

# Iran, the New Iraq, and the Political– Security System in the Persian Gulf

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A joint publication of the Islamic Azad University and the Center for Strategic Research  
(CSR), Fall 2008  
Tehran [in Persian]



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Kayhan Barzegar, is a faculty member at the Department of International Relations at Science and Research Campus, Islamic Azad University, and a senior research fellow at the Center for Strategic Research (CSR). He is expert on Iranian foreign policy and the Middle East comparative politics, with special focus on the Persian Gulf region. He has published a number of articles and two books on the political-security developments after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In his recent book which is in fact a sequel to his earlier research on Iraq, including the 2007 book entitled *Iran's Foreign Policy in the New Iraq* he undertakes to explore the effects of the recent and ongoing political-security developments in the new Iraq on Iran's national security and interests, the region's politics, and most importantly the Persian Gulf political-security architecture.

The author's main hypothesis in the book *Iran, the New Iraq, and the Political-Security System in the Persian Gulf* is that the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq and the subsequent emergence of a Shi'ite-dominated government has created a favorable situation for Iran and significantly increased its potential for a much stronger role in the Persian Gulf, and on a larger scale in the entire Middle East. In his analysis, such a potential is much facilitated by the enhanced possibility of a

strategic cooperation between the New Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran, hence providing greater opportunities for a more activist regional and international foreign policy. The crux of the author's argument in the book revolves around the necessity of adoption of new approaches in the Iranian foreign policy towards the New Iraq and the Persian Gulf region.

The book starts with a foreword and an introduction. It is comprised of four parts and nine chapters, inclusive of the conclusion. In his introduction, the author reviews the developments in Iraq after 9/11, particularly the U.S. invasion in March 2003 which led to the collapse of the Ba'athist regime and the establishment of a new kind of power and political structure in Iraq. It is further argued in the opening pages that the developments in Iraq have profoundly transformed the role of regional and global actors in the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf region. The author has surveyed Iraq's crisis from domestic, regional, and international perspectives.

In addressing the domestic perspective, he has focused on endemic and ongoing rivalry among sectarian, political and ethnic factions over power and the redefinition of roles under the new political structure in the country. From the regional perspective, he addresses the roles and interests of neighboring states and global actors in the New Iraq, especially Iran and the United States which have played a pivotal role in the emergence of the new situation. Within this framework, he also discusses the implications of the U.S. role and presence in Iraq for the neighboring states, particularly Iran. And from the international perspective, Dr. Barzegar elaborates on the role of international



institutions and organizations in Iraq's crisis, and the inter-relationship between the political and security problems in the Middle East and those at the global level. In addressing these issues, the author emphasizes the transformation of the nature of security threats in the Middle East. He reiterates that the previous dominant pattern of traditional and military rivalry among states has over time transformed into a new pattern involving threats to human security and ethno-religious conflicts, and in a general sense, threats dealing with the domestic power structure and the process of transition of power in societies. Along this line of argument, he has also dealt with the significance of developments in the New Iraq and their impact on Iran's national interests and security, including at the bilateral, regional and international levels.

Part one of the book, entitled "The New Iraq and Perspectives of Power in the Middle East," is comprised of two chapters. In the first chapter "Regional Crises and New Geopolitical Developments in the Middle East" - the author surveys developments in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region in the wake of September 11 attacks in the United States. He argues that these new developments have caused transformation in the nature of security threats and also changed the role of regional and international actors. While addressing the regional picture and its developments, the author has focused on Iran's geopolitical features, inclusive of the significance of the ideological factor. In his analysis, the post-9/11 developments, the global "War on Terror," and the rise of the Shi'ite ideology have all played a role towards increasing

Iran's regional importance in the Persian Gulf region and the entire Middle East. From his vantage point, these developments have also significantly affected the state of political–security issues in the region.

The second chapter - “The Iraqi Crisis and Change in the Power and Politics in the Middle East” - deals with the regional impact of the Iraqi crisis in 2003, which, among others, further brought to light the reality of complex structures of power and politics in the region as well as the critical role that cultural, religious and historical structures and relationships in the countries in the region play in regional affairs and developments. Among the new developments in the region, the author also draws attention to a trend of decline in the status of foreign powers in the eyes of the nations and states in the Middle East as well as to the emerging conflict between democracy and security. In his analysis, the process of establishment of security and democracy in the region faces serious challenges as a result of the twin impact of long–established interference of foreign powers in regional affairs and the diversity of power and political structures in the region.

Part two of the book entitled “Iran and the New Iraq: A New Chapter in Bilateral Relations” is divided into two chapters - Chapters three and four. In chapter three - entitled “Iran and the New Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities” - the author argues that despite long–standing differences, especially during the reign of the Ba’ath Party, Iran and Iraq are not strategic enemies. He believes that the establishment of a new government in Iraq comprised of all major ethno–religious



factions, commensurate with their relative weight, and also change in the perceptions in both countries based on mutual threat can help solve many problems between Tehran and Baghdad.

The fourth chapter entitled “The Impact of Shi’ite Factor on the Relationship between Iran and the New Iraq” discusses the significant role this ideological [sectarian] factor has played in the relations between the two countries, especially in the post-2003 era. The author explores this liaison in light of the centrality of the Shi’ite ideology in the governance structure of the Islamic Republic, and in the formulation and conduct of its foreign policy at both regional and international levels. Placing the role and significance of this particular [ideological] factor in regional context, the author then looks at the current outlooks in the Arab world towards the Iranian posture and policy, including the perceived objective of creating a so-called Shi’ite Crescent and the apprehensions vis-à-vis Iran’s growing regional stature and influence. In the author’s analysis, to the contrary, the Shi’ite factor can indeed serve as a confidence-building element towards promoting strategic cooperation between and among nations/countries in the region in various social, cultural, and political fields and also towards deterring security threats against the region.

The third part of Dr. Barzegar’s book - entitled “Iran and the United States in the New Iraq” - is itself comprised of chapters five and six. Chapter five - “The United States, the New Iraq, and the Scenario for Iranian Regional Role” - addresses the Iranian foreign policy in the region in the wake of

the Iraqi crisis and underlines the principally defensive nature of this policy. The author argues that Iran pursued this strategy as a reaction to the new security threats resulting from the direct presence of the American forces in Iran's immediate security environment. From this vantage point, Iran has been trying to link its security to the security of the region through pursuing a "inter-correlated security" strategy and "active and effective participation in the region's politics" aiming at simultaneous tackling of [new] security threats and enhancement of its bargaining regional power.

In the sixth chapter on "The Roots of Conflict between Iran and the United States in the New Iraq" Dr. Barzegar explores the state of the conflictive relations between the two countries following the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003. In his estimation, the new roles played by both sides in and around the new situation in Iraq, and as a corollary in the Persian Gulf region, have lain at the heart of this conflictive relationship. He argues that Iran and the United States, as the two major actors in the Persian Gulf, adopt and pursue policies that are geared in essence to the containment of each other. He goes on to further argue that the New Iraq is practically serving as a turning point in the ongoing conflict between them; that is, while it could serve to exacerbate further their relations, it could as well provide a potential venue for the promotion of positive, proactive engagement between them, utilizing Iran's unique ideological and geopolitical position in the area. In this particular regard, he draws attention to the critical role Shi'ite Iran can play – and in fact has been playing – in the fight against terrorism as





well as against Salafi extremism in the context of the greater Middle East.

Part four of Dr. Barzegar's book entitled "The New Iraq and the Political-Security System in the Persian Gulf", similar to previous parts, is also comprised of two chapters. Chapter seven - "The Theoretical Framework for the Political-Security System in the Persian Gulf" tries to lay out a theoretical framework for the purpose at hand. In his analysis, such theories of international relations as "neo-realism" and "regional convergence," as fully positivist and reductionist theories, do not appear to be able to provide a workable pattern for the promotion of indigenous security arrangements and intra-regional cooperation in the Persian Gulf region. He, instead, considers the theory of "regional security" – representing an intermediary approach in current security studies - as an appropriate analytical framework for analyzing the post-2003 security situation in the region. Within this overall framework, two security patterns in the region are discussed: First, an indigenous security regime based on commonalities and full-fledged cooperation; and second, a regional security system based on the Copenhagen School. The chapter also looks into the past experiences of security and cooperation patterns in the Persian Gulf region as espoused and promoted by the United States – which the author critiques because of their materialist and utilitarian nature and reductionist attitudes towards the diverse identities and cultures in the region.

In chapter eight - "The New Iraq and the Characteristics of the New Political-Security System in the Persian Gulf" - the



author lays out his argument in support of the necessity of erecting a regional security architecture based on the recognition and consideration of the new variables which effectively bear on the nature of power and politics in the Persian Gulf region in the post-2003 situation. In his analysis, the establishment of such a regional security system depends on the collective and mutual cooperation between and among all regional states, including Iran and Iraq. Such a regional security system, first and foremost, calls on all states in the region to take distance from and effectively abandon previous mutual threat perceptions, which in turn depends on the facilitation and promotion - and consolidation - of cultural, social, political, economic, and strategic interactions within the region. The author further argues that the new security challenges in the Persian Gulf region can be addressed - and dealt with - through mutual cooperation between and among major regional and global actors with stakes in this region. He cautions, however, that the Iranian regional policy in the Persian Gulf can hardly be separated from issues and aspects related to the United States. Conversely, the United States, a foreign power with practical engagement in the region, also needs Iranian sympathy, support and active contribution towards promoting security in Iraq - and in the greater Middle East. In the author's reckoning, Iran's long-term interests would be better served through active pursuit of both regional coalition-making and proactive participation in new and emerging global processes and arrangements.

In concluding his book, Dr. Barzegar draws on the recent



developments in Iraq and their regional impact, and enumerates, in particular, the catalogue of challenges and opportunities in so far as the Iranian national security and interests are concerned. From his vantage point, the articulation of Iranian relations with the New Iraq is one of the major challenges in this regard. He further goes on to argue that such a relationship should, in principle and as a matter of practical convenience, be balanced, on the one hand, with Iran's bilateral relations with the rest of the Arab world, and on the other, with major global powers, particularly the United States. In the author's estimation, formulation and effective pursual of an active foreign policy by Iran towards and in the New Iraq can certainly help secure such an important neighboring country into a long-term strategic friend/ally and contribute to the redefinition of the political-security equation – and system - in the Persian Gulf region. Supporting his argument, Dr. Barzegar places special emphasis on the range of opportunities in various fields in the New Iraq, and underlines that effective utilization of such opportunities would contribute to the enhancement of Iran's regional position and posture, including also with major global powers. And finally, far from being oblivious to the challenges confronting Iran in the New Iraq, the author also underlines the importance – and the imperative – of Iran's serious policy and efforts geared to assuaging the risks and challenges involved in the ongoing process of state-building and political transition in Iraq as well as dealing with the threat emanating from the presence of American forces there.

Coming to the conclusion of my review of Dr. Barzegar's



book, I would add just a few more words. In my overall judgment, he has produced a well-researched book and done a good job in explaining the developments in the post-2003 Iraq as well as their regional impact and repercussions, particularly with regard to the immediate security environment of the Islamic Republic. His reliance on a solid conceptual and analytical outlook has helped him to this end, which I regard as a definitive plus for him and his work. Moreover, his objective and realistic outlook towards the wide range of issues under discussion in the book, inclusive of regional issues in general, and particularly the rather sensitive issue of Iran and U.S. relations and policies, come across quite distinctly. Based on this realistic outlook, the author has introduced a number of practical approaches – and concrete suggestions – towards the promotion and establishment of a new regional security system in the Persian Gulf region. And finally, I believe that his eloquence in writing an easily readable book, notwithstanding the inevitable technical-analytical jargon in the conceptual parts, is another important feature of the work. I recommend this work as a serious piece of research and valuable source on the New Iraq and the Persian Gulf to all interested students, researchers and policy-makers. I, for one, will look forward to his future pieces of research in these fields.

**Zahra Tavakkoli**