

Optimism on Iran

By Trita Parsi

By negotiating a Shiite truce, Tehran embarrassed Washington in early April and arguably proved itself to be a more potent stabilizer of southern Iraq.

Iran's role in Iraq came as a sharp reminder that the George W. Bush administration's accusations of Iranian mischief notwithstanding, Iranian influence in Iraq is both undeniable and multifaceted. As Washington starts to come to terms with this reality, the Middle East inches closer to its moment of truth: Is the United States ready to share the region with Iran?

As the risk of a U.S.-Iran war is deemed to have dropped in the past few months, in spite of the resignation of Admiral William Fallon and Bush's designation of Iran as the number one threat to the United States, a modicum of optimism for U.S.-Iran relations in 2009 has emerged.

The poisonous atmosphere between the Bush and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administrations has prevented the two countries from exploring areas of common interest. With a new U.S. president taking office in January 2009, and with the Iranian presidential elections in March of that year, both Iran and the United States may have new presidents by mid-2009. Such a development would certainly help create a window of opportunity for the two countries to reduce tensions and begin resolving their differences.

But both Tehran and Washington have a proven track record of missing political opportunities. And in this specific case, even if the two parties make use of changing political circumstances, readiness to seek a strategic accommodation appears to be lacking in Washington.

This is not necessarily due to a lack of will but to a failure to appreciate what a resolution to U.S.-Iran tensions would require—from the United States.

The discussions in Washington regarding any potential opening to Tehran have centered on boosting economic incentives in hopes that larger economic carrots would compel a change in Iranian behavior. At times, the idea of offering security guarantees has been considered in an effort to deprive Iran of incentives to develop a nuclear deterrence against the United States.

Though both of these components may be necessary to put U.S.-Iran relations on a different footing, they are likely insufficient. The notion that the U.S.-Iran standoff can be resolved solely through economic incentives and limited security guarantees is premised on the realities of yesteryear's Middle East. Current facts on the ground are quite different—Iran's regional influence is unquestionable, and rolling Iran back out of Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and perhaps even Gaza may no longer be realistic.

The question is no longer, if it ever was, about what economic incentives are required to change Iranian behavior. Rather, to reach a settlement with Iran that could help stabilize Iraq, prevent a Taliban resurrection in Afghanistan, reach a political deal in Lebanon, and create a better climate to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United States must arguably accept Iran's role in the region and begin focusing on how to influence Iranian behavior rather than how to roll back Iranian influence.

Neither Washington nor Tehran can wish the other away. While the U.S. days in Iraq may be numbered, it is not likely to leave the entire Middle East anytime soon. Nor can Washington continue to design policies and arrangements in the region based on the notion that Iran can be neglected and excluded. Sooner or later, Iran and the United States must learn how to share the region.

But a full comprehension of what a future Middle East order with Iran fully rehabilitated in its political and economic structure has not been reached or considered in Washington. While keeping Iran out is no longer a realistic option—at a minimum Iran has sufficient spoiler power to undermine any initiatives aimed at prolonging Tehran's exclusion—bringing Iran in from the cold will have momentous repercussions for the region's order and for U.S. allies that currently are benefiting from Iran's exclusion.

It is understandable that Washington is unprepared for this scenario. After all, Tehran has itself been notoriously incapable, or unwilling, to define the regional role it envisions for itself and the implications this would have for the United States and Iran's neighbors. With Tehran reluctant to clarify what it wants, Washington has been left guessing. Tehran's failure to be more forthcoming about its ambitions has also enabled rivals to describe Iranian objectives as hegemonic.

Nevertheless, reality requires Washington to begin considering not if, but the extent of an Iranian role in the region that the United States and its allies can agree to. This may necessitate a paradigm shift in Washington's approach to Iran and the Middle East, but failure to reconcile with Iranian demands justified by the new balance in the region will likely disable future administrations from turning political opportunities into real diplomatic breakthroughs—irrespective of their positive intentions.

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