

Interregional rivalry cloaked in Iraqi Arab nationalism and Iran secular nationalism, and Shiite ideology

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Abstract

To understand the contemporary Iranian–Iraqi connection, it is important to look at their relationship dating back to the Classical Era. With Iran (the Achaemenid Persia) extending its control over the territory today known as Iraq since 550 BC, and with Iraq trying to influence Iranian politics since General Qasim’s nationalist coup in 1958 and Saddam Hussayn’s invasion of Iran in 1980, the two neighbours show a constant aspiration for more hegemony in the region. This article argues that Iran influences Iraq for its own political, cultural and economic gains, while Iraq influences Iran because of a general failure of Arab nationalist ideologies and the desire to become a power broker in the Persian Gulf region. To do that the following examines Islamic political activism in Iraq; focuses on Ayatullah Khomeini’s connection with his Iraqi counterparts during his exile there; and takes a look at the Shah’s surveillance of Iranian Communists and their support by the Iraqi government after 1958, as evidenced in the newly released SAVAK documents.

Keywords

Iran
Iraq
Da’wa or Dawa
Qasim
the Shah
Khomeini
Saddam Hussayn
Iranian communists or
Tudeh
Iraqi nationalism
SAVAK

Introduction

When the 2003 American-led assault and occupation of Iraq was completed, keeping peace and civil order proved more difficult than the actual military campaign that toppled the Iraqi regime. As the security situation worsened, different political think tanks along with the US government officials began claiming that the Islamic Republic of Iran was meddling in Iraqi affairs in ways that were contrary to the invading armies’ objectives. A Congressional Research Service report presented to the US Congress, for example, stated that ‘Iranian influence in Iraq is currently assessed as extensive’ (Katzman 2008: CRS6). The report further claimed that the Islamic Republic assists ‘all major Shiite Muslim political factions in Iraq’ as most of these factions enjoy ‘longstanding ideological, political, and religious ties to Tehran and [its] armed militias’ (Katzman 2008: CRS1). Today’s major Iraqi Islamist leaders belonging to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, formerly known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, claimed the report, share a deep and unwavering relationship with the Iranian government which flourished during their exilic years in Iran starting in the 1980s until 2003. The report concluded this as the reason for Iranian influence in Iraqi politics (Katzman 2008: CRS2).

On the basis of more recent research, this study analyzes Iranian–Iraqi relations and offers a more nuanced perspective. Although only rudimentary evidence proving Iran’s culpability in influencing Iraqi politics exists today (Beehner and Bruno 2007), a historical examination of the two countries’ relationship should paint a better picture of today’s event through the use of the past as a key to how this relationship has evolved. This essay suggests that interference by both Iran and Iraq in each other’s affairs remains a long standing inter-regional issue pursued aggressively by both states. In other words, if Iran meddles in Iraq’s politics, gaining major advantage, its political, religious and economic well-being remains the only goal. And if Iraq meddles in Iranian affairs, in addition to the same reasons that Iranians did, it seems that a failed nationalist agenda and a desire to play a major power’s role in the Persian Gulf region are motivations (Tripp 2000: 223–35).

Divided into three parts, this study takes an historical look at the long relationship between Iran and Iraq, at times bloody and violent, but with short periods of fruitful and positive prospects during the twentieth century. The first section offers a short narrative of Iran and Iraq’s history in the context of their interaction from the Achaemenid conquest of Babylon and the rise of Persia as a regional power and its interaction with ancient Iraq to the end of the twentieth century. The second section considers the inter-regional politics and the Cold War that often pitted these two nations against each other. Of particular interest in this period is a discussion and analysis of newly released Iranian intelligence documents that serves as a tool to understand the extent of Iran’s fear of the changes after the 1958 Revolution toppled the Iraqi monarchy.

The last part focuses on the current claims of Iranian influence in Iraqi politics by analyzing new research on the formation of Iraqi Islamic parties over five decades, from the late 1950s to the early 2000s. Apart from recounting Iranian and Iraqi interregional relations, this article offers a new perspective by using recently declassified SAVAK (Gasiorowski 2008; Jackson 1979) field reports (the last Iranian monarch’s intelligence apparatus) that depict an Iranian monarch’s heightened alert because of the overthrowing of his Iraqi counterpart in 1958 (Ismael 1982: 18). That event led to an amplified state of panic and paranoia in Iran as Iraq leaned towards the Soviet Union for support in its fight against western hegemonic designs and practices. As a result, SAVAK increased its activities in Iraq to discover how Iraq was trying to subvert Iran by lending logistic support to the monarchy’s biggest threat, the Iranian Communist party. Also, new research focusing on Iraqi Islamic parties offers a fresh perspective allowing one to argue that if today’s Shiite dominated government seems to lean towards Islamic rule, it is because an Iraqi political Islamic movement existed long before Ayatullah Khomeini initiated his fight against the Iranian monarchy in the mid 1960s.

In a recent statement, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi (Roggio 2007; Ware 2006), pointed to Iran’s expanding presence in Iraq giving as proof the operating of Iranian banks, along with economic and military training with the objective of helping Iraqis reconstruct their war torn nation (Glanz 2007). Qomi’s words simply confirm Iranian involvement in Iraqi affairs. Notwithstanding the ambassador’s assertion,

no one knows with certainty the full extent of the involvement of Iranians in Iraq (International Crisis Group 2005). But if history is any indication, it appears that this mutual interest in each other's affairs did not start with the US occupation.

Historical background

The relationship between Mesopotamians and Persians (Frye 1975: 234), the ancestors of today's Iraqis and Iranians involves ancient rivalry, medieval collaboration and both ideological and military conflict and cooperation. Their current disputes should be seen in three different periods of rivalries between 'regional empires . . . , imperialist penetration . . . , and nationalist rivalry' (Ismael 1982: 1–2). Rooted in 'historical, cultural, geopolitical and national factors . . .' (Abdulghani 1984: i), the complexity of Iranian–Iraqi relationship mirrors each society's individual intricacies. Before the beginning of the Common Era, Persia's 'curiosity' and desire for expansion at the expense of the Babylonians allowed the two, first, to ignore each other and then, fight over their differences culminating in the Persian Achaemenid conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE (Frye 1975: 234). The inter-regional political milieu stabilized somewhat by default after Alexander of Macedon's 331 BCE conquests, and the rise of the Hellenic Age. The division of Alexander's empire in 312 BCE by the Greek Seleucus ended an era of imperial hegemony and started a new phase in Mesopotamian history.

The Persian Parthians ended the Hellenic age in 64 BCE, managing to rule the lands called Iran and Iraq for almost 300 years till 224 CE. The Persians ruled over what is now Iraq since only one Persian group defeated another. The last were the Sassanians (224–627 CE) who were the regional power until the Islamic Conquest. Prior to the coming of Islam, the Euphrates demarcated the western borders of the Zoroastrian Sassanians with Christian Byzantium, with the former extending its territorial control to the banks of the Indus River to the east. Today's conflict-ridden Iraqi province of al-Anbar which literally means granary (Morony 2006: 144–45) became a Persian military depot which sat at the border dividing the seventh century regional powers (Morony 2006: 144–45). Hence, today's Iraq remained part of greater Iran, or as Marshal Hodgson coined the term, the 'Persianate World' with its capital at Ctesiphon, some 35 kilometres south of Baghdad (Hodgson 1974, Volume 1: 96). One can argue that the possible lack of insight and modern historians' refusal to closely examine this region's history leads to an analysis void of the centuries-old cultural exchanges, which highlight the commonalities between Iran and Iraq.

Although not immediate, Islam's expansion into Mesopotamia and then into the Iranian plateau created an era of unity, which gave birth to a symbiotic relationship between Persia and Mesopotamia. After a period of limited resistance to the Islamic conquest of Iran and the Muslim Arab conquerors' occasional aggressive outbursts against Zoroastrian Persians (Boyce 1984: 116), the Iranians and Iraqis collaborated in almost all political, economic and cultural matters, thus, forming one of the most glorious historical periods known to Islamic civilization (Frye 1954: 41, 42). Modelled after the Sassanian round city (Bowersock, Brown and Grabar

1 For a better understanding of this period and the increasing role of the Persians in the Arab Muslim court of the newly established Abbasid caliphate read Yarshater, Ehsan (1998), 'The Persian Presence in the Islamic World', in Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (eds.), *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 4–125; see specially pp. 56–59.

1999: 329), Baghdad became the Abbasid Caliphate's capital, ultimately evolving into the centre that 'ruled the Muslim world' (Kennedy 2006). Sassanian administrative policies and procedures, along with Persian ministers and courtiers filled the infrastructure of most of the Abbasid caliph's courts. At one point the competitive rivalry between these two regions seemed to dissipate, but in the end, the Abbasid rulers were aware of the fact that albeit Muslim, Persians were not Arabs, and only clients, or *mawālī* (Crone 1980: 56, 57) of the faith (Yarshater 1998: 56–59).¹

The Islamic schism born out of the succession crisis immediately following the Prophet Muhammad's passing and the birth of Shi'ism as an opposition party provided a venue for the Iranians to construct a new identity within Islam. Shi'ism would later evolve into a revolutionary sect in Iraq and Iran. The Persians used their Zoroastrian heritage in developing distinctive Shiite rituals and extended their presence within the realm of Islam (Strausberg 2004: 36, 723). The Iranians evolved into ardent Shiites sympathizing with, and then protecting, the *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's household and direct line of descendents) in their struggle to rule the *ummah*. The Iranian identity-forming process gained new momentum almost 550 years after the last Shiite Imam went into the Great Occultation or *ghaybat al-kubrā* (Nasr 2006: 74), when Shah Ismā'īl, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, declared Shi'ism as the Iranian state religion in 1501 (Momen 1985: 105). This political decision strengthened the imaginary line dividing the Turkish Ottomans and the Persian Safavids and put the Iranians in direct opposition to Iraq, which by the mid-sixteenth century was an Ottoman province or *vilayet* (Tripp 2000: 12; Ismael 1982: 2). Notwithstanding the Iranians' high regard for, and yearly pilgrimage to, Shiite shrines like Imam Ali's in Najaf and Imam Hussayn's in Karbala, the political rivalry between the Safavid Shiite and the Iraqi Sunnis exacerbated the already tense relations between the two powers (Ismael 1982: 2). The Wahhabi raids (Litvak 1998: 121) in sacking the same sites in 1801 failed to end Iranian interests in their holy shrines in Najaf and Karbala. To the contrary, Sunni attacks made them even more adamant to protect what they perceived as rightfully their's spiritually and doctrinally (Momen 1985: 31).

Despite the fact that there were Sunni–Shiite clashes, when there were Iranian Shiite dissidents, they often sought safe haven in the Shiite holy cities located in Iraq. Jamal al-Dīn Asadābādī (al-Afghānī), Iranian constitutionalist, Ayatullāh Muhammad Kāzīm Khurāsānī, and most recently an Iranian dissident group, with the proclaimed aim of destroying the Islamic government in Iran, the Mujāhidīn-e Khalq (MEK), have all called Iraq home at some point (Najafi 1997: 13). The small band of clerics and their struggle to save the Iranian constitution and parliament (1906–1911) remained somewhat centred in Najaf, and it seems constitutionalists connected to the Shiite hierarchy in Iran also looked towards the influential citizens of this city for direction. The Ottomans welcomed this, seeing it as yet another form of fighting against the Iranians (Najafi 1997: 13).

Iran and Iraq's socio-political conditions improved little after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the citizens of each region struggled to make progress, while responding to European modernity and fighting the colonial powers. Both countries made sacrifices to free themselves from

western imperialist schemes and colonial activities which included, but were not limited to British support of native despotism. The history of Iran and Iraq in the 1900s is a story of lost hope, violent revolutions, political sabotage and wars that collectively seemed to result in cataclysmic events affecting both nations. One of the contributing factors to this upheaval was the perception of European modernity on the minds of the Middle Easterners during the nineteenth century. European modernity, presenting itself at 'the barrel of a gun' (Dabashi 2007: 47) caused confusion among its recipients, while the Europeans dominated Muslim political life. The politically powerless Iranian and Arab rulers found themselves out done by the diplomatically savvy and economically wealthy western powers. This weakness led to the British choosing rulers for the region's inhabitants or specifically, a non-native in charge of Iraq, and, a half-literate military officer in charge of Iran. The post-World War I era proved historically dynamic entailing newly won quasi independence for both.

In Iran's case, the British selected Reza Khan, an unknown but capable Cossack army officer, to help them stage a coup in 1925, overthrowing the Qajar dynasty (Ghani 1998: xi). Similarly, the British picked Faysal ibn Hussayn, a member of the Hashemite family from the Hijaz, to rule over Iraq after the European powers deemed Syria and Palestine too precious to leave to him or any other native (Tripp 2000: 47–82). Reza Shah Pahlevi managed to keep Iranian domestic politics under a tight grip until the Allies suspected a Persian–German alliance, possibly derailing their war efforts against Germany (Ghani 1998: xi).

After forcing Reza Khan into exile, the British left the leadership position unfilled. Reza Shah's son, educated in Europe and fluent in several European languages, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, fulfilled Britain's wishes and hence replaced his father in 1941. However, a certain 'imperial hubris' (Ansari 2006: 7–18) caused him to forget the tenuous nature of his power base and the circumstances surrounding his ascension to the throne (Ansari 2006: 36–46). Perceived as a British puppet, he was forced to flee the country after the election of Muhammad Musaddeq as Prime Minister and his success in nationalizing the oil industry (Kinzer 2003). Only through a coup d'état designed by the British Security Service (MI5), and implemented by the American Central Intelligence Agency, did Shah receive another opportunity to rule Iran (Kinzer 2003:1–16).

Contemporaneously, after some arm-twisting and political manoeuvring in the League of Nations, the British managed to win a mandate to administer Iraq (Antonius 1969: 244–251). Faysal ibn Hussayn was crowned as the new king of Iraq in 1921 as a result of a negotiated settlement for the spoils of war and the leftovers of the Ottoman Empire that divided greater Syria, including Palestine and Iraq, between the French and British in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Although the occupying British army's band played *God Save the King*, they crowned Faysal as the new Iraqi sovereign and with it a new chapter in Iraqi history commenced that somewhat resembled that of its neighbour, Iran, both manipulated by British foreign schemes (Cleveland 2003: 207). The Iraqis experienced their own post-World War I challenges, with a quasi-independence proclaimed in 1932 (Tripp 2000: 77–79).

Although he possessed no connection with either the Iraqis or their land, Faysal's installation as king served British interests. Some years later,

the Iraqis moved to shake off the British yoke by overthrowing the Hashemite monarchy (1921–1958). As the young grandson of Faysal, Faysal ibn Ghazi (Faysal II) took power in 1953, the Iraqis could no longer contain their discontent and on 16 July 1958, Abdul-Karim Qasim (Dann 1969: 21–23), an Iraqi general, led a bloody coup in which Faysal II, his son, and the Iraqi Prime Minister all perished.

But, prior to the July 1958 Revolution, the Iranian–Iraqi monarchies enjoyed an often cordial relationship mixed with periods of tension (Bakhash 2004: 11). According to Shaul Bakhash, the OPEC and oil became the primary and sole factor bonding the two countries, which even the 1958 revolution in Iraq did not alter. This economic relationship continued between the two nations and they agreed on OPEC politics (Bakhash 2004: 11). On other issues such as border disputes and waterway usage rights, they remained either unwilling or incapable of resolving them (Bakhash 2004: 24–25). However, the uneventful and seemingly congenial relationship changed after the overthrow of the Hashemite dynasty, and the left-leaning anti-imperialist Iraqi nationalists reached power. The 1958 Iraqi military coup destroyed ‘one of the most important supporters of [western] imperialism in the Arab world’ (Rodinson 1968: 108), and served as a watershed moment in the region’s history. Imbued with a unique version of Arab nationalism (Tripp 2000: 166), a native post-colonial struggle by Iraqi nationalists ensued and found its major support on the left. With the July Revolution, mostly based on anti-western/imperialist rhetoric (Tripp 2000: 148–151, 166), and the subsequent withdrawal from the Baghdad Pact (Kechichian 2008), Iraq found itself closer to the Soviets (Tripp 2000: 164) and farther from its Persian and Turkish neighbours and other Arabs.

New documents and Iranian–Iraqi relations

While Iran struggled with its own political challenges, specifically that it was a bulwark against the Iranian Communist Party (*Hizb-i Tudeh* or the Party of the Masses), the 1958 revolution in Iraq added unwanted pressure on the already feeble Iranian political structure (Ismael 1982: 18). Considering the proximity of Iraq’s July Revolution to the 1953 British–American coup in Iran, the Persian monarch was wary of another threat to his existence and, apparently, did everything in his power to stop the spread of what he perceived as the Iranian communists gaining a free hand in expressing themselves, basing this understanding on SAVAK intelligence field reports. A free Iraq meant trouble at home for Shah if it became a safe haven for Iranian subversives. His own fear of a leftist revolt combined with the US Cold War doctrine (Hollis 2004: 193–211) forced him to take what he perceived as necessary steps to save Iran from falling into the hands of communists. Therefore, he felt that he had to use different Iraqi elements as pawns in his effort to convince the Iraqi government not to sympathize with Iranian communists.

One of the Shah’s ways in trying to destabilize Iraq was through military assistance to the Kurdish minority. This assistance to Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq put Baghdad in a precarious situation as it seriously drained ‘Iraqi military and economic capabilities’ (Ismael 1982: 20). Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish rebel leader, took advantage of the rivalry

between Iran and Iraq; although Shah used him to create trouble in the northern regions of Kurdish Iraq. Whenever Barzani failed in securing autonomous rights from Baghdad, he only had to look towards Tehran to receive the aid he needed to convince Ba'athists to cooperate with him (Tripp 2000: 199–202). This remained the way Barzani interacted with the government but after Saddam's rise to power, Barzani lost all hope of ever succeeding in achieving his goal and thus looked to Shah for support who happily granted it (Tripp 2000: 199–202).

Aside from using minority groups to raise havoc, Iraq effectively became a new battleground for an ideo-political proxy war between the Soviets and Americans, which shaped into a long fight for hegemony in the Middle East and eventually destroyed native political aspirations. The story of Gamal Abdul Nasser's rivalry with Iraq, and Egyptian competition for leadership of Arab Nationalism (Jankowski 2002: 27–40) (Tibi 1990: 159–207) is beyond the scope of this essay, but we should note that because of Iraq's geopolitical positioning in the region and its cultural and political history with Iran, the rivalry between Arab nations turned into contention between Iran and Iraq.

Newly released Iranian intelligence documents,² also, paint a political picture of Iraqi mistrust towards Iran that was fed by the Soviets in their Cold War efforts against the United States, ultimately causing Iraq's government to cooperate and work closely with Soviet intelligence in an effort to destabilize Shah's regime (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005). On examining the information that Iranian intelligence gathered inside Baghdad, it becomes clear that Qāsim nurtured Iranian communist activity. The Iraqi regime's subversive actions, such as setting up an anti-Iranian propaganda machine in the form of Radio Baghdad (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 29), or help in providing logistics for training the communist militants on Iraqi soil were meant to destabilize and influence Iranian politics.

SAVAK reports claim that starting only months after the July 1958 Revolution, Iranian *Tudeh* members passionately expressed their discontent with the Pahlavi monarchy (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 3). About sixty Iranian *Tudeh* members immediately moved to Iraq and lived there after the July coup and SAVAK kept a close tab on them and provided Tehran with their full names and in some cases, their whereabouts and exact activities (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 4, 5). By the end of 1958, according to one document, Basra became the Iranian communist 'operation central' (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 13) because of its accessibility from Iran and ease of movement to and from major southern Iranian cities of Abadan and Khurramshahr. It further placed one of the founders of *Tudeh*, Reza Radmanesh, in Basra while attending a meeting (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 15). On 26 February 1959, the Iraqi government allowed the Middle East Communist parties (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 38) to formally meet in Baghdad (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 20–23). The attendees declared that they recognized and supported Qasim and his regime and committed themselves to take up arms, if necessary, to defend it against its enemies. They also declared they planned to organize their

2 For approximately twenty years, the Islamic Republic has published SAVAK field reports. They are probably not the entire collection but more likely the documents viewed as important.

efforts in creating an environment that would lead to a free Kurdistan encompassing ‘all Kurds . . . of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria’, in addition to relieving Iran of its dictatorship by ‘strengthening Iranian communists (*Hizb Tudeh*)’ and ‘founding an [Iranian] democratic republic based on a unitary policy with Iraq’ (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 20). The appearance of a communist group inside Iraq and its apparent support for the Iraqi republic must have concerned Iran, Shah and the United States.

Financial support for those Kurdish families who could be lured and economically enticed to move from Iran to Iraq shows that elements interested in destabilizing the Iranian Kurdish region possessed the financial strength to reportedly offer each person somewhere between ‘10–15 Iraqi Dinars’ to settle in the Iraqi side of the Kurdish region (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 30). We must note that in a self-critical view by one of the authors of these reports about the Kurdish migration attracted by Iraqi money, he or she pointed out Iran’s own failure to effectively provide for its minority Kurds, and spelled out their dismal socio-economic conditions (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 39).

The Soviets, according to the SAVAK documents, trained some Iraqi intelligence officers, which brought the Russian intelligence knowledge to the forefront of the Cold War struggle against Iran’s western-trained security apparatus (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 11). Quoting a western intelligence dispatch (possibly British), a SAVAK report claims, ‘a few’ Iranian army officers took advantage of the time and the political climate in Iraq and united with their Arab ‘communist comrades’ for an apparent joint Soviet–Iraqi coup d’état (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 7). Some historians agree that Iraq’s new regime ‘drew closer to the Soviet Union’ at this time mostly because of Iran’s ‘saber rattling’ (Batatu 1978: 1105) supported by the Americans and Shah’s regional hegemonic ambitions. Furthermore, evidence exists suggesting that the Iraqi government also used the Kurds to entice them into participating in upheaval and ‘sabotage’ (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 81). The same document further claims that British intelligence had reason to believe that as many as one thousand ‘Communist Kurds [and] one hundred Iranian communists’ (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 81) entered Iran and awaited orders to start a period of unrest in the Iranian Kurdish region. Apparently, they thought that after the Iranian government made its move to pacify the restless region, the rest of the group would dash to Tehran to finish the clandestine operation and overthrow the Pahlavi dynasty (*Markaz-i Barresi-i asnad-i tarikhi-i vezarat-i ettelaat* 2005: 81). Other documents go into detail reporting on the Iraqi government’s intention to raise havoc in Iran fuelled by its Arab nationalist ideology. Some of these Arab nationalist feelings manifested themselves through Iraqis claiming the southwest region of Khuzistan (which some Iraqis called Arabistan because of its large native Arab population) and also claiming the right to fully control *Shat al-Arab/Arvand Rud*, the waterway dividing the lower portion of their common border, or officially renaming the historically recognized Persian Gulf, by its new name the Arabian Gulf (Tripp 2000: 165).

Hence, we witness two nationalistic ideologies imbued with a common desire for remaining or becoming a regional power. This sentiment, it seems, was driven by loyalty to an overbearing patron and a feeling of monarchical grandiosity (in the case of Iran), and in the case of Iraq a damaged sense of Arab nationalism and pride. We could go deeper into discussing Iraqi nationalist ideologies, but the issue of trust or lack thereof, between the two states was deeply rooted in the history of the region at large with Iran and Iraq at its centre.

Apart from competing secular nationalisms serving as the primary factor in the struggle between the two nations, the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution offered, yet, another ideology to fight Iraqi nationalism. In this context, we should look at the Iraqi Islamic parties and their evolution from a simple political party urging change within an Islamic rubric to their transformation into a revolutionary force that one scholar views as a home-grown Iraqi movement. The desire to prove that Iraq could become a regional political player inspired Saddam Hussayn to invade and occupy parts of Iran in September 1980. Still pre-occupied with post-revolutionary political manoeuvring, Khomeini's government and almost all Iranians were taken by surprise, and Khomeini knew he had to respond to the threat of losing one of Iran's most valuable provinces, Khuzistan, to Iraq. According to one Iraqi scholar, the war began in part to help Saddam Hussayn's 'nation building endeavours as much as it aimed at enhancing regime security' (Jabar 2004: 121–140).

3 It was Khomeini's verbal attacks against the Iranian monarch that resulted in his exile, first in Turkey, and then in Iraq. He called for Iranians to revolt against the regime and to replace it with a free Islamic society that would respect the will of the people. He used a mosque network centred in the city of Qum to disseminate his message, and this led the Iraqi regime to deport him. After a transit stop in Kuwait, he settled in France, before his defiant return to Tehran in 1979.

Iraqi Shiite parties and the Iranian element

Ayatollah Khomeini seldom uttered his political wishes, but the one he did voice troubled many, regionally and internationally: his desire to topple Saddam Hussayn (Schirazi 1998: 69) put the Ba'athists government on high alert (Moin 1999: 236). According to Khomeini's biographer, Baqer Moin (1999: 129–159), Iraq was unique as the birthplace of Shi'ism. It was there that the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, as well as his grandson, Hussayn ibn Alī and dozens of others were murdered in the seventh century (Halm 2004: 32). Over the centuries, their burial sights became major pilgrimage destinations for millions of Shiites from around the world, especially the Iranian devout. Also, for almost 15 years Khomeini called Iraq home, and in the city of Najaf he certainly witnessed the political marginalization of Iraqi Shiites (Batatu 1978: 1078–79) and the oppression that increased after the Ba'athists regime came to power in 1963 (Tripp 2000: 216).

Already a high ranking cleric and a feisty political activist challenging Shah, Khomeini arrived in Najaf to start life in exile in October 1965 (Moin 1999: 139).³ He came in contact with the Iraqi Shiite community and its leadership including a number of high ranking clerics just as concerned with their secular government's treatment of the Shiite majority and the spread of communism to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbalā (Batatu 1978: 752). Thus, he was familiar with the Iraqi Shiites' plight and once he came to power expressed his wish to export the Iranian revolution to Iraq.

To confidently claim, however, that Khomeini's hope for Iraq was also the Iraqi Shiites' is an argument deserving its own discourse. In fact there

4 Born in Tehran, Vilāyatī was first trained in medicine at the University of Tehran and eventually received his pediatrics specialty from Johns Hopkins University in 1974. He became the trusted advisor to the Supreme Leader, Ayatullah Ali Khamanei, on International Affairs and the Islamic Republic's foreign policy after his long tenure at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

5 Yamao Dai is a graduate student in the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies at the Kyoto University in Japan and a Research Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences. I am appreciative of the fact the Mr. Yamao allowed me to examine his paper prepared for a conference and for giving me special permission to cite it.

6 Born in 1935 and executed by the orders of Saddam Hussayn in April 1980 only months after the Iraqi invasion of Iran had started. His charges included inciting Shiite unrest and being a threat to Iraqi national security. His sister, Bint al-Huda, was also executed with him.

are those who make a counterargument based on their close working relationship with Khomeini. Ali Akbar Vilāyatī (1997: 46),⁴ the Iranian foreign minister (1981–1997), asserts that exporting the Islamic Revolution was not an actual plan but rather an insinuation that was more symbolic than real. What Ayatullah Khomeini preached, Vilāyatī claims (1997: 46, 56), was an exhortation for Muslims around the world to take part in their political and economic destiny through political activism that would secure their rights violated by the imperialistic practices of the superpowers, especially the United States.

But, of what indigenous is Iraqi Islamic movements and their ties to Iran is? In 'Struggle for an Iraqi Islamic Soul', Yamao Dai (2008)⁵ refutes claims that the Islamic Republic influences today's Iraqi affairs simply because of the overwhelming number of Iraqi leaders who were exiled to Iran during the 1980s. If we look at the rise and development of Islamic parties in Iraq since the late 1950s, and further examine their evolution in Iran after their settlement in exile there, a clearer picture surfaces that does not easily accept preconceived notions of a free Iranian hand in Iraqi politics today. The common understanding of Iraq's Islamic parties' history (Yamao 2008: 1) suggest that after Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's execution⁶ and the subsequent exile of a large group of Iraqi Shiites to Iran, most of them fell under the ideological sway of the Iranian revolution. Further, this narrative says that the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (*al-Majlis al-'ala lil thawra al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq*, SCIRI) which acted as an 'umbrella' party under which the Islamic Call Party (*Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyah*) (Jabar 2003: 239), became a tool in the hands of the Islamic Republic (Yamao 2008: 2). Scholars such as Ofra Bengio (1985: 12), Nikki Keddie, Juan Cole (Keddie and Cole 1986: 21), Graham Fuller, Rend Rahim Francke (Fuller and Francke 1987: 109–111), Shahram Chubin (1987: 159–171), Abdulaziz Sachedina (1994: 403–405) and Vali Nasr (2006: 143) all have argued that Iran influences today's Iraqi political affairs, either directly or indirectly and that Iran is shaping and affecting the Iraqi Shiite Islamic parties. As *Da'wā* and SCIRI grew and matured in Iran in the 1980s, this explains how Iranians know their power in shaping Iraqi politics (Aziz 1993: 207–208). Although partially correct in identifying Iran's current influence in Iraq, they fail to consider Iraq's unique history when making this claim.

Yamao's research, for example, suggests that Iraqi religious nationalists led a struggle for change that took place contemporaneously with Iraq's secular nationalists. With the Iraqi Communist Party (Batatu 1978: 422–424; Tripp 2000: 161, 162) spreading to Baghdad and even to the Shiite shrine cities of Najaf and Karbalā, it appears that some Iraqis felt a need for Islam to be more prominent in the socio-political culture of their nation (Tripp 2000: 160). Interestingly, it seems that relatively new, but politically active, groups such as *Hizb al-Ja'fari*, *Shabab al-Aqaidin al-Iman*, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* and *al-Tahrir al-Islami* eventually supported the same agenda, which together gained the backing of the 'ulama and others (al-Nizari 1990: 38–41) 'to establish a new Islamic political party' starting around 1956 (Yamao 2008: 3) and more specifically by 1959 (al-Khursan 1999: 53–69).

Yamao further claims that this home-grown Iraqi collaboration in the late 1950s led to the founding of *Hizb al-Da'wa* in the years between 1957 and 1959 (Yamao 2006: 3) (Tripp 2000: 160). Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, ultimately, became its leader (Yamao 2008: 3) but not until he secured the full support of a high-ranking Shiite mujtahid's blessing, Ayatullah Muratādā al-Askari. The connection between Shiite clerics and the Shiite establishment can be viewed as an endorsement of this new movement in Iraq (Yamao 2008: 3). Although discerning whether or not this effort supported an Islamic state proves difficult, Yamao suggests that the movement possessed no 'revolutionary' inclinations and remained mostly an intellectual awakening. Ayatullah al-Sadr later stated in his *al-Usul al-Islamiyah* that the movement should and would eventually lead to the formation of an 'Islamic state' (*Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiya* 1981–1989: Vol. 1, 234–240). The freedom of this period, which allowed the Shiites to express their wishes and plans for Iraq's political future, lasted only for a decade or so and the 'golden age' (Marr 2004: 127–129) of an Iraqi Islamic movement had diminished substantially by 1968.

A year after the demoralizing Arab loss to Israel during the 1967 Six-Day-War and the Ba'thists victory in 1968, *al-Da'wa* seems to have started its transformation when Islam, as an ideological engine for a utopian Iraqi society, turned more revolutionary. Yamao attributes this to the Ba'th's suppression of the party in Najaf's Shiite seminary (Yamao 2008: 4, 8; Rauf 2000: 121). The political climate changed so drastically that the regime made *Da'wa* membership a capital crime punishable by death (Yamao 2008: 8). From this, we can see that *al-Da'wa* had established itself as an opposition force years before Khomeini objected to the Pahlavi regime in 1963 and before his arrival in Ayatullah al-Sadr's Najaf in 1965. Al-Sadr's political activism against the secular Iraqi regimes from Qasim to Saddam, being 'fortuitous' (Aziz 1993: 218) or otherwise, ended with his execution. Days before his death, he was still busy sending smuggled messages to the leaders of his support group asking them 'to resist the regime in any way possible' (Aziz 1993: 218).

Ayatullah al-Sadr's execution in April 1980 angered Khomeini (Aziz 1993: 218). Almost immediately after al-Sadr was executed, Iraqi Shiites of Iranian dissent were deported to Iran and settled in the outskirts of Tehran. It is noteworthy to mention that while the Iraqi Shiites made Iran home for the time being, a large portion of the Iranian *Mojahedin* took refuge in Iraq as they could not effectively fight Khomeini's regime's security forces.

MEK

Although some of the current members of the Iraqi government found refuge in the Iranian capital in the early 1980s, the *Mojahidin-e Khalq* or *Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq-e Iran*, an Iranian dissident group was forced into hiding and found refuge in Iraq with Saddam Hussayn acting as their patron.⁷ Originally, a Marxist-Islamist group, three educated engineers from the University of Tehran created the MEK in 1963 (Abrahamian 1989: 87). The group sought to topple the Pahlavi monarchy and opposed western imperialism and American capitalism (Keddie and Richard 2006: 220). According to the *State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism*

7 This organization has presented itself with different aliases including The People's Mojahedin, People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), National Liberation Army of Iran, and National Council of Resistance.

(Fletcher 2008), the MEK assassinated a number of American defence contractors and US armed forces personnel working on Iranian military projects. Along with clerical students, the group involved itself heavily in the events that led to the overthrow of the Iranian monarch and the revolution's final victory in February 1979.

In the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, the MEK still thought of itself as a key player in organizing Iran's new government. Some assert that its members seized the American embassy (4 November 4 1979) in Tehran, arresting over fifty American diplomats and embassy staff, leading to the hostage crisis until their release on 20 January 1981. But much to their chagrin, they found themselves sidelined by Ayatullah Khomeini when he no longer had any use for them and decided to dispose of them altogether. A heavy-handed assault on the group and its leadership created months of political instability when MEK took up arms to fight Khomeini's forces inside Iran and then on European and Iraqi soil. A bloody turn of events followed, including a series of bombings of government buildings and the assassination of revolutionary leaders such as Ayatollah Murtza Muṭahḥari (Davari 2005: 4) and Hussayn Bihishti, the architects of the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's close confidants.

When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, the MEK stepped up its attacks with the goal of toppling the Islamic Republic and this led to a more violent Iranian crackdown on the Mujāhidīn-e Khalq. The onslaught was so strong that the MEK leadership, including Mas'ud Rajavi, had to find refuge in France. With Rajavi's exit, most MEK members faced imprisonment, execution or fled to the mountains and the Persian Gulf. A large number of the MEK arrived in various European, North American and Oceanic countries as political refugees. With French-Iranian relations improving, the government in Paris decided to deport the MEK and its leadership. While the Iran–Iraq War still raged, Saddam Hussayn granted the MEK leadership and its members political asylum and welcomed the enemies of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic. The MEK members, associates and their families who failed to secure a viable status elsewhere relocated to Iraq and Saddam Hussayn provided them with a large land parcel outside Baghdad so that they could build residences in a military base. This allowed them to begin training to fight the Islamic Republic alongside the Iraqi army. Since 1986, over 3,000 Iranian MEK members have lived and trained in an environment that mostly resembles a cult setting rather than an organized political paramilitary group (Peterson 2003) in Camp Ashraf located about hundred kilometres north of Baghdad. After the US invasion, the United States (Global Security 2008) and the European Union (Official Journal of European Union 2005) have considered the group an international terrorist organization. However, the American-led coalition placed Camp Ashraf under its control and the organization's future remains uncertain.

So, whereas the MEK took refuge in Iraq with the hope of returning to Iran one day, some Shiite members of today's Iraqi government fled to Iran in the early 1980s following what other disenchanting and politically active Iraqi Shiites had done more than 80 years earlier. In that exile, a group of *mujtahids* accompanied by their sons and supporters who led the

1920 revolt against the British in Iraq had to relocate to the Iranian capital in fear of their lives (Batatu 1978: 1144–1145). Hence, the practice of Iranians or Iraqis using the opposite group's nation while waiting to return to their native land has a unique historical precedence.

Conclusion

To ascertain if Iran meddles in Iraqi politics today finds its answer in the history of Iran and Iraq and their relationship that has evolved over the centuries. Ancient and medieval competitive rivalry for control and expansion of one's dominion beyond one's natural and cultural boundaries predates today's Iran and Iraq. Contemporaneously, Iranians and Iraqis fought against each other for 8 years in the 1960s. A considerable number of the Iranian army was composed of devout soldiers who volunteered to fight because of their religious beliefs (Farzaneh 2007). Hence, several examples can be cited to show that the two nations have a long history of antagonism. It should also be remembered that modern nationalism, chauvinistic beliefs and a sense of superiority have caused leaders to utilize these beliefs to entice citizens to fight their neighbours.

Iraqi Arab nationalism drove Iraqi foreign policy after 1958. The inter-regional political milieu and Cold War policies of the United States and the Soviet Union encouraged a constant sense of confrontation with Iran, climaxing in the bloody Iran–Iraq War. The years 1992–2003 were an era of uneasy and strange alliance between the two neighbours; mostly due to the after effects of the Second Gulf War (1990–1991) and the United Nations' sanctions on Iraq as well as international isolation led by the United States. During the period between 1979 and 2003, Iran and Iraq shared a tough and tense political standoff with 8 years of it spent in war. During Shah's reign, Cold War policies took advantage of the age-old Persian–Arab chauvinisms that deprived Iran and Iraq from enjoying a cordial relationship, and after the Iranian Revolution, Shiite ideology buttressed by Ayatollah Khomeini's rhetoric of Islamic dominance threatened Iraqi Arab nationalism.

Today's interregional politics in the context of Iranian–Iraqi relation seems hardly different from the past. Iran and Iraq's past was full of inter-meddling and efforts were exerted by both nations to influence the opposing government over international borders. Thus, it seems contradictory and counterintuitive to claim that Iraq acts totally and unconditionally on behalf of the Iranian regime because its current regime was exiled in Iran for over two decades.

Given Iran's increasing influence in the region, as acknowledged by its ambassador, the securing of Iranian interests in Iraq is historically plausible. However, this is not the same as alleging that today's Iraqi nationals who control the government are acting as Iranian elements. To assert this argument dismisses Iraq's Arab identity and its nationalists' loyalty to the territory in which Iraq created its modern nationalistic identity. Iraq's Arab character was strong enough to entice Iraqis to fight Iran for 8 years. To say that because Iraq's leaders were exiled in Iran, hence, they are Iranian agents is false, and exposes one to being accused of misunderstanding both countries' history.

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