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Seeing Specters - I ^[1]

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Simply put, here is America's quandary in Iraq: we want to see democracy develop, but we are distrustful of the results. As Americans we have been hard-wired since kindergarten to believe Democracy to be a fundamentally Good Thing. Yet we are slowly realizing that a genuine Iraqi democracy may not be pro-American.

Many things fuel our rising discomfort. We are taken aback at the rising violence in the country. We fear that political debate within the Sunni community is being driven by Baathists, Islamists and others who detest us. But above all we fear the Shia Islamists. If a report last week in the Financial Times is to be believed we are even tacitly condoning activities by Iyad Allawi's 'government' that we would denounce in any other emerging democracy, such as the shameless use of state television as a propaganda tool, and the use of police and Iraqi soldiers to distribute Allawi's campaign material and, in some cases, tear down posters put up by rival electoral slates. We do this because the United States has an irrational fear of Iran, and that fear is driving us toward short-sighted policy decisions.

US problems with Iran go back a quarter century to the fall of the Shah and the rise of today's Islamic Republic. Iran and the United States have been, let's not mince words, enemies ever since. Iran has funded terrorism directed at the United States and its allies both inside and outside the Middle East. The United States has worked to isolate Iran from the outside world. In recent months, however, we seem to have taken this loathing a step further – insisting on seeing an Iranian hand in every Shiite political move in Iraq. This is likely to cause us problems over time. Moreover it is being encouraged by some of our Arab friends for their own less than honorable reasons (more on that tomorrow).

Is Iran trying to influence the Iraqi elections? Of course it is. States have interests, and Iran is very interested in what happens in its large, turbulent neighbor. The government Iran would like to see in Baghdad would probably not be one particularly friendly to the United States. But it is a mistake to move from there to the assumption that anything Iran does in Iraq is, by definition, contrary to American interests. Washington and Tehran both want a peaceful, somewhat stable Iraq. We want peace and stability so we can leave. The Iranians want it because they have to share a long border with Iraq and no one wants to share a border with an anarchic failed state. Our visions for the country's future are certainly different, but there are broad goals on which we can agree. This is a moment when we could use that small bit of common ground to try to improve relations, yet there seems to be an assumption in the United States that anything Iran does, or tries to do, in Iraq is by definition bad for the US.

There also seems to be an assumption in Washington that Iraq's demographics virtually assure Iranian success, yet this is not true either. It is a mistake to assume that Iraq's Shiites (some 60% of the country's population) are in thrall to the clerics who run Iran simply because they are Shiites. First, there are more than a few secular Shiites out there (starting with Iyad

Allawi). Second, Iraqi Shiites proved their loyalty when huge numbers of them fought Iran during the 1980-88 war between the two countries. Iran's leaders assumed that many Iraqi Shiites would rally to their banner – and were sorely mistaken. Third, Iraq's Shiites have waited centuries for this moment. Why on earth would they want to turn their country into a client state? At a moment when Iraq's Shia could see us as the agent of their empowerment there is a real danger that we are allowing our deep distrust of Iran poison our relations with what will, one way or another, be Iraq's dominant community.

There's no real evidence that a Shia-ruled Iraq would be either a theocracy or an Iranian client state. This is not to say that an overtly theological government would not cause problems – the Kurds, for one, would probably object – but an Islamist, Shia-led government need not be a bad thing for Iraq, its neighbors or the United States. We cannot guarantee that it will be a good thing, but letting prejudice cloud our judgment almost assures a bad outcome.

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