

U.S. Tactics of Containing Regional Roles in Middle East

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Two-pronged U.S. tactics of confrontation and engagement unfolded last week and described by some media as “turnabouts” in the strategy of containment of what Washington perceives as adverse regional roles in the Middle East, but in the Iraqi context and in historical perspective these tactics are revealed only as old diplomatic manoeuvres in the drawers of the State Department.

In remarks before the Senate Appropriations Committee on Tuesday Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the United States will engage Iran and Syria, previously condemned by President George W. Bush as two pillars of the world “axis of evil,” in two meetings of Iraq neighbours and the veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSEC) next March and April and expressed hope they “will seize this opportunity.”

In face-saving remarks Rice noted her administration was just responding to a “new diplomatic initiative” by the Government of Iraq because “Prime Minister (Noori) Maliki believes and President Bush and I agree that success in Iraq requires the positive support of Iraq’s neighbours.” She did not miss the opportunity to remind that, “This is one of the key findings, of course of the Iraq Study Group.” In fact this finding was also recommended recently by Prime Minister Tony Blair, German Chancellor Angela Merkel among other world powers, mainly Russia, and by friendly Arab states as well as the U.S. bipartisan James Baker-Lee Hamilton Iraq Study Group.

However Rice stressed that this seemingly “turnabout” was just an “additional component” to an U.S. “diplomatic offensive” aimed at cementing concrete action on the ground, including upgraded military naval presence in the Arabian Gulf (“Persian” to Iran) and a surge of 21,000 troops in Iraq, to guarantee “the security and stability of the Gulf region” and the success of the recently-launched “security plan” in Iraq. (1)

Two weeks on, the U.S.-Iraqi “Baghdad security plan” unfolds as pursuing an elusive enemy (2) amid an exacerbated insecurity, while revealing an evasive non-committal Iraqi government. It is antagonizing the so far allied “Shiite” militias and at the same time showing indications pointing to what the prominent investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh described as a “redirected strategic shift” by the Bush administration, within the context of an “open confrontation with Iran,” towards realignment with what he also described as “Sunni extremist groups that ... are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.” (3) This second “turnabout” on the ground has yet, if ever, to be officially confirmed.

Gradually but emphatically the facts of the U.S. policy of first igniting the sectarian divide in

Iraq then playing the emerging sectarian protagonists against each other are unfolding by the day to reveal the context as well as the real goals of the American strategy in the occupied country, which the anti-occupation national resistance is rendering more elusive than in any time since the invasion of the country in 2003, in as much as the alleged WMD and the al-Qaeda links to the Saddam Hussein-led Baath regime had unfolded as merely lies of a covertly planned propaganda campaign drawn to mislead the American public into supporting their country's devastating invasion of another people.

The Washington Post highlighted the elusiveness of the "enemy": "I don't know who I'm fighting most of the time. I don't know who is setting what IED," it quoted Staff Sgt. Joseph Lopez, 39, a soldier based in the northern outskirts of the capital. (4) The evasive commitment of the Iraqi government to the "security plan," which Bush announced it was an "Iraqi" one, was highlighted by a widely reported leaked confidential letter Prime Minister al-Maliki sent to the leaders of two of the most notorious militias warning them of the impending American crackdown and advising them to go underground or abroad to outmanoeuvre the coming storm, especially the powerful Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr whose whereabouts are still unknown; al-Sadr is the main ally of al-Maliki and is represented by 30 members of parliament and six cabinet ministers in the government in whose name the security plan is carried out.

The instrumental role played in Baghdad's security plan by the pro-Iran militias who dominate the army, police and security agencies of the Iraqi government (5), could only be interpreted as using the American involvement to serve their own ends, i.e. to "clean" the Iraqi capital from both the national resistance and their sectarian foes alike. Once that is done Baghdad would be secured as their pro-Iran sectarian capital.

Meanwhile it looks unrealistic that Bush's reported "strategic shift" could win over their Sunni counterparts. His shifting of focus from one side of the extreme sectarian divide to the other aims first at containing then revoking Iran's regional role in Iraq either per se or as a prelude to confronting the Iranians inside their own country.

"The White House is not just doubling the bet in Iraq, it's doubling the bet across the region. This could get very complicated. Everything is upside down," Hersh quoted the director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, Martin Indyk, as saying. "The Middle East is heading into a serious Sunni-Shiite Cold War," Indyk warned.

The Iranian Factor

Ironically Iran has gained her prominent role in Iraq thanks to the U.S. Washington has adopted, financed, equipped and promoted pro-Iran militias as the alternative to the Saddam Hussein-led regime, knowing beforehand they were without exception nurtured militarily, financially and logistically by Iran and were either drawing on sectarian or ethnic divides for recruitment and support against the secular and the Pan-Arab ideology of the ruling Baath party, the only ideology other than the Islamic one that could secure a national majority consensus uniting all sects and ethnicities against foreign threats. The aim was to neutralize an Iraqi pro-Iran Shiite base as a tactic to buy Iranian collusion with the invasion. That aim was fulfilled, but entailed the current Iranian prominence, which has become a counterproductive U.S. burden that should be removed.

Ironically also Iraq's regional role was one of the main targets of the U.S. occupation. The

sectarian power struggle in Iraq in the post-Saddam era was exactly the US-sought pretext to stay in the country and use the divide as a realistic excuse to promote federalism as solution and accordingly install a weak central governing authority that depends internally more on regional federal security than on a strong national central source of authority and externally on the U.S. occupying power, which entails both a small Iraqi army and a weak federally-divided economy, thus dooming a major Arab state that was a founder of the League of Arab States and the United Nations to a minor regional role or no role at all in regional, especially Arab, politics.

Five months ahead of the invasion, Michael Eisenstadt, a senior fellow military and security expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy said: "A government organized along federal lines would rely on local law enforcement for internal security, alleviating the need for a large army or security apparatus. Such changes could foster a less aggressive Iraq that is less likely to assert a leadership role in the Arab world. The United States , not Iraq , will ensure regional stability and provide a counterbalance to Iran ." (6)

Like many Arab governments, Iran has converged with the U.S. strategy of containing the Iraqi regional role. Tehran maintained armed formations, such as the Badr Corps, inside Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion. In 2004, the assistant commander of the Iranian Republican Guard announced, during his visit to London , that Iran has two brigades and other militia in Iraq in order to protect the national security of Iran . Tehran anticipated and welcomed the U.S. invasion since it would destroy her chief enemy in the region. Now that the Iraqi enemy has been destroyed as a state irrespective of the ruling regime, " Iraq is considered to be the first line of defense for Iran against any foreign invasion." (7)

Containment of Regional Roles

All U.S. administrations whether Republican or Democrat have been always ready to confront the regional roles of non-Middle Eastern powers, like Russia, or of Arab and Islamic states in Middle East in two cases: When those roles are in conflict with the Israeli security prerequisites and when they could compromise the American free access to the "vital" oil interests. Late Saddam Hussein and Jamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt did both. Now Iran and Syria are also portrayed as threats to both U.S. interests. The American diplomatic rhetoric about defending their regional "moderate" friendly and allied governments against the regional roles of both countries is merely meant to be sold to American voters, Arab public as well as to other unforthcoming world powers and public opinion.

The Iranian hosts of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during a two-day visit to Tehran last week said the U.S. and Israel are trying to undermine the regional positions of Iran and Syria by questioning their roles in Iraq , Lebanon and with Palestinians so they remain the sole players in the region. When the U.S. bipartisan James Baker-Lee Hamilton group recommended engaging the regional roles of both countries where those roles are mostly felt, particularly in Iraq, the Bush Administration opted instead for containment through confrontation with both countries, encouraged both overtly and covertly, directly and indirectly, by Israel and other regional players who are adversely affected by their cross-border influences, in a pattern that reminds historians and observers of a similar reaction to the over-borders political and military roles of late Iraqi and Egyptian presidents Saddam Hussein and Jamal Abdul Nasser during the second half of the twentieth century.

However the U.S. case against Iran and Syria this time is essentially flawed. When Saddam Hussein crossed the American red line and pushed Iraqi forces to sit on the Kuwaiti oil fields

in 1990, in retaliation to what he perceived as a U.S. and regional ungratefulness after eight bloody years in a war, during which the only human fodder were Iraqis, to contain a perceived Iranian military and political threat to the historic American regional “sphere of influence” in the Arabian Gulf as well as to Iraq, both countries stood pragmatically firm on the opposite side.

Syria in particular is promoting a regional role to gain a better negotiating position in pursuit of peace with Israel as “a strategic option” since 1971 when late President Hafez al-Assad assumed power to end a split in the ruling Baath party early in the seventies of the last century over the issue of peace with Israel, but Israel nonetheless has been unforthcoming. The U.S.-initiated current crisis with Syria has everything to do with her containment strategy than with the U.S. allegations that Damascus is a “terrorist-supporting” country regionally. Syria ’s regional leading role is the target. Once this role is neutralised Washington will certainly leave the Syrians to their internal potentially Iraqi-style divides. The same U.S. strategy applies to Iran .

As for the U.S. oil interests the self-sufficient Syria and Iran are not and never have been a threat. Moreover Syria in particular has been a regional stabilizing factor particularly to the U.S.-allied GCC oil-producing countries as well as through her close coordination with them. Her military intervention in Lebanon , which ended the first civil war there, was supported diplomatically and financially by those same countries, green-lighted by the United States and grudgingly accepted by Israel , though unexpectedly it had become the incubator that nurtured another extension of Iran ’s regional role.

The “containment strategy” has been always a national bipartisan U.S. strategy against what she labels as “rogue” states, which do not identically fall in line with the American strategies abroad. This strategy has become dangerously destabilising worldwide after the collapse of the balancing and deterring power of the former USSR and the emergence of the United States as the world’s only super power because the military intervention has been added as a feasible risk-free addition to sanctions within the containment strategy.

The United States however tolerates even military regional roles played by strategic allies like Israel and encourages political roles regionally by friendly allied Arab states, which move and act within the U.S. strategy in the Middle East.

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Notes

(1) Remarks by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice Before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Washington, DC, Feb. 27, 2007.

(2) The Washington Post, Feb. 26, 2007.

(3) Seymour M. Hersh, The New Yorker, Issue of 2007-03-05, Feb. 25, 2007.

(4) Ibid (2)

(5) Mounir Elkhamri, “Iran’s Contribution to the Civil War in Iraq ,” Jamestown Foundation, Jan. 2007. Elkhamri is a former aide, “cultural adviser” and translator for Major General Rodriguez, the commander of Task Force Freedom, General George Casey, Secretary of

State Condoleezza Rice and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad.

(6) Michael Eisenstadt, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, POLICYWATCH, NO. 681, Nov. 25, 2002.

(7) Ibid, Mounir Elkhamri.

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