



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (43/2006)

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## **To Nuke or not to Nuke?: A Plea for Reason in the Psychologies of the “Iraq-Iran Issue”**

Christoph Marcinkowski\*

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Reports of “imminent US preventive nuclear strikes” against Iran have recently appeared more frequently in the media. The future will show whether the “proliferation” of such news is driven by some sort of “US-psychological warfare” - as claimed by the current Iranian leadership - or whether they reveal serious and real considerations by particular strategists in Washington. If the latter holds true, it would be of little surprise as the reports resemble the pre-Iraq war rhetoric of the Bush administration in 2003. If the US does indeed take military action while still being embroiled in Iraq, it could be argued that the Gulf region would be moving towards what may be understood as an all-out “Iraq-Iran Crisis”.

What are we to make out this? In order to diffuse the current tensions, it would be necessary to study what may be understood as the “psychologies of the Iraq-Iran issue”. It could be argued that the current issues pertaining to Iran and Iraq cannot be addressed by military means and regime change alone. Instead, these issues have to be dealt with more holistically and simultaneously due to their entwined histories as well as shared cultural and religious experiences. Moreover, the rich historical and cultural narrative that Iran enjoys also has to be taken into account.

### **Iran, Iraq, the Gulf: Sensitivities, Past and Present**

Iran’s historical ties with Iraq are stronger than the usually cited “Shi’ite connection” with Shi’ite clerics of often Iranian descent residing for generations in Iraq’s holy shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. In fact, they reach back far into the pre-Islamic Sasanid period (3<sup>rd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century) when Iran’s then capital of Ctesiphon was situated in what is now Iraqi territory not far away from what was to become Baghdad in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, during the later part of the Islamic period, under Shi’ite Safavid Shah Ismail I (1501-24), and again in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century under Shah Abbas I the Great (1588-1629), Iraq and much of the Gulf region was an integral part of Iran. For example, Bahrain was also under the rule of Abbas I which until today still has a Shi’ite majority. In contemporary times, although the rulers of Bahrain are Sunnites, cultural and religious ties to Iran are still strong. Saudi Arabia too has the historical footprint of Iran. The eastern oil-producing parts of Saudi Arabia not only have a Shi’ite majority but they are also becoming increasingly determined to reassert their religious and cultural heritage. A petition signed by several hundred Twelver Shi’ite personalities and handed over to crown prince ‘Abd-Allāh in 2003 called for “an end to all religious, political and social discrimination”. Interestingly, the

petitioners still declared their loyalty to the kingdom while stressing the importance of both “Muslim and Arab national unity”.

On the larger screen, one could certainly expect a worldwide solidarity effect with an Iran facing a military intervention or a nuclear strike by “unbelievers”. Ethnic differences between Arab Iraqis and non-Arab Iranians should not be underestimated. Arab Shi’ite “grand ayatollahs”, such as Lebanon’s Fadlallah, might be somewhat more popular in Iraq than Iran’s Khamenei but the fact remains that Shi’ites are the majority in both countries. Moreover, the circumstance that Iraqi Shi’ites had been shooting at their Iranian brethren during the Iran-Iraq War should not be overstressed: Shi’ism had been bloodily suppressed under the Ba’th regime and although it might be true that most Iraqis do not wish to live in a theocracy *à la iranienne*, they could prefer it one day as the “minor evil” to the horrors they have been through in the past three years. Moreover, the illusion of a supposed Sunnite-Shi’ite friction seems to be fatal mistake. In the past, the 1979 Iranian revolution led to multifaceted expressions of solidarity throughout the Sunnite world as well and the currently existing ties between Sunnite Hamas and Shi’ite Iran, for instance, are fact – in spite of the recent sectarian violence initiated by foreign terrorists in Iraq.

### **On “Popular Uprisings” and Other Dangerous Illusions**

Besides Iran’s historical, cultural and religious ties with many states in the region, Iran also enjoys strong internal unity stemming from a strong national consciousness. Iran’s experiences with foreign interferences are alive in the national consciousness of many Iranians. Already at the beginning of the last century, imperial rivals Britain and Russia had divided the country into “zones of influence”. Growing American influence after WW II is widely held responsible for the events that led to the overthrow of the popular Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh 1953 by a CIA-sponsored coup, and ultimately to the Iranian revolution of 1978/79. Moreover, the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War is perceived by many Iranians as a “foreign plot” - somewhat reminiscent to the “coalition wars” at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that were aimed at putting revolutionary France to her knees.

The above considerations have to be taken seriously as they are very much present in the conscience of contemporary Iranians. Matters of national pride and the knowledge of Iran’s pre-Islamic grandeur in history is still present in the mind of almost every single Iranian regardless of their particular social standing, political orientation, or degree of adherence to the tenets and practices of Shi’ite Islam. Iran, a country with a civilization reaching back several thousands of years is the only country in the region that is not an artificial creation of the post-WWI situation. It would be a grave and tragic mistake to hope for some kind of friction in the event of an outbreak of open hostilities. A military intervention would in all probability rally Iranians of all strata of society behind the flag as it did during the 1979 revolution. What happened in 1979 was not “Khomeini’s revolution” but an event in which even the country’s communists took part.

### **Integrating Iran**

What can be made of this explosive cocktail of politics, history, culture and religion? With regard to Iraq, in an article entitled “Fear not the Shias”, Stephen Schwartz argues in favor of a supportive wait-and-see attitude with regard to the majority-Shi’ite government in Baghdad on the part of the West - as “their tradition recognizes the rights of minorities, because they have always been a minority”. Such a prospect, however, would presume that the occupying

powers would be able to perform their main task in Iraq, i.e. to establish peace, security and a livable life. Otherwise, the US administration would be better advised to learn from its British partners from their experience in post WWI-Iraq: the installation and fall of their Hashemite puppet regime and its aftermath filled with violence and several coups ultimately lead to the horrors of the Saddam regime.

With regard to Iran, the question for those interested in security and stability in the region would be how to integrate a country of the size and geo-strategic significance of Iran into the framework of regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council. In other words: how to integrate Iran while also dispelling the anxieties of its neighbors of a “hostile takeover”. This task is by no means easy but the alternatives are far more frightening.

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\* Dr Christoph Marcinkowski is a Visiting Research Fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, and the author of *Religion and Politics in Iraq. Shi'ite Clerics between Quietism and Resistance* (Singapore, 2004). His latest book, *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications*, is forthcoming at Singapore University Press.