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EVALUATION OF IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN IRAQ

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Introduction

The first war in the twenty-first century started by the US (and Britain) invasion against Iraq in March 2003 and their rapid victory marked a new record of the history of inter-state wars. Iraq's occupation by the US and coalition forces could have serious regional and international consequences especially for the neighboring countries. In order to become able to predict the future of the Middle East region after the occupation of Iraq, one has to study these consequences on one hand, and explain the reaction of Iraq's neighbors on the other. In this article, we seek to evaluate Iran's policy towards Iraq since the US attack in 2003 till now. First, we will point to the regional consequences of the US attack on Iraq, emphasizing major implications for Iran. Second, we will evaluate Iran's policy towards Iraq's occupation. Last but not least, the outlook of Iran's foreign policy during president Ahmadi-Nejad's government will be examined.

1. Regional Consequences of the US Invasion of Iraq

The first war in the twenty-first century happened by the US-Britain invasion of Iraq in 2003. US obstinate behavior in its attack against Iraq, despite the world-wide opposition on one hand, and the lack of the UN Security Council's approval on the other, shows a fundamental fact, rooting in the US new strategic thought in the Middle East. In this section, we seek to recognize this new prevailing thought in the US, in order to have a better understanding of the causes of invasion to Iraq and its regional consequences, particularly Iran's new security threat perception.

1.1 The US new strategic thought

The US new strategic thought which is called the Bush Doctrine, was declared in the September, 2002 US National Security Report. This doctrine contains three main features,

¹ *Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI.* The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.



that is, supremacy, over-ambition and prevention². The concept “supremacy” shows the belief inside the United States that this country has an unrivaled military power after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The US believes that it is the only world superpower and this intoxication of power can have many negative consequences for international peace and security. The concept “over-ambition” concerns the US ambition for expanding American values globally and finally the concept “prevention” means that the US will attack emerging threats before they form.

According to the Bush Doctrine, America seeks to establish moderate and modern states in the Third World, supports the liberal-democratic governments representing the people, recognizes the rogue states as a threat to the world peace and security, and attacks any emerging threat before they form (a preventive attack).

Despite the global opposition and also the disapproval of the UN Security Council, the invasion to Iraq is recognizable only through the framework of this new thought. The US is insistently willing to reach its strategic goals using force. According to this new thought, the strategy of containment which was the US policy during the Clinton’s administration, especially to contain both Iraq and Iran, had no more efficiency. Although the containment policy has many supporters yet, the UN failure to compel Iraq to destroy the weapons of mass destruction is an evidence of the failure of this policy³. Therefore, according to this new thought, despite many risks war may have and its being unfavorable, giving a chance to states (the so-called rough states) trying to acquire the weapons of mass destruction, could have much more destructive effects than the war itself. As quoted by an American journalist, war is perilous in a short term, but peace can be destructive in a long term⁴. This is an end to the doctrine of containment and a start for the doctrine of preventive war.

1.2. Regional consequences of the US occupation of Iraq

The first twentieth century war can be assumed to herald the formation of the American empire⁵. There are several evidences showing that the US is after establishing its domination in the international arena. Change in the structure of the international system, that is emergence of a structure which looks like a unipolar one, would lead to changes at the level of regional systems especially in the Middle East region. This change could have outstanding security consequences for the regional states.

Though it is still too soon to talk about such changes because of American invasion of Iraq, some of them can be speculated. First, it can be said that the invasion to Iraq, as an Arab state, made the most important contemporary challenge against the Arab world. This challenge not only exposed the Arab states to insecurity, but made the Arab society inflamed and disturbed. In other words, although there was only one Arab state attacked in this war, it can be said that it was the Arab nationalism and the pan-Arabism which received the most damage. It seemed unbearable for Arabs to see that a foreign state attacks an Arab district, changes its regime, occupies its territory and tries to establish a political regime in favor of its own interests. This can not only lead to a new disappointment of Arabs and strengthening of their previous suspicion of the US policy in the Middle East which has always been after keeping security of Israel and controlling the oil sources, can further destabilize the Arab

² See for example Kirshner, Jonathan (2003): *Prevent Defense: Why the Bush Doctrine Will Hurt US Interests*, Peace Studies Program, Cornell University.

³ Lieber, Robert (2003): *The Folly of Containment*, Commentary, New York.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See for instance, Boot, Max: “The Case for American Empire”, *Weekly Standard*, 7 (2), 15 October 2001 and Golub, P.: “Westward the Course of Empire”, *Le Monde Diplomatique* (September 2002=).



states. The invasion of Iraq as an Arab state and the silence of the majority of Arab leaders would intensify internal pressures on them to confront the US and its regional agent, Israel. These pressures can lead to taking some positions by the Arab leaders which would put their relations with the US in jeopardy.

Second, it can be said that the end of the war and the US victory in Iraq caused the Israeli position in the Middle East region be strengthened; therefore, the balance between Israel on one hand, and the Arab countries on the other hand, altered strongly in favor of the former. This can weaken the opposition and resistance to Israel by the Arab states especially Syria and Lebanon and thus pave the way for imposing an Israeli-favored peace. Israel was the only state that not only didn't oppose the US-British attack on Iraq, but encouraged it, too. Therefore, the US invasion of Iraq can be named as the Israeli war. Because it has given this country the most advantages, through diverting the world attention from the Intifadah and giving the Israeli regime an opportunity to suppress Palestinians, and eliminating one of the most important regional threats against Israel as well⁶.

Third, the occupation of Iraq may lead to some changes in the US relations with the Arab countries especially Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The Bush administration's claim that the Syrian government has allowed its citizens to enter Iraq in order to support Saddam during the war or their allegations that Syrian authorities had accepted some Iraqi officials into Syria, can be mentioned in this regard. On the other hand, although Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been the main US allies in the Middle East, the Bush policy of establishing a democratic regime in Iraq can be a serious threat to their authoritarian style of rule. The attack to Iraq has also excited the people of the Arab countries which can increase the pressure on their governments and cause internal instability.

Fourth, if the US mission in Iraq fails or if the US administration cannot fulfill its promises made in the Roadmap to Peace in the Middle East, terrorism especially against the US interests in the region, will be intensified. At the present, based on the opinion polls, the public opinion in the Middle East has a strong anti-American flavor and the continuation of the US presence in Iraq and the possibility of its failure, can aggravate anti-American feelings in the region.

Fifth, because of American presence in Iraq, the Middle East countries' desire to enter an arm race and use force to solve the regional disputes will increase and it will add to the Middle East region instability, in turn. On one hand those Middle Eastern countries which feel threatened by the U.S., would have no choice but to increase their efforts to acquire non-conventional especially nuclear weapons. On the other hand, countries allied with the United States in the region would, in tandem with the US policy of preventive attack, take the advantage of this opportunity to solve the regional disputes by resorting to force which may in turn escalate the regional instability.

Finally, the US invasion of Iraq can cause instability in the world oil market. Although there is no possibility of the Arab countries using oil as a weapon against the US in particular and the West in general, the world oil market can face strong fluctuations due to the internal instability of the oil producing countries. The US presence in Iraq, which possesses 11 percent of the world oil reserves, may also give it an effective leverage on the price and the security of the oil which in turn may weaken the power of the OPEC.

⁶ Barthe, Benjamin: "Palestine: The World Looks Away", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 16 April 2003.



1.3. Iran's security challenges after the regime change in Iraq

The American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq eliminated Iran's two major security threats. However, the American presence in these two countries posed a new threat to Iran's security. Iran was encircled by the US forces in the region. This could intensify the pressure on Iran and strengthen its threat perception. However, scant attention was given to the fact that Iran was the most concerned country in the region when Iraq was invaded⁷.

It seems that Iran has two main concerns regarding the US-British presence in Iraq. One is the issue of Iraqi Shiites and their destiny and role in Iraq's future government and the other is the probability of US attacking Iran. It might be speculated that the Bush administration is after moving the Shiite's centre of power from the city of Qum to Najaf and thus weakening Iran's prominent position among the Shiites. Furthermore, the US can offer an alternative Shia government beside Iran by establishing a secular, democratic Iraqi government in which Shia plays a major role. Whether the US can compromise with the Iraqi Shiia, the Islamic Republic of Iran will face a serious ideological threat. If the US establishes a Shiite government in Iraq supported by the majority of Iraqi people, this government could be introduced as an alternative to the Iranian government. And if Iraq's Shiites don't come to an agreement with the US and a resistance against the American dominance is formed, Iran's security will still be exposed to major threats, because it will be accused repeatedly of supporting the Iraqi Shiites' resistance.

This analysis is based on the idea that the US can establish stability in post-Saddam Iraq. Clearly, in case of the US failure in establishing a central government in Iraq and stabilizing this country, Iran will face a double situation. The US failure in the post-Saddam Iraq can be a pleasant issue for Iran on one hand, but at the same time, an instable Iraq could cause numerous challenges to Iran's security.

2. Iran's Policy Towards Iraq During and After the American Invasion

During the US attack on Iraq on March, 2003, Iran tried to keep itself away from the dispute by declaring its policy of neutrality. Although the fall of Saddam regime, as Iran's most significant security threat, was very pleasing for Iranian leaders, the US victory and its domination over Iraq couldn't bring any good news for the country, because first, the US control over Iraq could complete the ring of Iran's siege, and second, any instability in the post-Saddam Iraq could have negative security implications for Iran, such as the possible flood of war refugees. Thus, the Iranian authorities refused to take sides with either the US and coalition forces or the Iraqi regime. In this section we will first discuss about the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy orientations in the Middle East. Then we seek to evaluate Iran's policy towards Iraq during and after the American invasion.

2.1. Iran's foreign policy orientations in the Middle East (1979-2005)

Foreign policy is, by one definition, "the strategies used by governments to guide their actions in the international arena"⁸. According to this definition, three issues of the strategies (containing techniques or tools), goals (short/long term), and the international environment (international system) should be observed in studying the foreign policy of a country.

⁷ Graham, Hugh: "Iran's Great Game", *The Walrus Magazine*, 4 November 2004.

⁸ Goldstein, Joshua (1999): *International Relations*, New York, Longman, p. 147.



Concerning strategy, international relations' scholars study the foreign policy tools on one hand, and its orientations on the other. Regarding the orientations of the foreign policy, they name three orientations, that is, isolationist, nonalignment and coalition-making.

Concerning goals, not only each country's short-term goals (objectives), but its mid- and long-term goals (goals) are being examined, too. While a country's objectives and goals are being studied under the rubric of national interest, to evaluate its foreign policy we have to see if its national interest is achieved.

Concerning the international environment, international system and its characteristics which has direct links with each country's fulfillment of its foreign policy and its success or failure, is examined. Accordingly, the international system has a determining effect in the formation of countries' foreign policies which should be taken into considerations.

Based on the following two axes, confrontational/accommodating and ideal-centered/constraint-centered, Iran's foreign policy orientations (particularly in the Middle East) can be categorized into four types that is, confrontational/ideal-centered, confrontational/constraint-centered, accommodating/ideal-centered and accommodating/constraint-centered⁹.

	Confrontational	Accommodating
Ideal-centered	1979- 1981	1989- 1997
Constraint-centered	1981- 1989	1997- 2005

During the first period which starts from the Islamic Republic of Iran's establishment in 1979 to the beginning of the Iraqi invasion of Iran (1981), it can be said that Iran's foreign policy orientation was confrontational/ideal-centered. In this period, the main principles of Iran's foreign policy that is exporting the revolution, opposing the existence of Israel and supporting the Palestinian issue, caused fears and hopes in the Middle East region. The majority of the Middle Eastern countries, particularly the Arabs, felt threatened by Iran's Islamic revolution and consequently tried to confront it and isolate Iran.

During the second period (1981-1989), Iran's foreign policy orientation was confrontational/constraint-centered. In our view, the most significant consequence of the Iraqi invasion was that the Iranian authorities paid more attention to the facts of the international environment. The imposed war showed that Iran, as a state in the international system, was facing numerous constraints. These constraints caused the Iranian officials to make the government's survival their top priority. Although the Islamic Revolution didn't have expansionist goals, the role-perception of the Iranian state as a salvation, anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial state, caused the existing states in the Middle East region that were mostly undemocratic, authoritarian, and the major allies of the great powers, feel strongly threatened. The Iraqi attack on Iran, despite being against the international law including the UN charter, was explicitly and implicitly supported by almost all countries particularly the United States and the Soviet Union. In fact the imposed war made Iran's foreign policy more constraint-centered though its confrontational stance endured.

During the third period from the end of the imposed war until 1997, Iran's foreign policy orientation became accommodating/ideal-centered. In this era, Iran had to leave aside its previous confrontational policy because of the necessity of rebuilding the ruins remained from

⁹ Haji-Yousefi, Amir M.(2005): *Iran and the Middle East*, Tehran, Goftoman, pp. 9-13.



the war, but still for many reasons, followed its ideal-centered policy. Perhaps the most important reason for this, related to the international environment rather than the internal factors. In other words, despite the efforts of president Hashemi's administration to accommodate/adapt to the requirements of international environment in order to facilitate reconstruction of Iran's ravaged economy, for Iran to restore the confidence of the international community, especially Iran's neighbors, seemed to be a lengthy process. Therefore, the Middle East countries still viewed the Islamic Republic of Iran as a revolutionary country that is after exporting the revolution.

In the fourth period during Khatami's presidency, it can be said that Iran's foreign policy orientation was accommodating/ constraint-centered. Iran not only tried to expand its international ties through detent and confidence-building policy, especially in the Middle East region, but recognized that is facing many pressures and limitations in the existing international system. This caused Iran's foreign policy to emphasize cooperation and coalition-making. President Khatami's coming to power in 1997 and his policy of reforms in Iran's relations with other countries in addition to domestic affairs, encountered international adherence and as a result, Iran's relations with the Middle East countries improved remarkably.

2.2. Iran's neutral policy towards American invasion of Iraq

Since 1979, Iran has proved to be acting against the requirements of the by-polar international system by declaring its "neither East nor West" doctrine. In other words, despite the fact that the by-polar system required the states to adhere to either the West or the East, the Iranian state adopted an assertive policy based on admonition of both superpowers¹⁰. However, the collapse of the by-polar system brought about major change in Iran's foreign policy orientation, accepting the requirements of the international system. First, declaring the policy of "both north and south", Iran paid notable attention to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union (north of Iran) on the one hand and the Persian Gulf countries (south of Iran) on the other. The main aim of this policy was expanding Iran's relations with its northern and southern neighbors. Secondly, by adopting a neutral stance in the face of US attack to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait in 1991, Iran sought to demonstrate that had no commitment to either side of the conflict who were Iran's enemies. Iran's policy of neutrality compared to its former policy of "neither East-nor West", was defensive in nature and rose from a partial understanding of the international environment and concern about the regional changes. Iran's policy of "both north and south" on the one hand and the policy of neutrality on the other hand, were adopted out of Iran's understanding of the requirements of the international system. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the US attack on Iraq in 1991 provided a golden opportunity for Iran to achieve some of its interests.

During the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Iran once again resorted to policy of neutrality. It seems that the main reason for adopting this policy was to exploit the opportunity that Taliban's overthrow provided for Iran. The American presence in Afghanistan eliminated one of Iran's most significant security threats in the region. Furthermore, stabilizing Afghanistan could remove, to some extent, some of the most important problems Iran has been facing in Afghanistan during the last two decades such as the flood of Afghan refugees to Iran and the issue of drug trafficking. It can be said again that Iran took the policy of neutrality in an absolutely independent way and in accordance to its national interest.

¹⁰ Haji-Yousefi, Amir M.: "Waltz Theory of International Politics and Iran's Foreign Policy" (in Persian), *The Journal of Foreign Policy*, Institute of Political and International Studies, Tehran, Iran (Winter 2003).



But Iran's policy of neutrality in 2003 during the US attack on Iraq rose from Iran's serious concern for, and fear of, the possibility of being the next target. Thus, it can be said that the difference between Iran's policy towards the US attack on Iraq on the one hand and its policy towards the American invasion of Afghanistan on the other was that in the former the Iranian policy-makers took such policy to prevent the US from attacking Iran, while in the latter they took the cooperative policy to achieve some advantages in Afghanistan. In other words, the Iranian authorities did not perceive to be the next target when the Taliban was ousted in 2001 while the overthrow of Saddam in 2003 brought with it an existential threat perception in Iran. In fact, attacking Iraq, a member of the "axis of evil", caused serious concern among the Iranian leaders that the Bush neoconservative administration may have a real intention of a military attack on Iran.

Perhaps the most important reason for substantiating our argument that Iran's neutral policy towards the American invasion of Iraq was adopted because of its serious concern about a consequent attack of the US on this country is that despite Iran's cooperative stance in Afghanistan it was not reciprocated. Allegations against Iran continued and Iran was included in the axis of evil. Accordingly, Iran instead of taking a neutral posture was supposed to oppose the American invasion of Iraq. But such thing didn't happen since Iran was afraid of being seriously attacked militarily by the US after its control over Iraq.

2.3. Outcomes of Iran's neutral policy

Saddam's fall led to the elimination of Iran's most important security threat in the region. This paved the way for Iran's supremacy in the Persian Gulf and could alter the regional balance in its favour. The US officials know well that Iran and the United States have some common interests in the Persian Gulf such as stability of this region. They know further that the Persian Gulf regional security system cannot be established without Iran being engaged. In my view, even stability in post-Saddam Iraq is not possible without Iran's cooperation. Therefore, Iran by adopting a neutral policy towards American invasion of Iraq could not only strengthen its international position by opposing the war but also demonstrated its policy of abiding by international law and adhering to international organizations. On the other hand, Iran could still play the role of a champion, struggling against the new colonialism and imperialism, among the Third World countries. In sum, Iran's policy of neutrality which was based on three pillars i.e., preferring a non-military solution to the Iraqi crisis, emphasizing the non-proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction and commitment to multilateralism in international relations, strengthened Iran's international posture. However, adopting this policy antagonized the United States and thus Iran has been continuously accused of interfering in internal situation of Iraq.

Conclusion: The Prospect of Iran's Foreign Policy In Iraq

It seems that the recent presidential election in Iran may lead to some changes in Iran's foreign policy orientation. President Ahmadi-nejad has in the last few months showed his uncompromising stance vis-à-vis what seems to be the Western say American new imperialism. In my view, Iran's foreign policy orientation during the current government may lean towards confrontational constraint-centrism. In other words, Iran will take a more assertive though defensive foreign policy in general in order to achieve its national interests. According to president Ahmadi-nejad's administration, Iran's policy of detent and confidence-building has not led but to more suppression and humiliation of Iran. The country has been included in the "axis of evil" and every effort has been made to isolate it



internationally. The Western countries' stance regarding Iran's acquisition of peaceful nuclear technology is a good example. Iran's complete cooperation did not yield but more Western demands on the one hand and less concessions to Iran on the other. Thus, it is believed that the best way to confront this is to take an assertive foreign policy orientation. Accordingly, the Iranian government has to rely on its domestic support as well as using all leverages at its hand in order to regain Iran's strength regionally. One of these leverages is the chaotic situation in Iraq (and also in Afghanistan). It is not only possible that Iran can turn the presence of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan to its advantage but also can be an instigator of the present surge in tensions at best and make Iraq hell for the occupiers at worst¹¹. Iran has not done that yet but if it is pressured by the United States, this may be considered by the Iranian authorities. In sum, Iran under president Ahmadi-nejad may end its policy of short-term cooperation and exploit the instable situation in Iraq if the American pressure to isolate Iran is increased. The most prudent and wisest policy for the West regarding Iran is to engage, not isolate Iran¹².

¹¹ Iran has enough capability to exploit the situation in Iraq. For Iran's assets and liabilities in this regard see, Weinstein, Michael A.: "Iran's Bid for Regional Power: Assets and Liabilities", PINR, 6 September 2004.

¹² Hunter, Robert: "Engage, Don't Isolate, Iran", *The San Diego Union Tribune*, June 27, 2004.