

Iran Iraq Relations: A Complex and Ever-Evolving Dynamic



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Iran and Iraq, two neighboring nations in the volatile Middle East, have a long and complex history of relations that have spanned centuries. From conflict and war to cooperation and mutual understanding, the relationship between these two nations has been shaped by political, religious, and strategic factors.

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In recent decades, Iran and Iraq have both faced significant challenges, ranging from internal political turmoil to external military interventions. These challenges have further complicated their already intricate relationship, making it difficult to analyze and predict the future trajectory of Iran-Iraq relations.

The Historical Context:

To truly grasp the dynamics of Iran-Iraq relations, one must delve into their shared history. The roots of the modern-day relationship can be traced back to the ancient Persians, who inhabited the land of present-day Iran. The Persians, renowned for their rich culture and innovative governance, exerted influence over various neighboring territories, including Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq).

However, the historical narrative took a significant turn with the Islamic conquests in the 7th century. The Arabs, led by the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, conquered both Iran and Iraq, establishing Islam as the dominant religion in the region. While the conquests brought a cultural and religious unity, they also sowed the seeds of a complex relationship between the Persian/Shi'a-dominated Iran and the Arab/Sunni-majority Iraq.

The modern era of Iran-Iraq relations began in the 20th century, with the formation of nation-states following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Both Iran and Iraq struggled to find stability and assert their national identities amidst internal strife and foreign interference.

The Iran-Iraq War:



The most notable chapter in Iran-Iraq relations is undoubtedly the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. Triggered by a territorial dispute and fueled by ideological and geopolitical differences, the war resulted in immense human casualties and economic devastation.

The war proved to be a turning point in the historical trajectory of Iran-Iraq relations. Iraq, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, sought to exploit Iran's post-revolutionary turmoil and export its own version of Arab nationalism.

Conversely, Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, viewed Iraq as a threat to its revolutionary ideals and aimed to export its Islamic revolution across the region.

Both Iran and Iraq employed various tactics, including chemical warfare and indiscriminate missile attacks, causing widespread human suffering and attracting international condemnation. Despite several attempts at peace negotiations, it took eight years for both sides to agree to a ceasefire, essentially ensuring a stalemate with no clear victor.

The Post-War Dynamics:

Following the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran and Iraq faced new challenges and opportunities. Iran, under international sanctions and isolated from the global community, sought to rebuild its shattered economy and regain its regional influence. On the other hand, Iraq, under a weakened Saddam Hussein regime, grappled with internal uprisings and the consequences of its failed invasion of Kuwait.

This period witnessed a shift in the dynamics of Iran-Iraq relations. Iraq, once a secular Arab nationalist state, experienced a rise in religious Shi'a identity due to the marginalization and persecution of the Shi'a population under Saddam Hussein's regime. Meanwhile, Iran underwent internal changes with a younger and more moderate generation rising to power, leading to a potential opening for dialogue and cooperation.

Furthermore, the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime by the United States in 2003 dramatically altered the regional balance of power. The power vacuum that ensued provided an opportunity for Iran to expand its influence in Iraq, as the majority Shi'a population sought support from their fellow Shi'a brethren in Iran.

This development further complicated the already strained relationship between Iran and the Western powers.

The Current Landscape:

Today, Iran and Iraq find themselves in a highly volatile and complex regional context. Both nations face internal political challenges, with Iraq struggling to establish stability after years of violence and Iran grappling with economic hardships and popular discontent.

Moreover, the regional rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the tensions between Iran and Israel, have spilled over into the dynamics of Iran-Iraq relations. Iraq, caught in the middle of competing interests, has found it challenging to strike a balance between its historical, cultural, and political ties with Iran and its aspirations for closer engagement with the Western powers.

The relationship between Iran and Iraq is further complicated by the ongoing conflicts in the region. Iran, through its support for various Shiite militias in Iraq, has been accused of fomenting sectarian tensions and exacerbating the already fragile situation. Iraq, on the other hand, seeks to maintain independence and avoid becoming a battleground for larger regional conflicts.

The Future Outlook:

As we look to the future, it is essential to recognize the unpredictable nature of Iran-Iraq relations. The dynamics between these two nations are influenced by both domestic and external factors, making accurate predictions challenging.

One possible scenario is the continuation of a delicate balancing act by Iraq, seeking to maintain its relationship with Iran while pursuing closer ties with the

West. This approach would likely involve carefully navigating the regional rivalries and avoiding being dragged into conflicts that do not serve its national interests.

Alternatively, an unforeseen event, such as a change in leadership or a significant geopolitical shift, could dramatically transform the dynamics of Iran-Iraq relations. The fate of the Iran nuclear deal, the influence of regional powers, and the state of Iraq's internal political landscape will all play a crucial role in shaping the future trajectory.

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The relationship between Iran and Iraq is multifaceted, influenced by historical, religious, political, and strategic factors. From ancient conquests to a devastating war and the aftermath of foreign interventions, the dynamics of Iran-Iraq relations have constantly evolved.

As Iran and Iraq continue to face internal and external challenges, the future of their relationship remains uncertain. However, what is clear is that any analysis of Iran-Iraq relations must consider the complexities of the region, the aspirations of their respective populations, and the ever-changing dynamics of global geopolitics.

It is through a nuanced understanding of these factors that we can hope to gain insights into the future trajectory of Iran-Iraq relations and potentially contribute to more informed and constructive dialogue between these two nations.

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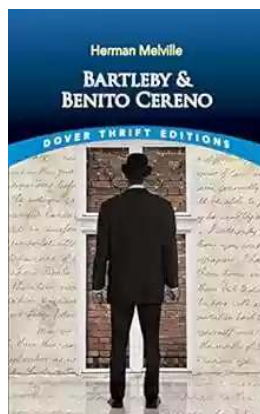
With a conventional military and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat from Saddam Hussein’s regime removed, Iran seeks, at a minimum, to ensure that Iraq can never again become a threat to Iran, whether or not there are U.S. forces present in Iraq. Some believe that Iran’s intentions go far further—to try to harness Iraq to Iran’s broader policy goals, such as defense against international criticism of and sanctions against Iran’s nuclear program, and to enlist Iraq’s help in suppressing Iranian dissidents located inside Iraq. Some believe Iran sees Iraq primarily as as providing lucrative investment opportunities and a growing market for Iranian products and contracts.

Iran has sought to achieve its goals in Iraq through several strategies: supporting pro-Iranian factions and armed militias; attempting to influence Iraqi political leaders and faction leaders; and building economic ties throughout Iraq. It is Iran’s support for armed Shiite factions that most concerns U.S. officials. That Iranian activity continues to a threat to stability in Iraq, according to senior U.S. commanders, and positions Iran to pursue its interests in Iraq after U.S. forces leave Iraq by the end of 2011.

Many of Iraq’s current leaders were in exile in Iran or materially supported by Iran during Saddam’s rule, and see Iran as a mentor and an influential actor in Iraq.

Even those who have longstanding ties to Iran have asserted themselves as nationalist defenders of Iraqi interests, but Iraq appears to be a clearly subordinate partner in the relationship. Perhaps resenting this relationship, many Iraqi citizens have appeared to reject parties and factions who accept preponderant Iranian influence in Iraq. This sentiment has caused Iran to suffer key setbacks in Iraq. The most pro-Iranian factions generally fared poorly in the January 31, 2009, provincial elections and again in the March 7, 2010, national elections for the National Assembly, which chooses the government. A political bloc that is decidedly against Iranian influence and which is supported by Iraq's Sunni Arabs won the most seats in the election, although no bloc has been able, to date, to build enough support among other blocs to assemble a government. Still, virtually all political blocs are consulting with Iran to try to gain its support for their inclusion in or dominance of any new government.

Also see CRS Report RL32048, Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses, by Kenneth Katzman.



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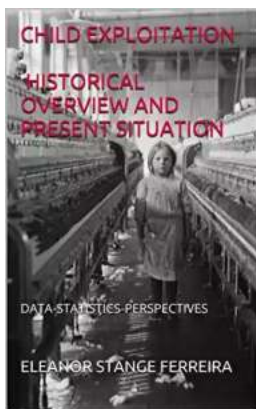
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