

Iran Sparked Islamic Divide, Iran Only Can Defuse It

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Tehran for the first time and at the highest level has this week went public on the so far taboo Sunni-Shiite divide, accused the American Great Satan of exploiting and fuelling the historic Islamic sectarian tragedy, which is true, but offered no way out of the divide except a verbal call for unity, which has to be tested against the Iranian policies on the ground in Iraq, where the Iranian call can make or break.

Iran's highest authority, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, has criticized the United States for carrying out the policy of "divide and rule" in the Middle East, the official IRNA news agency reported, quoting him as saying: "The British ... have taught the Americans how to sow the seeds of discord among Shiites and Sunnis. Making Sunnis and Shi'ites suspicious of one another ... is the policy of the Americans in Iraq ... they promote terrorism in Iraq in the name of Shiite and Sunni. Unity is the greatest need of the region's peoples."

Without any reference to the similarly significant Iranian "presence", Khamenei added: "The bare truth there (in Iraq) is the presence of occupiers that keep interfering in affairs of the government, the parliament, the president, the prime minister, the financial policy making, and in security affairs."

The sophisticated scholarship and leadership of Khamenei could not be credited in good faith with inexperience or innocence to justify his missing the real "bare truth" in Iraq .

He portrayed the conflict in Iraq as only "interference" by the "occupiers" in the affairs of what he presented as the "national" government, ignoring on purpose the "bare truth" that it is the government which the occupiers installed and legitimized without any sovereignty even inside its captivity in Baghdad's Green Zone.

Khamenei's confusing portrayal of the state of affairs in Iraq could only be attributed to a premeditated policy to smokescreen Iran 's exploits from the U.S. invasion.

Tehran also for the first time went public this week on the "superior situation" Iran has gained under the U.S. occupation of Iraq , a fact which makes it impossible to absolve it from being responsible also for the state of affairs of its unfortunate western Muslim Arab neighbor.

"Iran is now enjoying a superior situation in Iraq ... Today, many of the European, American and regional analysts and heads of states admit that the Islamic Republic of Iran is having a powerful position in Iraq," said special assistant to Iranian Foreign Minister for Strategic Planning, Mostafa Moslehzaheh. (1)

Precisely this "superior situation" vindicates Saddam Hussein's arguments for his "pre-

emptive" war on Iran in 1980. In a bad faith reading the "superiority" Iran enjoys in Iraq now is tantamount to sharing the Iraqi pie with the Great Satan; in a good faith interpretation it reflects a conflict with the Great Satan over the Iraqi pie, or most likely it is maneuvering either to make Iraq a battle ground in case of a U.S. attack on its territory or to use its position there as a bargaining chip to negotiate with Washington, a possibility that almost came true earlier this year.

The Machiavellian policies Tehran pursued to gain this situation starkly contradict with whatever interpretation a Muslim might give to Islamic solidarity, and could hardly be defended as not being a continuation of its 1980-88 war with Iraq, this time using grudgingly but skillfully the American invading army instead of its own.

None could argue that Iranians would be happy with the occupation of Iraq by the Americans and the presence of a huge American force at their doorsteps, but none also could deny the fact that were it not for the US occupation Tehran could not have gained its current prominence in Baghdad .

The flare up of the sectarian conflict in Iraq, which has so far claimed the worst bloodletting, sectarian cleansing and unleashing of an historic genie of a long-dormant Sunni-Shiite divide is precisely the fear that Saddam tried to fend off, backed by the overwhelming majority of Arab regimes and people, and generously financed by his immediate Arab neighbors who feared the regional repercussions and were ready to deplete their budgets and fight until the last Iraqi to confine the Islamic revolution within Iran's borders.

Those Arab fears are also vindicated as manifested recently by the Saudi criticism of Iran 's superior role in the Iraqi plight, Jordan 's repeated warnings against a threatening sectarian crescent, and Egypt 's alerts against the sectarian loyalty to Iran which compromises national loyalties.

None could argue the historical fact that the Islamic revolution in Iran had sparked a sectarian divide that only Iran can defuse, restrain and contain.

This brief dwelling on the immediate history is not intended to open hopefully healed wounds in the Arab - Iranian relations, but to draw attention that Tehran has yet to dispel Arab doubts and to appease Arab fears that are being pushed to the verge of scare by Iran 's policies in Iraq .

It was an unavoidable turn of history that any Islamic revolution in Iran could not but be a sectarian one. Iranian Muslims could not and cannot change their religious demography or sectarian affiliation. But for sure they can control these dictates of history as well as their adverse regional fallout in a way that preserves a regional geopolitical unity vis-à-vis a crushing foreign intruder.

The rising star of Iran as a regional power is in harmony with both history and geopolitics that none in the region disputes and were it not for the sectarian factor it would be an asset for the regional neighbors. Within the context of a sectarian divide it would adversely affect regional peace, security and stability. This factor precisely vindicates Arab fears because Iran is staying as an integral part of the regional existence but the U.S. is an intruder who will go away sooner or later.

Iran's temptation of the prospect of an Arab country controlled by the Shi'a for the first time

in modern history is deluding Tehran to miscalculate, to the detriment of the Shiites themselves as well as to Islamic unity and regional peace and security.

What Arab critics see as Iran's sectarian policies is cited as the pretext for many Arabs to conclude that the presence of the American occupying forces in Iraq is a guarantee against the collapse of the country into an abyss of sectarian strife; many Arab leaders had on record declared their opposition to U.S. exit from Iraq, which led to counter accusations by Tehran in a futile war of words that only the U.S. occupiers have stake in.

The sectarian divide and a rapprochement between a U.S.-installed "Shiite-Kurdish" regime and Iran were evidently foreseen by Washington and taken into account as positive factors in neutralizing Iran and the Iran-influenced Shiites and Kurds of Iraq, a calculation that the current state of affairs in Iraq vindicates as a proven anticipation.

It seems the Iranian leadership had anticipated what the former U.S. Secretary of State, James Baker, wrote in his 1995 memoirs, that removing the Baath would "fragment" Iraq in "unpredictable ways that would play into the hands of the mullahs in Iran ." Obviously Baker is also vindicated.

One of the headache questions that scare the war strategists in Washington since 9/11, the ensuing U.S "war on terror" and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq is how to abort the potential for a unified Islamic resistance between active Sunni and Shi'a forces.

Arab public opinion has always seen in the Islamic revolution a strategic depth which removed the U.S.-installed pro-Israel regime of the Shah from Tehran but could not apprehend Iran 's passivity or collusion vis-à-vis the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq .

Hailing the occupation of the sisterly Muslim neighbor by Tehran as innocently an ousting of a dictatorship could not be interpreted except as in defense of the bad example of inviting the Great Satan, or any other foreign power, to interfere in settling scores in intra-Muslim conflicts and disputes; if the precedent is applied to Iran it would implicitly justify calling in the American forces by the Iranian opposition of the Mujahideen Khalq to invade Iran; what Muslim could defend it?

Changing regimes by foreign invasion is in principle rejected regionally and internationally. No sectarian alliances or dividends could justify it; nor could anti-Saddam vendetta.

In Iraq there is ample evidence that Iranian policies have significantly contributed both to the sectarian divide and the U.S. exploitation of the underlying sectarian fire. The seeds of the low-intensity civil war that is raging in Iraq now and the de facto division of the country have flowered in these policies.

What seems to outsiders as a sectarian divide is in fact a divide between Iraqis who resist the U.S-British occupation and their compatriots who opted to co-exist with this occupation in the so-called "political process," which was planned and legalized by the occupying powers themselves and to which Iran subscribed from the start.

Iran's alignment mobilized Iraqis on sectarian lines behind leaders who followed in the footsteps of the invading armies and who were trained, equipped and financed ironically by both Tehran and Washington, where they still maintain offices; there was no other way for Tehran to maintain its current "superiority" in Iraq.

Hence the sectarian divide between Iran 's Shiite-Kurdish allies — who are empowered by the occupying powers as the new rulers of Iraq and immediately recognized by Tehran as the legitimate government - and the Sunni-led resistance to the occupation and its quislings.

This is a doomed Iraqi and regional policy that will inevitably reflect adversely on Iran 's confrontation with the U.S. over its legitimate right to possess nuclear power for peaceful purposes. The Arab geopolitical support is Iran 's only strategic asset that cannot be replaced by a Shiite regime in Baghdad .

The future of Iraq and the region as well as the U.S. and Israeli occupations will be decided positively only by a turnabout in Iran's policies to cement the Islamic unity between Arabs and Persians and their respective ethnic minorities as the only regional defense against foreign intrusions; otherwise the region will continue to be polarized on foreign lines and terms.

The prerogatives of Islamic unity and averting a Shiite-Sunni divide from playing into the hands of U.S. occupiers in Iraq and far beyond in the region requires that Iran accommodates the proven historical experience that exclusion of Arabs and Pan-Arabism deprives Islam of its vital component, acknowledges that sectarianization of Islamic politics adversely affect Islamic unity, rejects in principle the exploitation of foreign powers' interference to settle intra-Muslim scores, and translating these prerogatives into concrete policies.

Of course Iranian commitment to such prerogatives requires Arab reciprocity, which in turn necessitates the highest level of dialogue and political engagement.

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Notes

(1) Fars News Agency quoted by tehrantimes.com on October 16, 2006.

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