

In Iraq, Iran's Arab Credentials Are Made

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Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's latest visit to Tehran was just another occasion to highlight that Iran is compromising its Arab credentials in Iraq, and to raise more questions about whether Tehran and Washington are in collusion or in collision in Baghdad than giving answers to Arabs who do care to have Islam as a unifying force between the Arab and Persian neighbouring nationalities against foreign interference in the region.

When President George W. Bush never stops repeating that "success in Iraq is necessary for the security of the United States" (1) and his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pledges "full security" (2) for Bush's Iraqi regime, one could not but wonder whether Iran and the U.S. are in collusion or in collision in Iraq.

Jumping from a red carpet reception to another from Washington to Tehran in less than two months raises questions about the role of al-Maliki's government as well as about the widely-reported verbal collision and the de facto cooperation, or at least coordination, in Iraq between Iran and the U.S., which have no diplomatic ties since the Islamic revolution swept away a pro-U.S. regime in Tehran in 1979.

On July 26, al-Maliki addressed the Americans. "When (Iraqi and American) blood mixes together in the field, aiming to achieve one goal, this blood will help in establishing a long-lasting relationship between us. Our relationship will stay forever," he said. 47 days later he addressed the Iranians after talks he described as "very constructive" and called Iran "a very important country, a good friend and brother," Al-Maliki said.

Only a magician or the leader of a nation of the weight of the former USSR could reconcile and mobilize the resources of ostensibly two antagonists like the U.S. world great power and the Iranian regional great power to serve his country's interests at the same time, which al-Maliki is not.

A third more realistic interpretation is that both powers have converging agendas in the wretched country and have, in an ironic moment of history, worked either together or in harmony to bring to power in Baghdad a government that both bombastically claim as their own and both describe as democratically representative of the people whose independence, state, territorial integrity, resources and historical cultural identity they are unmercifully ravaging.

And none argues that al-Maliki's government is at the same time pro what Washington dubs as the Iranian "axis of evil" and what Tehran labels as the U.S. "Great Satan."

“We will complete the (U.S.) mission (in Iraq). It’s in our interest,” Bush said in July and his Iranian counterpart pledged on Tuesday: “Iran will give its assistance to establish complete security in Iraq because Iraq’s security is Iran’s security.” Doesn’t this complementary roles sound as if Iran and the U.S. have a joint venture in Iraq!

However both nations continue their verbal exchanges over Iraq, which smokescreen their negotiation on the ground.

Commenting on Ahmadinejad’s pledge of “full security” cooperation with Iraq, and his call on the “unwanted (U.S.) guests (to) leave the region” and not Iraq only, White House spokesman Tony Snow said: “We just have to take a look at precisely what it means,” suggesting that Tehran was “part of the problem” in Iraq. (3)

But the Arabs and not the U.S. administration are the ones who have real interest to know what the Iranian leader meant!

Iran’s passivity and de facto coexistence with the U.S.-led NATO presence in Afghanistan only serves as a precedent to Arab sceptics.

Leaving alone Arab ideological or political antagonists, Iran’s Arab friends, Arab advocates of Islamic fraternity with Iran and Arab defenders of a joint Pan-Arab-Iranian front against foreign hegemony in the region owe Tehran an interpretation that clarifies its role in Iraq, where its Arab credentials are essentially made, without of course marginalizing Iran’s controversial contributions to the Arab – Israeli conflict which need a separate review.

The Arab-Iranian future cooperation, especially with the GCC countries, the Syrian-Iranian 25-year old regional coordination which the U.S.-led western strategists are currently strenuously looking for ways to break it, Iranian involvement with Lebanese and Palestinian resistance movements, and the maintenance of the regional political stability, which historically was based on the peaceful coexistence among Islamic theologies, all depend on this overdue Iranian interpretation.

Among important non-Iranian factors, the Arab perception of the threat emanating from Tehran’s intention to “export” its Islamic revolution have alerted the regional status quo, pushed the incumbent regimes to emergency measures of self-defense, and finally engulfed the region in an eight-year bloody war.

The perception is still lingering on and the “export” of revolution is still in the horizon, and the antagonists are confirming publicly while protagonists are secretly struggling against their doubts that Tehran is espousing a sectarian agenda, leading some regional capitals to warn against an emerging Middle East anti-regional status quo and anti-American Shiite arch.

No more than in Iraq these fears are given concrete justifications. The sectarian basis of Iran’s support or non-support of the mushrooming more than 120 Iraqi political factions is antagonizing not only the Baathists but also all the other pan-Arab Iraqi opponents of the Baath regime, and is bloodily pushing the country to the brink of a civil war that in addition to the Iraqi people only the Iraqi pan-Arabs are left to fend off civil war and defend Iraq’s national unity, as the antithesis of the post-U.S. invasion status quo.

The sectarian divide is the only approach to enable Tehran to gain influence on the ground; it is the pretext the U.S. repeatedly cites to keep its occupation forces as the arbiter in the country; the Israeli Jewish state which bases its statehood on a purely religious identity foment it for high strategic stakes to prevent an influential Arab country from regaining its statehood; the U.S. and Iran-backed Kurdish separatists see it as a prerequisite to fend off the Arab majority from curbing their autonomous status and their aspirations for independence; and the sectarian-based militias and their leaders will have no other grounds for any power base without it.

Regional and world repercussions are too obvious to ignore. "Grim forecasts are already circulating at the CIA. They predict that the blood feud between the Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites could spill over into Iran and Saudi Arabia. This could prompt a fratricidal Islamic war that would endanger the whole world's oil supply."(4)

The "excellent" bilateral ties hailed by Ahmadinejad during al-Maliki's visit, his pledges to "completely support the Iraqi government and parliament" and his promise that "Iran will provide assistance to the Iraqi government to establish full security" (1) should have been more than gratefully welcome statements were they not extended to a government that was engineered, sustained, protected and still commanded by the generals of the U.S.-led occupation army.

Ahmadinejad's statements on Iraq's "security" boils down under scrutiny to securing the government of the U.S.-led occupation.

The more than 10 million Iraqis who were mobilized by sectarian and ethnic incitement to vote this government into power in elections financed, protected and given legitimacy by the occupying power is a fact that nonetheless does not legitimize an illegitimate status quo that the Iranian leader promises to secure.

Ahmadinejad can help al-Maliki to develop his government into a representative of a truly independent Iraq by empowering this government against the foreign occupation, which requires a U turn in Iran's strategy vis-à-vis Iraq during the past fifty years. But his and al-Maliki's seems a completely different agendas.

Al-Maliki came to power on a security three-pronged agenda: Fighting "terrorism," dissolving militias and national reconciliation.

Iran, al-Maliki's government and its predecessors, and the U.S. occupying power are and were always keen to confuse the Iraqi resistance with a minority of foreign-linked or foreign fighters whom they accuse of fomenting sectarian violence and "terrorism" in Iraq.

Al-Maliki reportedly demanded that Iran secure its side of Iraq's longest borders against the infiltration of those al-Qaeda-linked fighters and arms, and certainly Ahmadinejad could and might deliver on this.

He also might but so far could not deliver on al-Maliki's second demand to fight the Iraqi national and Islamic armed resistance, which al-Maliki condemns as "terrorists."

This ever growing resistance is the major threat to al-Maliki's government, which his Iranian host pledged to secure, and it is also the same threat to the foreign occupation.

It was noteworthy that Ahmadinejad did not publicly condemn this resistance, but he neither voiced his support nor called on Iraqi “friends” to join or support it. Tehran is still officially subscribing to the so-called U.S.-adopted “political process” to engineer a pro-Washington regime in Baghdad.

Ahmadinejad could also deliver on the second item of al-Maliki’s agenda, i.e. dissolving the militias, all sixteen of them are sectarian militias; His silence on al-Maliki’s demand to dissolve the militias was noteworthy; but to do so goes against Iran’s regional strategy, especially in Iraq.

The sectarian approach is the only guarantee for Iran to maintain any credible influence on the ground in Iraq, as Iran’s alliance with the Kurds in the north, especially during the 1980-88 war with Iraq, was always pragmatic and compromised by the presence of a large Kurdish minority in Iran itself with the same national aspirations like their brethren in Iraq.

How could Tehran agree to dissolving the militias it sponsored, financed, armed and used as a “fifth column” during the eight-year war with Iraq and prepared, alongside the similarly sponsored Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq, to continue the U.S. inconclusive war, which evacuated Iraqi troops from Kuwait in 1991, to topple the Saddam-Hussein-led Baath regime in Baghdad.

Their mission was bloodily aborted in 1991, but it was done by the U.S.-British invading armies in 2003; Iran’s militias grudgingly followed in the footsteps of the occupying forces, which failed them twelve years earlier; a *fait accompli* of coexistence and integration was created between the two sides to lead the “new Iraq.”

How could Ahmadinejad contribute to Iraqi national reconciliation without a clear-cut anti-U.S. occupation stance, commitment to cut Iran’s lifeline to Iraqi militias and a U-turn in Tehran’s policy vis-à-vis the Iraqi resistance? Iran seems unable to resist its lucrative dividends of the *fait accompli* in Iraq.

Betting on Iranian connivance was a US tactic from the start: “Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense under George H. Bush, opposed a full-scale invasion in the Iraq war of 1991. Saddam Hussein, he was certain at the time, would not last long once the Iraqis had been driven out of Kuwait. He even made private bets on the outcome.” (5)

Ahmadinejad’s statement that, “We regard progress, independence and territorial integrity of Iraq as our own” should be tested not only against the realities of the Iraqi status quo, but also against the realities of recent history, which have crushed Iraq to rubble as Iran was watching on the sidelines.

His cordial call on the American “unwanted guests” to leave the region in general and not Iraq in particular was heard on the backdrop of his normally firebrand rhetoric and gave credence to media reports that al-Maliki was mandated to make a breakthrough in U.S.-Iran deadlocked relations after a reported U.S flexibility vis-à-vis Iran’s nuclear program.

The undeclared Iranian desire to let the Americans continue the inconclusive Iran-Iraq war and finish off the Baath in Iraq is not enough convincing justification to stand on the sidelines while the Iraqi state is being dismantled and the Iraqi people dispersed into

sectarian and ethnic pieces jumping on the throats of each other, let alone Iran's active involvement in Iraq under the U.S. occupation.

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Notes

- (1) <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060726-1.html>, July 26, 2006.
- (2) Statements quoted here were reported by agencies on Tuesday, September 12, 2006.
- (3) Wires on September 12, 2006.
- (4) Der Spiegel online: September 12, 2006.
- (5) Ibid.

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