

# The Role of the New Iraq and Neighboring Countries in the Stability and Security of the Persian Gulf

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### Abstract

Iraq, as a major country in the Persian Gulf region, has traditionally played an important role with regard to stability and security in the area. However, the Ba'athist Iraq, especially under Saddam Hussein, acted in large measure as a source of instability, tension and conflict in the area. That period came to an end in 2003 with the collapse of the Ba'athist regime and the emergence of a new governance system in that country. Considering Iraq's position in the region as well as its quite substantial potentials, this country can still play such an important role – perhaps more important than in the past – in the stability and security of the region. Characteristics of the “New Iraq”, particularly its unfolding democratic experience and governance, and a new collaborative approach to foreign policy, especially towards the neighboring countries, have raised hopes for Iraq's prospective positive contribution to regional stability, security, convergence, and ultimate integration, based on a new pattern of engagement and collaboration among regional states and actors. Having suffered for a long period from destructive rivalry, tension and conflict, the Persian Gulf region is acutely in need of a new collaborative, indigenous mechanism to foster and promote lasting stability and security in the area – needless to say, with the active participation of all countries in the region. The present article attempts to look into the Iraqi aggressive posture and policy during the past several decades as well as into the prospects for the future based on the mutual roles and responsibilities of the “New Iraq” and the neighboring states in the Persian Gulf, from the vantage point of peaceful intentions and conduct, interaction and collaboration towards the development of a collective regional system.

**Keywords:** New Iraq, Persian Gulf Security, Iraq's Neighboring Countries, Regional Security System

## **Introduction**

The Persian Gulf area has suffered from destructive rivalry, tension and conflict since 1970s. The ambitious, aggressive approach and policies of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq (1968-2003) have been one of the major factors for the emergence and perpetuation of this situation, not only in the Persian Gulf area but in fact through the bigger Middle East. Iraq's initiation of two regional wars; invasion of Iran in 1980 leading to an 8-year-long conflict; and occupation of Kuwait in 1990 leading to the second Persian Gulf war; and the situation that finally led to the 2003 US-led military action against Iraq have created a long-enduring state of instability and insecurity in the area, including paving the way for the direct military presence and engagement of foreign forces in the area with all its complicating consequences and implications.

Since its establishment as an independent state in 1921, Iraq has been one of the important countries in the Persian Gulf area, and has played an increasingly significant role with regard to its stability and security, which, as indicated, has been of a predominantly negative character during the Ba'athist rule. The post-2003 situation in Iraq – the New Iraq with a radically different governance structure – has raised hopes in the region

that a new foreign policy approach on the part of Baghdad, especially vis-à-vis the region and particularly the neighboring countries, would contribute, on its part, to the emergence of a new security environment and arrangements. Significant potentials of Iraq in various fields, which have been previously used by the Ba'athist regime for threatening, aggressive, and destabilizing purposes, can under the new situation be utilized for constructive purposes and consolidation of stability and security through engagement and collaboration.

Seven years after the demise of the Ba'athist regime and a few years since the emergence of a new governance structure along general democratic principles and majority rule, Iraq is, for understandable reasons, still grappling with a host of major challenges in various fields, both domestic and foreign. Indications are that, despite the significant challenges involved, the new situation in Iraq appears to be moving in the direction of gradual normalcy, allowing the country to undertake major steps towards political stability, badly-needed economic reconstruction, and equally important, re-building of past tension-ridden relations with its neighbors. While the nature and direction of prospective internal political developments in Iraq, inclusive of the future role of foreign forces, most prominently the US forces, are of genuine concern to and significance for the neighboring states, what is of particular concern and interest relates to the future foreign policy approach and orientation of Baghdad. In other words, what kind of foreign policy will emerge from the New Iraq with regard to its neighbors in the Persian Gulf – will it be a policy of interaction, engagement and



collaboration, or a continuation of old ambitious, aggressive policies in one form or another? With Iraq gradually turning its attention to regional matters, what kind of a security pattern and arrangement can be envisioned for the region as a whole? The present article, drawing on the past patterns of security in the Persian Gulf region, with particular emphasis on Iraq's past policies and conduct, attempts to look into the prospects for the future regional security and stability, also with an eye to the unfolding internal developments in Iraq as well as the imperative of mutual interaction and cooperation between Iraq and its neighbors.

### **1. International Significance of the Persian Gulf**

The Persian Gulf is considered a very critical region for a host of reasons, among others, its geo-strategic position, abundant energy resources, and the consequent impact on international security.

#### **1-1. Geo-strategic Importance**

The Persian Gulf, a crossroad linking three continents - Asia, Europe and Africa - is vitally important from strategic and geo-strategic perspectives. That is exactly why it has been associated during the past several centuries with geo-strategic importance for major global powers of the time; initially with European colonial powers – Portugal and Britain – and more recently, the United States since the end of WWII. Discovery of oil in the area, going back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century – first in Iran and subsequently in other countries - further increased the global

significance of the Persian Gulf, which has continued to increase over time with the rising role of oil, and also gas, in the economies of advanced, industrial countries. Britain's military withdrawal from the East of Suez, and the Persian Gulf for that matter, in 1971 paved the way for the emergence of the United States as the single most prominent foreign player in the area (The Nixon Doctrine). Despite major developments in the world since then, most notably the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and continuous tumult in the area, the United States has preserved its predominant position and has also tried consistently to keep other rivals out and maintain its monopoly of presence and influence.<sup>(1)</sup>

#### **1-2. Importance of Energy Resources**

It is a universally acknowledged fact that oil exports from the Persian Gulf region have played a vital role in the global economy during the past several decades, and in providing global energy security. The region is home to some 750 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, i.e. almost 65 percent of the global proven oil reserves. In addition, with around 2560 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, the region also accounts for almost 30 percent of the global proven natural gas resources.<sup>(2)</sup> Such an abundance of oil and gas resources in the area has accorded it a special place in the global economy and world energy markets. Continued, uninterrupted export in recent years of over 20 million barrels of oil per day from the Persian Gulf oil-producing countries to the consuming markets, mainly to advanced industrial economies, has made the question of long-



term energy security – a critical concern of energy importers – dependent on the security of the area and the oil-exporting countries.

### **1-3. Security Importance**

A third area of the importance of the Persian Gulf region concerns the security dimension. The security of this region, if for no other reason than the two areas already discussed, is critically linked to international security. Despite the fact that the Cold War and the ideological confrontation associated with it have ended for all practical purposes, the security of the Persian Gulf region still appears to be accorded a high, strategic place by supra-regional states and powers, including in particular the US, as the sole remaining super-power. The post-9/11 developments, particularly the United States military undertakings in Afghanistan in 2001 and subsequently in Iraq in 2003, have further brought the importance of the region to global security into sharper focus. In fact, these developments have turned the area into a major theatre of foreign competition, and its corollary, local rivalry and tension between and among regional states.

## **2. Conceptual Patterns of Security in the Persian Gulf**

In the post-Cold War period, security as a concept has come to be defined and understood in a much wider context, incorporating non-military aspects and dimensions, thus enriching the field of security studies. The same is also true for the concept of threat. In fact, the new, emerging definitions of

these concepts have been refined in light of particular developments in different parts of the world and the emergence of new variables. To cite an example, it could be argued that the US strategy in the occupation of Iraq in 2003 introduced substantial changes into global security perceptions and patterns. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of the “New Iraq” have simply changed then existing equilibrium in the Persian Gulf region. These changes and developments are bound to leave their long-lasting imprint on the region, as well as on the security outlook of the local actors involved, hence, the inevitable search for new security paradigms and arrangements and mechanisms.

Based on the conditions in the Persian Gulf region, and depending on the strategies pursued by major supra-regional powers, security scholars have articulated a number of security patterns for the region. Looking back at the state of security in the area during the past several decades, at least since the end of 1970s, and considering the continuous developments since, inclusive of the 2003 US military action in Iraq and its aftermath, it would appear the area needs a new security paradigm and pattern, reflecting the new realities and the inevitable change in the equations on the ground.<sup>(3)</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, two major patterns of security relations stand out for the region: 1) the pattern based on the old, familiar concepts of rivalry and balance of power; and 2) the pattern premised on the concepts of participation and cooperation. Each pattern, needless to say, is based on a number of particular elements and factors, thus each entailing a distinctive approach





to be adopted by political actors of relevance to the security equation.

### **2-1. The Balance-of-Power Pattern**

The pattern of balance of power, based theoretically on the realist outlook in international relations, has been the predominant security paradigm in the Persian Gulf region for a number of decades. It is predicated on power politics, as well as on security and military competition among the actors. As per this paradigm, no country is permanently considered a friend or a foe. Different countries have different levels of common or conflicting interests with others within the region. Common interests enable almost all regional actors to cooperate with each other depending on actual circumstances.

Generally, the traditional balance of power paradigm, or competitive realist pattern, is based on the following principles and priorities:

- Countries share generally common values and interests and, therefore, they share similar definitions of national security and stability;
- Countries trust their partners and tend to avoid disturbing the existing order for the sake of extending transient interests;
- Countries respect the sovereign independence of other actors and their autonomous action;
- Trans-national and/or domestic movements and ideologies do not negate the fundamental, pivotal role of nation-state as the principal actor; and

■ Political priorities of countries/states are generally constant or are reasonably predictable, which would help generate mutual confidence.<sup>(4)</sup>

During the past few decades, the dominant security pattern in the Persian Gulf region has rested on the balance of power among Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, which has been shaped, among others, by their respective perceptions of and attitudes towards one another, and also vis-à-vis the supra-national powers directly engaged in the region or powers projecting influence. As seen by scholars of the Middle East, Tehran and Riyadh have looked at each other more as rivals than friends.<sup>(5)</sup> This mutual attitude on the part of the two major powers in the Persian Gulf has inevitably constrained their areas of interaction and cooperation. The US high profile, open support for the members of the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council – originally established in 1981 with the express objective of shielding the six countries against spreading Iranian influence in the early days of the Islamic Revolution – has also had a role to play in this regard. In fact, the US predominant security role in the area has helped maintain or encourage unhealthy rivalries, promote mutual suspicion between and among the states concerned, and further limit the possibility of meaningful interaction and cooperation among them. This pattern of perception, attitude, and behavior, on the part of the US as well as on the part of the regional actors themselves, has practically prevented the articulation, development and emergence of an indigenous, regional participatory security pattern in the Persian Gulf.



## 2-2. The Cooperation-Participation Pattern

This pattern is premised on the participation and cooperation of regional - indigenous – actors, and involves meaningful interaction and engagement beyond the traditional military-security dimension and includes the wide range of social, economic, and environmental fields. Moreover, it is geared to the expansion and deepening of mutual understanding of the paradigm and its requirements. Instead of relying on a set of ready-made formulas to promote regional security systems, this paradigm/pattern is essentially a gradual process trying to shape the perceptions and inclinations of politicians and policy-makers vis-à-vis the question of security as broadly defined and understood. It also endeavors to come up with alternative options for achieving security as opposed to the traditional sole reliance on the military option.<sup>(6)</sup>

Unlike the traditional security pattern predicated on balance of power, political rivalry, deterrence, and reliance on military prowess, the participation-cooperation pattern/paradigm is structuralist in approach. It emphasizes consultation rather than confrontation; confidence-building instead of deterrence; transparency as opposed to duplicity; prevention rather than compulsion; and interdependence rather than unilateralism.<sup>(7)</sup> This pattern also has a different approach to international politics. The central element in this security pattern holds that all states can provide themselves with relative security through undertaking mutual commitments with regard to restricting their respective military capabilities. Furthermore, participation in this security system is not limited to friends and

allies. Rather, it would also provide for the inclusion of enemies, who, like friends/allies, also undertake similar technical/technological limitations. The important point here is that this pattern of behavior is quite possible, despite mutual suspicion and distrust. Also it is assumed that the legal and technical constraints voluntarily undertaken by participants involve mutual advantages as well. According to this pattern, hegemony can not secure security guarantees; rather, such guarantees are achievable only through rejecting the choices bent on imposing hegemony on rivals. In a nutshell, the participatory security approach is coming to be increasingly understood and defined - similar to common property - as indivisible. While it avoids categorizing states as friends, allies, or enemies, this pattern emphasizes on the fundamental fact that all actors are equally exposed to threats, and hence, all need to cater to and advocate mutual security.<sup>(8)</sup>

Given the above general explanation of the participation-cooperation pattern, it hardly needs to be stated that thus far no such pattern of behavior has been articulated in the Persian Gulf region, let alone implemented. Obstacles of various kinds have prevented the articulation and development of such a pattern in the area in the past. Lack of mutual trust and confidence among regional states, emanating, among others, from certain ambitious and/or aggressive approaches on the part of some, e.g., the approach and policies of the Ba'athist Iraq, has been generally considered as the prime negative factor in this regard. However, collapse of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 and its succession with a majority-based and generally pluralistic governance system



appears to have changed the overall context in Iraq for a different, non-aggressive, participatory regional foreign policy to emerge. Considering all these developments, it can be argued that the overall situation in the Persian Gulf region is, to some reasonable degree, becoming ripe for the development and emergence of a participatory and cooperative security pattern.

### **3. Iraq's Historical Role in the Persian Gulf**

Since its establishment as an independent state in 1921, Iraq has played two distinctly different roles in the Persian Gulf region, each leaving major impacts on the state of regional relations; a generally collaborative role under monarchy (up to 1958), and a decidedly aggressive role afterwards (1958-2003). Between 1921 and 1958, while under monarchical rule and with very close political relations with Britain, Iraq did not pursue a particularly active role in the Persian Gulf area. However, its participation in the Baghdad Pact in 1950 along with Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan – under the general British umbrella - brought it closer to the then emergent regional collaboration with a clear pro-Western orientation. During this period, Iraq's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, both under traditional monarchical regimes, were quite close and friendly.

Following the 1958 coup which led to the demise of monarchy and the establishment of republic, Iraq withdrew from the Baghdad Pact and pursued a different foreign policy. From 1958 onwards, Iraq joined other radical Arab states and, in competition with Nasser's Egypt, tried to claim the leadership

mantle of the Arab world. As a result of the substantial shift in Iraq's political structure and foreign policy, increasing instances of tension emerged with generally conservative political establishments in the region, inclusive of the Persian Gulf area.

In 1968 the Ba'ath Party assumed power, which led, among others, to a closer relationship with the former Soviet Union, and a more pronounced radical, Arab nationalist posture. Simultaneously, the US entry into the Persian Gulf in the wake of the British withdrawal from the region as of the end of 1971 and the implementation of the Nixon Doctrine further exposed the area to bipolar and strategic rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union – albeit principally through proxies. The tension manifested itself in imperial Iran's alliance with Saudi Arabia and support for the status quo and the conservative sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf on the one hand, and the Ba'athist Iraq's radical, anti-establishment posture and rhetoric on the other. Moreover, open tensions between Iran and the Ba'athist Iraq during the early 1970s over a wide range of bilateral issues, including land and water frontiers, also effectively militated against any practical possibility of regional convergence. Conclusion of the 1975 Treaty between Iran and Iraq helped calm the situation somewhat – at least at the bilateral level and only for a short four-year period.

The collapse of the monarchical regime in Iran in early 1979 was interpreted by the Ba'athist Iraq, then under the person of Saddam Hussein, as a golden opportunity to revive its previous claims and ambitious designs, both with regard to bilateral relations with Iran as well as with respect to supremacy



in the Persian Gulf and the claim on Arab leadership. This new aggressive approach culminated in Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980, leading to the 8-year-long armed conflict and regional instability. Active support of Iraq in its war against Iran by the countries in the region as well as by powers outside of the region, including through the presence of foreign [US] forces in the area, created and perpetuated a state of instability, insecurity, and pervasive mutual suspicion that was ill-suited to any regional rapprochement and convergence. Saddam Hussein's dangerous, destructive, and yet failed gamble against Iran was repeated a decade later in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 – another failed gamble with devastating consequences for Iraq and for the whole region – the tragic consequences of which came to haunt Iraq and the region twelve years later.

Analysis of the reasons and rationale for Iraq's aggressive foreign policy during the Ba'athist rule (post-1968) points to a number of factors. Already mention has been made of political ambitions vis-a-vis the Persian Gulf and the Arab world. The catalogue could as well include such intrinsic factors as Iraq's almost land-locked situation and the aspiration to acquire access to free international waters, hence, the dispute with Iran on the common river frontier, which has been resolved through the provisions of the 1975 Treaty. Over and above these factors in explaining the Iraqi aggressive foreign policy, one could also look at the ideological foundations of the Ba'ath Party as well as the political and governance structure in Iraq during the period under review. The element of personality; the role of personal character, mentality, and conduct of leaders in action, in this

case, the person of Saddam Hussein, cannot be underestimated either. But, in so far as the governance structure was concerned, as is well known, the modern Iraq since its creation in the 1920s had been ruled by the Sunnites, a minority as compared with the majority Shi'ites and also the Kurds in the north. Ascendancy of the Ba'athists to power in 1968 led to further consolidation of power within a rather limited political constituency in Iraq – in and around a highly centralized political party with an ultra-nationalistic, Pan-Arab outlook and unmistakable authoritarian thinking and party politics. The trend towards consolidation of minority rule was further accentuated in the wake of Saddam Hussein's assumption of presidency in 1979, which led to the predominance of the Takritis in the Iraqi power structure. The combination of the Ba'athist ideology, authoritarian policies, and the actual dictatorship of the minority, embodied in the person of a brutal dictator as Saddam Hussein, could explain well Iraq's aggressive foreign policy in the 1980s and the two destructive wars he personally fancied and pursued with relentless determination against Iran and Kuwait.<sup>(9)</sup>

#### **4. The Post-Saddam New Iraq**

The collapse of the Ba'athist rule – and Saddam Hussein – in 2003, changed the whole political context in Iraq and ushered a totally new era, replete with fundamental challenges in almost every field. Seven years after the demise of the old regime and five years since the establishment of the new governance structure, the “New Iraq” is experiencing a transitional stage in





the course of which the governance system – the power structure – and its corollary, foreign policy, are in the process of formation and articulation. The question begs to be asked: what kind of foreign policy, to be precise for the issue at hand, regional policy, would the New Iraq adopt and pursue henceforth? In light of the past practice and also the unfolding developments in Iraq, it could be surmised that Iraq's future approach towards the region – the Persian Gulf – and its stability and security could follow, in broad terms, the following two patterns; continuation of the past aggressive approach, or a new proactive, collaborative approach.

#### **4-1. Continuation of an Aggressive Approach**

The new situation in Iraq, characterized principally by the unfolding pluralistic governance structure, would entail, reasonably speaking, among others, a different foreign policy than the one pursued by the Ba'athist regime; that is, a generally proactive, conciliatory approach towards the region – the Persian Gulf – that has suffered most from the previous aggressive approach and policy. Such an approach – expected reasonably by Iraq's neighbors, including Iran – could, however, prove difficult or challenging in light of other militating factors, both within the Iraqi society and without. As for the internal factors, the new governance structure would have to contend with the residual remnants of the old regime and the expansionist, ultra-nationalistic tendencies and slogans – which could prove quite resilient or be susceptible to revival under certain circumstances.

Moreover, as it happens more often than not in transitional stages or during periods of political instability at home, governments facing internal challenges may opt as an escape for a confrontational, aggressive foreign policy. The Iraqi situation may not be an exception to this general rule of politics and governance. In so far as external factors are concerned, Iraq might as well be susceptible to outside pressures, mainly by some Arab states in the region, to pursue an aggressive foreign policy, particularly with respect to non-Arab, predominantly Shi'ite Iran. Pursuit of such an approach by the New Iraq – regardless of the immediate domestic factors involved, inclusive of the revival of previous political ambitions and aspirations, or as a result of external regional pressures – would in all probability contribute to the perpetration of a state of suspicion and mutual distrust between Iraq and its neighbors – and not just Iran - further preventing the articulation and development of collaborative security arrangements in the region.

#### **4-2. Emergence of a Collaborative Approach**

The post-Saddam “New Iraq”, as characterized by a developing pluralistic governance structure moving in the direction of democratic governance reflective of Iraq’s ethnic, sectarian and lingual mosaic and population structure, and engaged in the process of return to a state of normalcy, reconstruction and development, would be expected, reasonably, to adopt a collaborative, conciliatory approach in its foreign policy, including, in particular, with regard to its immediate neighborhood – inclusive of the Persian Gulf. Given the



tremendous, daunting challenges the New Iraq is inevitably facing in its domestic scene in various fields, it would not be unrealistic to assume that the governance structure would opt for a collaborative approach and project peaceful intentions in its foreign policy, including with the explicit objective of soliciting maximum cooperation and assistance from abroad, especially from its immediate neighbors – particularly the oil-rich Arab brethren. Moreover, given the bitter memories in the region from the Ba’athist era, it would be quite reasonable to expect the Iraqi government to distance itself from the past policies – in words and indeed – and to undertake to work towards ameliorating those memories and healing the wounds of the past.

Adoption of such a collaborative approach by the “New Iraq” will undoubtedly have positive impact on the state of relations in the region and will serve to augment regional stability and security. It will also serve to help encourage other regional actors to overcome past reluctance and opt, on their own part, individually and collectively, for participatory, cooperative arrangements and mechanisms for the promotion and establishment of regional security. It is granted, however, that the adoption and effective pursual of such an approach – and requisite policies and measures – by the Iraqi government hinges, first and foremost, on its commitment and concrete policies to institutionalize the democratic political structures and processes at home – quite a formidable challenge under the circumstances - and to overcome its myriad other domestic challenges. It is also granted that regional states, particularly

Iraq's neighbors, have a very critical role to play in this regard. A positive, proactive approach on the part of Iraq's neighbors would contribute to help Iraq move forward in solving its problems and difficulties at home, and conversely, a negative approach would instead further complicate an already difficult situation.

### **5. The New Iraq - Internal Challenges**

As already discussed, the collapse of the Ba'thist regime in Iraq in 2003 ushered a new situation and era, opening the Iraqi Pandora's Box with all its challenges and difficulties, further complicated by the mere fact that the new situation emerged only as a result of foreign military engagement and occupation. While the state of foreign military presence has continued, with all its complicating impact and implications, both within Iraq and also with respect to Iraq's neighbors, the new governance structure has taken shape and moved in the direction of institutionalization, notwithstanding major hurdles along the way, including continuing insecurity and instability and acts of terrorist violence. The inherent difficulties and contradictions of the post-Saddam Iraq, also complicated by a less-than-desirable attitude of some of Iraq's neighbors<sup>(10)</sup> and particularly the destructive role of the remnants of the old regime, have created – and sustained – the following areas of major challenge for the New Iraq.

#### **5-1. Military–Security Challenges**

Looking at the situation in Iraq, it appears that the overall



security picture is much better when compared with the immediate post-2003 situation or during the early years afterwards. Despite marked improvement in the overall security environment, instances of terrorist acts still continue to occur, here and there, and mostly in certain areas in and around the central part of Iraq – the traditional stronghold of the Ba’athist regime and also the center of concentration of the Sunnites who generally seem to be dissatisfied with the change in the country’s political structure and the consequent ascendance of the Shi’ite-Kurdish majority coalition to the ruling position. Most terrorist acts in more recent years, however, appear to have been perpetrated with the objective of inciting and furthering Shi’ite-Sunni sectarian strife. Another similar challenge with quite serious security implications concerns the ethnic strife between the Kurds, concentrated in the northern part of the country enjoying autonomy and a much better economic lot, and the Arabs, living in the rest of the country, even if the divide is most acute between the Kurds and Sunnites who happen to be living in closer proximity than the Shi’ites who are mostly concentrated in the south. The traditional Kurdish-Arab divide is made worse in recent years over the dispute at the national level on the distribution of oil revenues coming for the most part from the oil fields situated in the Kurdish areas.

Another area of security challenge concerns the institutional weaknesses of Iraq’s military and security-intelligence apparatus, which still appear to be suffering the aftershocks of the post-2003 political-organizational collapse. Since the Iraqi army and the security apparatus, under new

command, have been re-organized by the US forces, they are still in a state of relative infancy and heavily dependent on foreign support. The US extensive intelligence liaison with certain forces and groups in the Iraqi opposition prior to 2003, and its impact on the post-2003 security situation also seem to have played a complicating role.<sup>(11)</sup> Given this, it could be argued that the Iraqi security and intelligence forces might still need some time before they would be able to overcome their current challenges and be able to manage the security problems in the country on their own and independently.

Another challenging area, over and above those already discussed, concerns lack or inadequacy of effective cooperation and support by Iraq's neighboring countries. While the positive attitude and conduct of Iraq's neighbors can effectively contribute to the promotion and consolidation of security in Iraq, their reluctance to extend a helping hand can have a negative impact, much worse, if they choose to either create difficulties of sorts in Iraq or undermine its security through various measures or acts – directly or otherwise. The mechanism in recent years for the collective discussion of Iraq's security issues with the participation of neighboring countries has proved quite useful, even if inadequate thus far in rising to the task, and could – and in fact, should - be further relied on to explore various ways and means to help the situation and strengthen regional cooperation for its intended purpose. The particular, dominant position of the US and its military and security forces in Iraq has, however, acted as a complicating factor in this regard, making it difficult in some respect for Iraq



and its neighbors to engage in serious interaction on security matters independently of American discretion or involvement.

Iraq's security and stability also happen to be seriously affected by the presence and activities of terrorist organizations and agents, whether of Iraqi origin (hardcore Ba'athists/supporters of Saddam Hussein) or foreign nationals affiliated with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda – with pronounced anti-Shi'ite Salafi tendencies widely known to have close relations with certain Saudi quarters.<sup>(12)</sup> As reported,<sup>(13)</sup> such a presence and activity have also contributed to the worsening of the general political environment in the country and further exacerbated ethno-sectarian tension and strife.

### 5-2. Political Challenges

The fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 brought to an end a long period of dominance of the minority Sunnites in the political structure in Iraq – in fact since the establishment of modern Iraq in 1921. It paved the way for the emergence of a radically different situation in which the other two major constituencies in the Iraqi society – Shi'ites and Kurds, together accounting for almost 80% of the population – to have the opportunity to form the post-Saddam governing coalition, particularly that they had long militated against Saddam Hussein, both had very close relations with Iran, and also had actively cooperated with the US towards the common objective of Saddam's removal from power.

While this substantial change in the Iraqi political structure was welcomed by Iran – and for understandable reasons – and

also by Syria, another Saddam foe, the rest of the Arab world, inclusive of those in the Persian Gulf, appeared to have felt unease at the turn of events in Baghdad – happy to see Saddam’s menace gone and equally disturbed to witness the emergence of a a ruling coalition of a different mold. That feeling of dissatisfaction echoed the overt discontent and even anger of the political forces and currents inside Iraq who had found themselves at the losing end of the deal once the Ba’athist apparatus was out of power. It has been exactly this shared feeling of dissatisfaction within Iraq and in the neighboring Arab countries that has come to constitute the essence of the on-going political challenge in Iraq. Turkey, the only non-Arab neighboring country has had its own peculiar concerns towards the Iraqi developments, mostly concerned with the Kurdish question and territorial integrity, particularly the impact of the Kurdish autonomy and possible federalism in Iraq on a susceptible situation in Turkey. Their initial sensitivity to these issues seem to have somewhat subsided over time. Political developments in Iraq since, inclusive of the ratification of the new constitution, drawn up along generally democratic and pluralistic principles and provisions, and the formation of democratically-elected administrations, have contributed to the institutionalization of a new legal/constitutional order and actual consolidation of a new governance structure, even if haltingly and fraught with challenges and pitfalls.

Notwithstanding the progress thus far in building a new constitutional political order as mentioned above – which has been achieved at quite a high cost and painstakingly – Iraq still





continues to face serious political challenges in this regard - some of which are as follows:

- General Sunnite dissatisfaction with the new power structure and political developments;

- Ethno-sectarian and ideological differences and disputes between Shi'ites, Sunnites, and Kurds, and the political forces representing them, on almost all important issues facing the country and the governance structure;

- Serious differences among major political currents on constitutional provisions; e.g., federalism and distribution of oil revenues;

- Dissatisfaction among Arab states with the new power structure in Iraq, and consequent interference of sorts towards undermining the new order;

- Slow progress in the process of normalization of relations with some neighboring states; and

- Continued presence and active engagement of foreign forces in Iraq and the serious complications arising from such a situation, both within Iraq as well as with regard to Iraq's bilateral relations with its neighbors, more in the case of some than others.

### 5-3. Economic Challenges

The military engagement in 2003, which came on the heel of over a decade of paralyzing economic sanctions, caused vast destruction of material and economic resources in Iraq. The continuation of the war situation in the country, perpetual political upheaval, and still worse, continued terrorist activities,

have all practically prevented a serious program of economic reconstruction to start and take off in Iraq. Economic paralysis under war conditions and rising economic hardships for a large part of the Iraqi populace since 2003 have further complicated the slow and difficult process of political stabilization and return to normalcy in the country, making it difficult in turn for any effective economic reconstruction programs and industrial rehabilitation. This situation in Iraq has underlined, once again, the intrinsic two-way relationship between economic activity and security, each feeding on the other and in turn assisting the other.

Any assessment of the performance of the Iraqi economy should take into account the pivotal role oil and oil revenues play in this economy – and in fact, have played for a quite a long period since Iraq became a major oil-producer-exporter and member of OPEC. The available data indicate that Iraq is producing some 2.5 million barrels of oil per day, and the oil revenues account for almost 100 percent (98%) of its foreign exchange earnings.<sup>(14)</sup> The increase in oil revenues from 7.519 billion US dollars in 2003 to 27.5 billion US dollars in 2006 – an almost 270 % increase<sup>(15)</sup> - indicates that the oil industry has been making steady progress, and also that Iraq has regained part of its previous export capacity. It has been estimated that by 2013 Iraq will produce up to 4.5 million barrels of oil per day.<sup>(16)</sup>

Despite steady improvement in the performance of the oil sector – still far from the country's capacity in its better days - the 2009 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report depicts quite a gloomy picture of the Iraqi economy in recent years. A 46 percent unemployment rate in 2005 – 2006,



of which some 62 percent belongs to the youths, is quite illustrative of the gravity of the economic situation and the associated hardships for the populace. Such a picture once put in the context of the substantial increase in oil revenues – as already indicated – provides a clearer picture of the state of the Iraqi economy.<sup>(17)</sup> More recent reports on the Iraqi economy, especially the indices for general economic performance and public welfare, tend to depict a much worse picture.

With the above overall picture in mind, the available data and analysis on the Iraqi economy point to the following major challenges:

- The urgent need for general economic reconstruction, as a matter of priority, which has received scant attention due to the primacy of military-political-security urgencies;
- Urgent reconstruction of the economic-industrial infrastructures destroyed in the course of the extensive air campaigns in 1991 and 2003;
- Job creation on a scale corresponding to the high rates of unemployment; and
- Increase in foreign exchange earnings commensurate with the needs for economic-industrial reconstruction, including through attraction of foreign investment – which is closely related to the questions of political stability and security.

## **6. Mutual Responsibilities of Iraq and Neighboring States towards Regional Stability**

The aggressive attitude, approach and policies of the Ba'athist

regime in Iraq and their negative impact and repercussions on and for the bigger region surrounding Iraq – the Persian Gulf in particular - have been discussed in the preceding pages. Significant changes since 2003 in Iraq, inclusive of the legal-constitutional arrangements, structure of the ruling polity, and the potentials for a pluralistic, democratic governance in the long-term – notwithstanding serious challenges of sorts on the way just discussed – appear to offer a somewhat more promising future foreign and regional policy for the New Iraq. Given these changes, and also taking into consideration the formidable challenges the Iraqi government – polity – will have to deal with in the years ahead, it would be reasonable to assume that Iraq's foreign policy in the future will by necessity follow a moderate, conciliatory approach towards the neighboring countries and the surrounding region. Pursuit of an aggressive approach and policy towards others in the region, somehow similar to that of the old regime, such as repetition of irredentist claims on Kuwait<sup>(18)</sup>, could hardly serve the imperative of national reconciliation, reconstruction, and long-term development. And this is, by definition, a two-way relationship with the neighborhood; that is, regional countries should also pursue approaches and policies towards the New Iraq that would serve the two complementary purposes of helping internal reconciliation and reconstruction as well as bring Iraq back into regional fold commensurate with its status, capacities and potentials.

Within such an overall framework, as discussed earlier, creating stability and security in the Persian Gulf region is



dependent on the development of a new pattern of regional interaction based on the participation and cooperation of all local – regional - actors. A new participatory paradigm in the region would, therefore, require that each and every actor in the region play its due role – commensurate with its status, capacities, weight, and potentials – in a regional, multilateral game and mechanism that is itself developed and arrived at through a consensual process. With the benefit of hindsight, and also taking cue from other regions and similar models and experiences of regional reconciliation, interaction, and cooperation, it would be reasonable to expect that the future regional security arrangement in the Persian Gulf region would, in its elemental construct, entail a set of mutual responsibilities, undertakings, and commitments on the part of every and all regional actors – big and small. The following sub-section will try to look into the general parameters of the commitments envisioned for a future cooperative, proactive arrangement – on the part of Iraq as well as on the part of others.

#### **6-1. Iraq's Commitments towards Neighboring States**

History of Iraq's difficult relations with the neighboring countries during the past several decades in general, and the specific cases of turbulent relations with some countries in the region - such as Iran and Kuwait during Saddam's rule – make sit abundantly clear that return to a normal state of relations and cooperative regional arrangements would entail an overall different foreign policy approach and concrete policies and measures on the part of the New Iraq. In so far as the overall

foreign policy outlook is concerned, Iraq will need to reassure the region and the neighbors of its peaceful intentions as well as its respect, in practical terms, for international law and its recognized rules and regulations, independence and territorial integrity of other states, and equally important, commitment to peaceful settlement of disputes. This could be achieved, among others, through the following policies and measures:

■ **Resolution of outstanding disputes/differences with neighbors through compliance with existing agreements.** The best example in this case relates the Iraqi relations with Iran, for which there exists the 1975 Treaty, with its Annexes and Protocols, that address and cover the wide range of areas of difference (e.g., land and water frontiers) and issues of mutual concern and interest (e.g., non-interference in the internal affairs of one another). The conclusion of the Treaty in 1975 put a practical end to decades of tension and conflict between the two countries<sup>(19)</sup>. It was unilaterally abrogated by Iraq prior to the invasion of Iran in September 1980, and subsequently accepted by Saddam Hussein in summer 1990 in a letter to his Iranian counterpart – President Hashemi Rafsanjani. The Treaty, a valid international document, still constitutes the requisite legal basis for the peaceful settlement of all outstanding differences between the two countries in various areas.

■ **Confidence-building with neighboring states, including through conclusion of mutual security agreements.** As already indicated in the case of the 1975 Iran-Iraq Treaty, the mutual commitments to avoid interfering in each other's affairs proved extremely effective in facilitating the normalization of the



relations between the two countries in mid-1970s, which could still be relied on in more propitious circumstances as exist between the friendly politics in Baghdad and Tehran. However, expressions of doubt by some Iraqi officials or certain political quarters in recent years questioning the validity of the Treaty or raising issue with some of its provisions making their implementation subject to further negotiation, have been taken in Iran as worrisome signs of renegeing and lack of good faith, with unfortunate and serious implications for the long-term relations between the two neighbors. Taking cue from the experience of this Treaty, it could be argued that the conclusion of a similar agreement between Iraq and Kuwait rejecting previous irredentist claims on the latter [Kuwait as Iraq's 19<sup>th</sup> province] would be considered a critical step in the right direction, not only with regard to Kuwait but also for other neighboring countries and for the whole region. All states in the area need to be reassured of the peaceful intentions of the New Iraq in the future, and that Iraq is determined in action to take definitive distance from a troublesome past.

■ **Alleviation of regional concerns over the presence of foreign forces and terrorists.** The presence of foreign forces in Iraq since 2003 – and more so, their active current military-security functions – have led to inevitable serious concerns on the part of Iraq's neighbors – some more than others. This particular element, while seemingly unavoidable within the actual parameters of the post-2003 situation in Iraq, at least in the short-term, has brought in its wake complications in the state of regional security, constitutes a critical area of responsibility of

Iraq towards neighboring countries, and needs to be addressed in earnest. Iraqi engagement and relations with foreign forces inside the Iraqi territory henceforth needs to be defined and regulated along lines and in a manner not found threatening to Iraq's neighbors. It hardly needs to be emphasized that foreign forces should not be used – involved – in intraregional issues and differences or towards the establishment of new security arrangements in the area. This inherently difficult situation has been further complicated with the presence and activities of terrorist cells and groups<sup>(20)</sup>, whether organized by remnants of the Ba'athist regime, other dissatisfied Iraqi political groups, or some of Iraq's neighbors also dissatisfied with the post-2003 governance structure. Continuation of insurgency and terrorist operations in Iraq with the unmistakable objective of creating political instability and undermining governmental authority and power, has also served to further tarnish the already tense state of relations in the region, especially between influential regional states with significant interests and stakes in Iraq; e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia, who have engaged in mutual recrimination accusing each other of perpetrating destabilizing actions and measures inside Iraq. Effective counter-terror and counter-insurgency policies and measures by the Iraqi government not only would help promote internal security but would also serve to ease the security situation on a regional scale and facilitate active regional support for political consolidation in Iraq.

#### **6-2. Commitments of Neighboring States towards Iraq**

As discussed in the chapeau to this section, establishment and





maintenance of sustainable stability and security in the Persian Gulf region depends also on the proactive and constructive approach and policies of other states in the region. Considering the tormented experiences of the past few decades, the pivotal and critical role to be played by the New Iraq to this end was underlined in the preceding lines. The reciprocal approach and policy of others towards Iraq – and the region in its entirety – will be discussed below.

It was mentioned previously that Iraq's neighbors reacted differently to the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq in 2003; Iran and Syria welcomed it, Turkey was generally ambivalent, and the Arab countries disliked it – each, of course, for their own particular or even peculiar reasons. Understandably, a host of differing approaches and policies towards the new situation, and the emergent new governance structure and power elite, followed; ranging from full-fledged support from the Iranian side to generally reluctant Arab reaction. An initially cool and reluctant general Arab posture of political support and holding official diplomatic-political relations at a distance, subsequently gave way to more overt forms of dissatisfaction, as reflected in the seemingly lax control of porous borders and the support extended from various quarters in the Arab world to insurgent forces and currents as well as to terrorist activities – an approach and conduct that still appears to be the case.

Considering the fact that the establishment of regional stability and security requires – and depends on - collective outlook and action by all the regional actors, and having already

discussed the role and responsibilities of Iraq towards the neighboring countries, the role and responsibilities of other countries in the region towards Iraq – and the entire region – also needs to be addressed. Similar to the case of Iraq, each and every country/state in the region – big or small, powerful or otherwise - will need to reassure the region and the neighbors of its peaceful intentions as well as of its respect, in practical terms, for international law and its recognized rules and regulations, independence and territorial integrity of other states, and equally important, commitment to peaceful settlement of disputes. This could be achieved, among others, through the following policies and measures:

■ **Acceptance of the post-Saddam political system in Iraq and normalization of bilateral relations.** The collapse of the Ba'athist regime – Saddam Hussein and the Takrities – and the consequent emergence of a radically different governance structure in Iraq is an Iraqi fait accompli; it has to be accepted and respected by all states in the region – even if not corresponding to the particularistic interests and aspirations of some regional states.<sup>(21)</sup> The post-2003 predominance of Shi'ite-Kurdish coalition in the Iraqi power structure – points to a generally democratic representation, although the actual situation with regard to other segments of the population could still be addressed and dealt with through political-constitutional processes, and not through insurgency, internecine bloodshed, or terrorist operations. Normalization of bilateral relations between the Arab states in the region – particularly in the Persian Gulf – with the New Iraq and the expansion of relations



in various fields would no doubt make the best practical contribution to the return of normalcy and political stability to Iraq, and hence, to the region at large.

■ **Non-interference of regional states in Iraq's internal affairs.**

Notwithstanding the particularistic concerns or sectarian interests of other states in the region<sup>(22)</sup>, the imperative of promoting – and maintenance – of security and stability in the war-stricken Iraq and for that matter in the region in its entirety requires that all regional states take actual and effective distance from previous approaches and policies of interference in Iraqi affairs with the objective of “hopefully” overturning the post-2003 political reality. Since the general trend towards institutionalization of the process of change and overall improvement in the political-intelligence situation have rendered the practical prospects for such an eventuality impossible, effective return to normalcy in Iraq, in so far as the role of regional and neighboring states is concerned, requires strict commitment to non-interference. This would entail, among others, lending practical support to the on-going constitutional processes; e.g., democratic elections, also simultaneously ending support for insurgency and terrorism. Pursuit of such an approach and policy by Iraq's neighbors would also help elevate the situation from the current state of internecine bloodshed to a more mature level of political engagement and interaction.

■ **Confidence-building policies and measures.** Beyond acceptance of the new political reality in Iraq and normalization of diplomatic-political relations, as essential prerequisites of a proactive approach, other states in the region can also take

concrete measures towards confidence-building with Iraq. Given the past history of difficult, tense bilateral relations in the area, including with regard to territorial differences and claims, regional states can undertake a range of concrete measures towards resolving the outstanding differences with Iraq, whether of a territorial nature, frontier disputes or security concerns of sorts. The negative strategic impact and implications of the perpetuation of the existing differences and disputes on the development of proactive, participatory security arrangements in the future hardly needs to be over-emphasized.<sup>(23)</sup>

■ **Expansion of economic and developmental cooperation.** Three consecutive military engagements since 1980, over a decade of biting sanctions, and presence and engagement of foreign military-intelligence forces since 2003 have left Iraq vastly devastated and ruined much of its physical economic and industrial infrastructure. The continuation of war or war-like atmosphere since 2003 and the concomitant political instability, tumult, and bloodshed have further complicated the situation and prevented meaningful economic and industrial reconstruction, which could be much ameliorated through the active cooperation and engagement of the neighboring states – who happen to be generally well-endowed and resource-abundant in a uniquely privileged position to undertake needed investments in Iraq. In fact, rapid improvement in Iraq's overall economic performance and tangible betterment in the economic lot and daily lives of the populace would significantly help stabilize the political situation, strengthen the country's fledgling institutional capacity, and undermine the efficacy of the on-



going efforts of insurgents and terrorists. Expansion of economic cooperation by the regional states will undoubtedly help Iraq take major strides towards moving beyond the current difficult circumstances.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The present article has looked into the past approaches and policies of Iraq towards the Persian Gulf region since its creation as an independent state in 1921. For the larger part of this period, especially since 1958 and more so, since the Ba'athist ascendance to unchallenged supremacy in 1968 – which ended in 2003 – Iraq has played a generally negative role with regard to stability and security of the region. Invasion of Iran in 1980 and occupation of Kuwait in 1990, leading to two consecutive costly wars with devastating consequences of different kinds, including the 12-year long- biting UN sanctions and the subsequent 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, have in addition to devastation of Iraq also left their long shadow on the stability and security of the Persian Gulf, one of the most strategic areas in today's world. The presence and active engagement of foreign military forces in the region, particularly the US forces, as a side effect of the Iraqi follies and their subsequent regional dynamism, has as well served to further complicate the regional situation, exacerbated the relations between and among the states in the region, and made the prospects for cooperative, participatory regional security arrangements murky and beyond actual reach.

The collapse of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 and the emergence of a majority-based new governance structure in Iraq, notwithstanding short-term instability and still on-going tumult and deep-seated political/sectarian differences and bickering, by all indications appear to bode well for the future. The development in Iraq, albeit gradually and even painstakingly, of a broad-based pluralistic governance system will not only serve the long-term development of the country, but it would also help the promotion of stability and security in the area. A pluralistic, democratic, and accountable government in Iraq, quite unlike the previous dictatorial, aggressive and unaccountable regime, cannot be expected to threaten the neighboring countries and the region or, worse, engage in wars rooted in grandiose ambitions or territorial expansion.

The change in Iraq's political structure – and the reasonable expectations arising there from – as argued in this paper, constitute the very basis for the development and emergence of a proactive, participatory, and cooperative security arrangement in the Persian Gulf area. Such an arrangement, it was argued here, will depend on the mutual role and responsibilities of both the New Iraq and the neighboring states. Each and every country/state in the region – big or small, powerful and otherwise – will be expected to comply with the established principles, and rules and regulations of international law, including respect for the political independence and territorial integrity of one another, and commitment to resolve differences and disputes through peaceful means. It was discussed in the paper that the New Iraq will have to overcome



the current political, security and economic challenges it faces, and simultaneously move to reassure others of its peaceful intentions in the future and act in a manner to help promote collective stability and security in the area, including with regard to its relations with foreign military forces currently engaged in Iraq. For the same token, others will also be expected to accept and recognize the new reality in Iraq, desist from interference in the internal affairs of Iraq through fomenting insurgency or terrorism, and extend their political support and practical assistance towards helping the Iraqi government weather the current challenges towards restoring a state of normalcy and promoting stability, and national reconstruction and development – as a prerequisite for the collective promotion of stability and security in the entire Persian Gulf region. Promotion of regional security mechanisms through the active, participatory, and cooperative engagement of the states in the region will also serve to reduce the kind, level and degree of participation or influence of supra-regional forces in this regard.

Given the complexity of the current situation on the ground in Iraq, and the less-than-desirable state of relations between and among other players in the region, it goes without saying that a set of approaches, policies and measures will be needed – in the short- to medium-term – to facilitate the collective move towards developing the parameters of a regional security system for the Persian Gulf region. The following can, among others, be considered as some of the practical ways and means to this end.

1. Establishment of a permanent regional mechanism for

the exchange of information on issues of concern to regional security in the Persian Gulf; e.g., terrorism, extremism, illicit drugs, etc.;

2. Devising of a collective regional mechanism for confidence-building approaches, policies and measures in the region; including with regard to the wide range of issues such as territorial disputes or the question of the presence of foreign forces in the region;

3. Development of regional mechanisms for the expansion of collective economic and development cooperation in the region, including the promotion of free trade agreements within the region, as well as cooperation in such fields as environment, health, migration, etc.;

4. Devising regional mechanisms for the promotion of cultural exchange and cooperation, with emphasis, among others, on the promotion of ethnic, sectarian, lingual, and religious peaceful co-existence and understanding; and

5. Establishment of a permanent regional forum of ministers for the organized exchange of views and political consultation on the wide range of issues of concern to individual states or groups of states in the region.

Collective consensual decisions within the region on the above measures can help establish the elemental structure for an organized, institutional collective effort towards building a new regional security system/arrangement.



## Notes

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