm, accessed on 13 July 2007.

Conclusion

Sunni Arab states are wary of the long-term spillover effects of an ascendant Shia movement, and especially of Iran's ability to exploit it for strategic gains. While opinion regarding Iran's destabilizing devices is largely unanimous throughout the region, Sunni leaders are divided over how best to tackle the threat. As already mentioned, accommodation with Iran is in the region's interest. However, a malevolent Iran cannot, and should not, be permitted to endanger future prospects (no matter how imperfect) of peace between states and communities.

The extent to which Iran uses its influence to negatively affect events in Iraq (and elsewhere in the region), or continues to flout IAEA guidelines and Security Council ultimatums, will likely be determined in large part by the American policy of containment. The means to neutralizing the Iranian threat, bloodlessly, may lie in a policy of 'engagement.' By first understanding Iranian concerns, the US and its Arab allies can proceed to encourage Iran to mitigate its anti-Western policies. Towards this end, diplomatic incentives should not be ruled out as they have constructive, reinforcing solutions to offer. Small modifications to hard-line US policies would demonstrate to the Iranian government the benefits of an improved relationship. Many observers and policymakers, however, are skeptical of diplomacy. They believe negotiations buy Iran time; and a possible settlement (which would include incentives to Iran) could provide resources to finance its nuclear programme. In their view, an appeasing gambit of engagement gives Iran the license to pursue its hostile and militant goals with impunity. Regardless of the efficacy of diplomacy, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski opines, unless the US strives for a peaceful resolution, "...the final destination on this downhill

track is likely to be a head-on conflict with Iran."²⁸

²⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Securing America's Interests in Iraq: The Remaining Options, Iraq in the Strategic Context," Testimony before the *Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate*, 1 February 2007, <http://www.senate.gov/~foreign/hearings/2007/hr070201a.html>, accessed on 20 June 2007.

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