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Iran's top priority in Iraq is anti-Americanism

By Sadegh Zibakalam

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The general perception among many experts and observers of Iran is that Iranian leaders prefer to see a grand victory by Iraq's Shiites in the Iraqi general elections next month. It is of course true that Tehran desires to see a government in Iraq dominated by Shiites. But that is only part of the truth. There are a host of other Iranian considerations regarding the future structure of power in Iraq.

First and foremost is the American factor. It would be no exaggeration to say that this is for many radical Iranians more crucial than even the Shiite factor. If we consider two different groups in Iraq, one liberal and pro-Western or, even worse, pro-American but Shiite; and the second not Shiite but anti-Western and, better still, anti-American, there is little doubt which of the two would be preferred or even actively supported by the Iranians. In other words, being Shiite, while important for the Iranian radical leaders, is not the exclusive criterion; Tehran also wants to know where the group stands vis-à-vis the United States.

This is a crucial point that is frequently not understood by many Arabs, both inside and outside Iraq, who constantly accuse the Islamic regime of trying to install a Shiite regime in Iraq and, indeed, seeking to create enclaves of Shiite domination in the Middle East. Of course the Islamic regime prefers to see a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and, recently, Yemen. But its priority is anti-Americanism, not Shiism. This is one explanation for the Islamic regime's close ties with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales and other anti-American national leaders.

The anti-American factor means that Tehran will not support secular and pro-American Shiite groups such as the one represented by Ayad Allawi. In contrast, the Islamic leaders will throw all the support they can behind Shiite groups represented by radicals like Moqtada al-Sadr.

The next consideration is the Sistani factor. Iran's leaders pay a great deal of respect to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Conversely, Sistani has spoken warmly about the Iranian leadership. Despite the exchange of these apparent warm messages between the Iraqi Shiite leader in Najaf and his fellow ayatollahs in Qom and Tehran, there are two major differences between them.

The first concerns the US. Sistani does not share the Iranian ayatollahs' strong anti-American sentiment. Far from it, he has tacitly endorsed the US presence on his country's soil. Every time Sistani makes a comment or offers an opinion critical of the Americans, the Iranian media immediately magnify it. But on other occasions, when his comments have been more accommodating and compromising toward the US, they have been ignored or manipulated by the same media in Iran.

The second difference between the ayatollahs in Qom and in Najaf is more fundamental. It is over the substantial issue of the Guardianship of the Jurisprudent (wilayat al-faqih), upon which the foundations of the Islamic Republic are based. Ever since the emergence of the Islamic regime in 1979, Iranian clerical leaders have defended the idea of the Shiite jurisprudent as the sole system for a Shiite state. Anyone not supporting this notion has been branded an improper Shiite, a counterrevolutionary and, frequently, an infidel. To the Iranians' great dismay, Sistani has avoided supporting the concept of wilayat al-faqih. Of course he has not explicitly dismissed the notion, but the very fact that he has not supported it has created a major lacuna in Iran's grand ideological scenario.

The third Iranian consideration is the sensitive issue of de-Baathification. The recent American intervention to persuade Iraqi leaders to allow ex-Baath party members to participate in the coming general elections provoked a strong reaction in Iran. The Islamic leaders accused the US government of trying to restore to power its old Iraqi allies of the Saddam Hussein era. Iranian media wrote that the Muslim Iraqi people would not allow the return to power of former US allies during the coming elections.

Finally, there is the important issue of oil. Last December, the Iraqi government signed several substantial oil contracts with major international oil consortiums, including Anglo-American companies. Iranians observed this unique development with concern insofar as one of the oil fields in question is located near the Iranian border. The Iraqi authorities then suddenly announced that Iranian troops had occupied an oil field near the country's borders. Tehran dismissed the occupation and explained that Iranian border guards were trying to demarcate the border.

In short, Iran was trying to convey to both Western oil companies and the Iraqi government that there are major border disputes between the two countries and that no one can simply enter these areas, whether for oil or for any other objective. The Islamic government will be watching the outcome of the March elections in Iraq to begin the painful business of settling these border disputes, which were the principal cause of the bitter eight-year war between the two countries.

