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The future of Iran-Iraq relations: Possible scenarios

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Abstract

The Middle East is the scene of intense regional and trans-regional competitions. The present study aims at investigating the possible scenarios regarding the future of Iran-Iraq relations. The most possible scenarios include cooperation, competition, and competition along with coordination. This study scrutinizes these scenarios by using historical evidence and focusing upon the geopolitical, political, economic, and identity-related variables. Although it is impossible to confidently prognosticate a scenario for the future relations of two countries, the signs of more cooperation and less tension in the relations of the two countries resulted from a variety of variables and reasons can be seen in the horizon. The most important indicators of possible competition include competition in the oil industry, political leadership, border disputes, regional and trans-regional activism, and environmental problems. On the other hand, the most significant indicators of cooperation encompass common security issues, convergence in the economic sphere, cultural and religious links, humanitarian aids and especially the perception of a common danger from Takfiri groups such as ISIL. Findings of the study indicate that the 'competition along with cooperation' scenario has the maximum likelihood of occurrence in the future of Iran-Iraq relations.

Keywords: Iran, Iraq, possible scenarios, competition, cooperation

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1. Introduction

In the sphere of diplomacy, the relations among countries are influenced by ideological, religious, economic, territorial and political factors; therefore, due to the influence of these factors, the relations may shift from cooperation to competition or even war and hostility. Such metamorphosis in relations of countries can be studied and analyzed within the framework of theoretical approaches such as realism, neo-realism, constructivism, as well as the critical approach. In this paper, Iran's relationship with its neighbor, Iraq, is studied, using the appropriate theoretical approach. Factors like long territorial and maritime borders, several thousand years of common history, with ups and downs such as unity or wars have attracted the attention of a number of analysts. In the past, the two countries have been affected by unpleasant consequences of tensions, particularly the eight-year long 1980-1988 war. However, during the succeeding decades, the relations between two countries improved to a considerable extent. Due to common interests and cultural and historical ties, especially the existence of Shi'ite holy places in Iraq, cooperative and friendly relations have been flowed between the two countries. After the fall of Saddam Hossein, the relations between the two countries shifted from war and hostility to cooperation at political, security-related, cultural and economic levels. Nevertheless, there are still many signs of cynicism and doubts. The future of Iran-Iraq relations and various possibilities in this regard are the main purposes of the current study.

After the overthrow of Saddam Hossein, Iran's influence in Iraq expanded. That was why King Abdullah of Jordan spoke of the 'Shia crescent' formation with the centrality of Iran and its threat to the regional countries, a view that was warmly welcomed by some other Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and reinforced Iranophobia. Iraq is one of the countries where regional and international powers are competing with each other. Such interactions along with internal factors can determine the trend of the future relations between the two countries.

In the current study, the authors present an analytical response to the question of what scenarios can be presented for the future relations between Iran and Iraq". The hypothesis is that three scenarios, i.e. cooperation, competition, and cooperation along with competition, can be envisaged, concerning the future of Iran-Iraq relations.

2. A brief historical overview of Iran and Iraq relations

The history of contemporary Iraq traced back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Until then, Iraq was a segment of the Ottoman Empire, which continuously was in war with its eastern neighbor, Iran. The Safavid Iran and the Ottoman Empire fought twenty times. These wars had long-standing impacts upon the history and identity of the two countries.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of a monarchy in Iraq, the relations between two countries encountered ups and downs because of the presence of great powers enacting as a power-balancing factor in the region (Barzegar, 2007-2008). Milani, professor of political science at the University of South Florida, argues that: "Mutual relations between Iran and Iraq were often made with suspicion and border disputes; however, at times, cooperation was also seen between these two countries" (Milani, 2011, p. 75). The above-mentioned condition was exacerbated as the Ba'ath Party staged a coup in Iraq in 1968. This coup brought to power a government pursuing ambitions not envisaged by its predecessors (Bongers, 2013, p. 126). With the occurrence of Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the collapse of Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, the level and the scope of tensions between these two countries reached its peak, and Saddam more than ever before was determined to attack Iran. The war that was followed turned into the biggest war at the end of the twentieth century, killing thousands of people and completely destructing the economic infrastructures of both countries. Numerous hypotheses have been proposed with respect to this war, citing some of which may be useful. Some researchers like Rezaie believe that the war was the result of Saddam fear of the export of Iran's revolution to Iraq (Takeyh, 2008, p. 15). In this perspective, the dominant ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran was considered to be a threat to Saddam. Some others put forward the view that dual containment strategy was the real cause of Iran-Iraq war. In fact, by engaging the two countries into the war against each other, the U.S. desired to weaken these two rivals for its own interest, as by achieving such an objective, the security of its allies in the region, e.g. Israel, could be guaranteed more than before (Donovan, 2011, p. 100).

However, it is evident that Saddam's ambitions were other causes of invading Iran. Indeed, he decided to take advantage of disturbances occurred after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and acquire a better position compared to his regional rival. From Parasiliti's point of view, the main goal of Sad-

dam for attacking Iran was to increase power of Iraq, decrease the power of Iran, and exploit the revolutionary changes in Iran. On the other hand, some scholars believe that geopolitical conditions resulted from colonialism has made some limitations for the interests and power of Iraq. Thus, a good opportunity was created for the abolition of the Al-Jazeera Agreement that led to the Iran-Iraq war (Dehgani Firoozabadi, 2012, p. 335). Furthermore, Ray Takeyh believes that territorial and political issues were not the sole cause of Iran-Iraq war, but the ideological struggle of secular Pan-Arab Iraq with Islamic fundamentalism of Iran played a role as well (Wolden, 2001, p. 23).

3. Explanatory variables of divergence and competition

As mentioned earlier, the trend of relations between Iran and Iraq have never been constant and static; hence it can be concluded that in the future, it would probably shift from the cooperative level to hostility or competition. In this section, we try to analyze the possible spheres of competition or, at times, tension in Iran-Iraq relations by providing historically objective evidence as well as facts and arguments through a systematic approach.

3.1. Cultural variables

3.1.1. Interpretation gap between Qom's and Najaf's Seminaries

In the Shiite theological school, in all periods of history, there have been debates between adherents of political Islam and those of a non-political approach to the religion. In this regard, in recent decades, we have faced two interpretations of Shiite Islam. Different definitions of Islam and politics are introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and Ayatollah Khoei in Iraq. These differences have continued under the leadership of Ayatollah Sistani and other Shiite leaders residing in Iraq. In spite of some similarities between Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Sistani in their perception of *Velayat-e faqih* (the Rule of the Jurisprudent), the interpretation of the latter in respect to the intervention of jurists in political issues contains limited responsibilities of jurists for maintaining the stability and peace in the society in specific conditions, a view that is hardly similar to that of the clerical government in Iran (Rahimi, 2012, p. 203). Ayatollah Sistani does not consider the authority of Shiite jurists in the political realm (Visser, 2009, p. 4). Theoretically, many ayatollahs in Najaf believe that jurists should have a supervisory role and avoid direct intervention in politics. Practically, by at-

tending to the realities of Iraqi society, they think of a type of secular state or “religious pluralism” in terms of politics. In Islamic Republic of Iran’s belief, the authority of *Velayat-e faqih* goes beyond the territorial borders of the country; a view distinct from that of the clerical establishment in Iraq (Cordesman, 2014, p. 148).

3.1.2. Ethnic gaps and its resulted historical mentalities

In the theoretical framework of constructivism, ethno linguistic identity, consubstantiality, common and historical mentalities and feelings resulted from historical identity and experiences are among effective factors on foreign policy and its players. From this perspective, historically-rooted ethno linguistic gaps, historical hostilities, and border conflicts between Arabs (e.g. Iraqis) and Iranians during the history have had a negative impact on the relations between Iran and Iraq.

Throughout the history, since the reign of the Umayyad up to now, a sense of desire for superiority over others, especially Iranians, has established and spread under the name of the Arab and Ajam division (otherness with emphasis on Iranians). It was due to such a desire for superiority that in 1980 Saddam attacked Iran by using Arabic symbols such as Qadisiyyah battle that is reminiscent of the victory of the Arabs over Iranian during the Sasanid era- and the collapse of the Iranian Empire. Such events led to the expansion of the ethno linguistic gap between Iranians and Arabs, particularly its neighbor, Iraq.

With the fall of Saddam, the ethno linguistic gap was overshadowed by common historical and religious links and commonalities between the two countries. Nevertheless, historically rooted mentalities focusing upon the ethnic and linguistic identity in both countries along with other factors, may likely lead to challenges and competitions. Since then, Iran has used three techniques to exert influence in Iraq: 1) furthering religious influence; 2) trying to turn Iran into the dominant and mediating power in Iraq, and 3) controlling and organizing the activities of Shiite militias in Iraq. From the aspect of ethno linguistic gaps, the increasing cultural and political influence of Iran in Iraq is not tolerable by a wide part of Sunni Arabs and a part of Shiite nationalist Arabs, and could likely lead to public pressure on the government to reduce both its level of relations with Iran and the influence of the latter in Iraq. The influence of Ayatollah Sistani by a great number of Sunni Arabs is interpreted as a part of the cultural influence of Iran.

Ayatollah Sistani is the most respected and most popular clergyman in the eyes of Iraqi Shiites. The link of Iranian Shiites with him was strengthened after the fall of Saddam. Eighty percent of Iraqi Shiites accept Ayatollah Sistani as their religious leader and annually deliver him their religious funds worth of more than \$ 700 million. In fact, the influence of Iran in the religious cities is so pervasive that in 2009, Iraq's Ministry of the Interior (MOI) banned the public use of Persian language and signs in Karbala (Nader, 2015, p. 3).

3.2. Political gaps and challenges

3.2.1. Increasing pessimism towards political influence of Iran in Iraq

In a large part of the Arab world and Sunni Arabs in Iraq, the belief is that after the fall of Saddam, Iran has been trying to turn itself into the dominant power in Iraq by using political, cultural and military levers, and more importantly, to establish a Shiite crescent vis-a-vis the Sunni block. Since then, Iraq has turned to be the most important priority for Iran's foreign policy. Following the threats perceived by Sunni Arabs from the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the attempts made by the latter to influence in and control Iraq have been considered as unpleasant. In some surveys, Sunni Arabs respondents affirmed their discontent; whereas the issue was denied by the Shi'a. Sunni Arabs believed that the Iranian government encourages sectarianism in Iraq and considered the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Sadrists and the *Dawa* Party to be the fifth column or the political lever of Iran's influence in Iraq. Sunni Arabs believe that Iran tries to continue its control over Iraq by persuading the Shi'a to present a unified list to acquire the maximum number of seats in the parliament. From their point of view, the presence of Iran military forces and its financial and military support of Shi'ite military groups would lead to the humiliation of Arabs (Nader, 2015, pp. 4-6). For the large part of the Sunni world and Sunni Arabs in Iraq, the dominant view and belief are that Iran is an aggressor in the Middle East and plays a negative role in the international and regional security and stability. Accordingly, it is believed that Iran is seeking to find a justification for its presence in Iraq, in order to form the so-called Shi'ite crescent by pursuing the aggressing strategy in Iraq.

On the other hand, Iranians reject the above-mentioned hypothesis. For example, Barzegar, believes, Iran's intention in Iraq after the fall of Saddam is not domination, but providing security for its borders with the country. He

adds that these security-related attempts by Iran in Iraq are due to the Iranians negative perception after the war with Iraq and the mental, financial, and economic consequences and the support of regional and trans-regional powers for Iraq with the aim of weakening Iran's security (Barzegar, 2007, pp. 2-4). Scholars at US Institute of Peace (USIP) also argue that after the fall of Saddam, Iran sought to pursue a new political order for the security considerations in its western borders with Iraq. From this perspective, a weak state in Iraq may lead to more border security problems for Iran. According to the view put forward by this institute, a powerful neighbor is both pleasing and threatening for Iran. It is threatening because it may encourage Iraq to get rid of Iran's influence, resume regional competition with Iran and create new ambitions for the new leaders (United States Institute of Peace, 2005, pp. 2-6).

Sunni Arab elites put forward two arguments for their claim about the intention of Iran for the formation of the so-called the Shiite crescent: 1) mobilizing and stimulating the masses against the rulers of the region; and 2) establishing an ideological belt of Shi'ite realms of influence and states in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, a substantial number of realistic analysts argue that the Iran's attempt to build a coalition of friend Shi'ite states is mostly based on the strategic and pragmatic rationality with the aim of providing security for its borders rather than being grounded on religious or ideological considerations. The aforementioned issue is due to the geopolitical realities in western and southern borders of Iran, and from such a perspective, the national identity is more important than religious and ideological identity in Iran's coalition with the Shiite states (Barzegar, 2008, pp. 87-92).

3.2.2. Shi'ite intra-group Cleavages

Strategic and political gaps within the Shi'ite political groups and parties in Iraq can also pave the way for challenges and conflicts in Iran-Iraq relations. The Iraqi society and its current realities have complicated the relations between Iran and Iraq. The presence of Shi'ite political groups in Iraq is both a threat and an opportunity for Iran. Iran has to be realist in its relations with the Shi'a in Iraq. However, disputes among Shiites and political groups like the followers of Hakim, Muqtada al-Sadr, and Shiite nationalists including adherents of the late Ahmed Chalabi and Ayad Allawi may result in unexpected crises in Iraq. For instance, forces loyal to Moqtada al-Sadr once at-

tacked the parliament and the government of Haider al-Abadi with the aim of inserting pressure for reforms and the appointment of technocrats instead of political figures for government posts. Intra-group conflicts of the Shi'a in Iraq could stimulate more political instability and tension among these groups and the Islamic Republic of Iran, adversely affecting the relations between the two countries (Wang, 2007, p. 71).

3.2.3. Kurdish separatism

The issue of Kurdish separatism in Iraq is one of the factors that could challenge in the future of Iran-Iraq relations. "Pan Kurdistan" and identity-based feelings of the Kurds is not accepted for Iran, which has a considerable number of Kurds. Besides, the possibility of Iraqi Kurds' cooperation with Israel could hurt the relations of the two countries (Wang, 2007, p. 70).

3.2.4. Dust problem

Dust is one of the most important environmental challenges in the countries of the Persian Gulf region. The challenge can negatively affect the Iran-Iraq relations due to its terrible socio-economic consequences. The drying up of the Hoor-Al-Hoveyzeh wetland is the most prominent factor creating the dust. Iran has repeatedly warned the Iraqi government for its noncooperation in transferring water into this wetland. Ma'soumeh Ebtekar, the former head of Iran's Department of Environment, stated that the Iraqi government has failed to meet its commitments regarding the management of environmental issues due to a number of reasons including lack of security and the presence of terrorist groups in Iraq, especially the ISIL. The ISIL prevented the inflow of water from the Euphrates River into the central Iraq and Hoor-Al-Hoveyzeh wetland on border with Iran. Consequently, Hoor-Al-Hoveyzeh wetland has turned into a great sandy desert that creates dust at large-scale (Eqdam-i Da'esh, 2016).

The extensive spread of dust to Iran from Arab countries, particularly Iraq, has jeopardized the health of the public, especially the western areas of the country like the Khuzestan province, and caused to the spread of lung and heart diseases. Such negative outcomes have brought about the dissatisfaction of Iranians who have frequently requested their government to put pressure on Iraq to resolve the issue. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that a part of environmental problems between Iran and other regional countries, particularly Iraq, is due to the shortage of atmospheric pre-

precipitation over the past years. Moreover, the cooperation of the two countries in this area would be possible provided that the leaders of two countries, particularly the decision makers of Iraqi foreign policy, have sufficient political will to resolve the problem.

3.3. Regional and trans-regional players

Because of their geopolitical and geo-economic importance, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf have turned into international regions, and led to the presence of trans-regional powers in the region. The presence of these powers has been the source of political tension and conflicts among the region countries. Geopolitics is a long-lasting determinant variable in conflicts of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf (Fuller, 1990, p. 4). The above-mentioned challenges in the future relations of Iran and Iraq can affect the balance of power and relations of the countries in the whole region. Currently, the world is witnessing the conflict of interest between Arab states and Iran in Iraq (Karsh, 1990, p. 257). Some scholars give more importance to geopolitical issues than the other factors, and believe that the Iran-Iraq war was the result of such geopolitical challenges (Karsh, 1990, p. 257).

The fragile state of the power structure in Iraq encouraged the involvement of the regional players in Iraq. A combination of political, cultural, economic and security-related causes has led these players to further their interest in Iraq through Iraqi political groups. Saudi Arabia and Iran are the most important regional rivals active in Iraq. Both countries claim the leadership of the Muslim world, and pursue their own different policies in Iraq. By financial and military support of Takfiri groups in Iraq, Saudi Arabia follows goals such as the containment of Iran, and altering the balance of power in the region to its favorite (Ehteshami, 2004, p. 75). The persistence of the current government in Iraq, and the presence of Takfiri groups as well as the influence of Saudi Arabia among Sunni Arabs in Iraq can result in political challenges in the future relations of Iran and Iraq.

The US is the most prominent trans-regional player that attempts to limit the influence of Iran in the region. In spite of their common interests in Iraq, e.g. war against terrorism, there is no cooperation between the two countries with respect to this issue. In this regard, US has tried hard to harmonize its security-related objectives with Arab countries to weaken the strategic position of Iran in the region. Barzegar believes that the main conflict in Iran-US relations in Iraq after the fall of Saddam is the new definition of Iraq's security-political structure. He argues that Iran, on the one hand, disagreed with

the US attack on Iraq and, on the other, considered the Saddam regime as an aggressive regime deserved to be punished and overthrown (Barzegar, 2008, pp. 55-56). Iran also opposes any government in Iraq that supports US interests. From the point of view of Iranians, Americans try to establish a security-political system in the region based on the balance of powers (Motaghi & Postinchi, 2001, p. 290).

On the contrary, US officials believe that the US may face security problems if Iran acquires the upper hand in the region. Therefore, the US and its Arab allies are seeking to limit Iran's power in the region. In fact, since 2005, Americans have sought to depict Iran as a player pursuing to fill the power vacuum in Iraq and to change the security structure of the region (Carpenter & Innocent, 2007, p. 74). In this regard, over last years, the former Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki tried to perform the role of a power-balancing player in the relations between Iran, Arab countries and Western powers in the region (Strauss & Gallia, 2013, p. 1). The future of Iran-Iraq relations partly depends on US-Iraq relations. If the relations expand, Iran-Iraq relations will be affected negatively (Wang, 2007, p. 70).

3.4. Economic challenges, focusing on oil

From the historical perspective, oil was one of the challenges in Iran-Iraq relations during the Saddam government. In the 1980s, before the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq violated international law by seizing more than fifty petroleum wells from the joint oil fields between the two countries. In this regard, Iran's government based on the 1975 Algiers Agreement protested, and called the Iraq ambassador to Tehran to the Foreign Ministry more than three times (Ehteshami, 2003, p. 125). The petroleum resources and their sale quotas assigned by the OPEC have been the causes of competition between the two countries ever since. In 2013, Bijan Zangeneh, Iranian minister of petroleum, criticized Iraq, saying that Iraq's petroleum policy was not friendly (Iraq actions are not friendly at all, 2013, p. 8). Moreover, international sanctions imposed on Iran, because of its nuclear program, by 28 European countries during the last years led to the reduced participation of Iran in the international market; hence Iraq has acquired a larger share of the oil market (Raqibat-i Iran va Iraq, 2013, p. 4). Generally, it can be argued that Iraq with its huge resources of petroleum can emerge as a powerful rival for Iran in the sphere of oil production and export (Bongers, 2013, p. 135).

Some experts argue that the increase in Iraq's oil export can be considered as a threat for Iran in the future. That is to say, Iran's current economic

recession and the increase in Iraq's oil export can result in the reduced share of Iran's oil export and eventually to its economic vulnerability (United States Institute of Peace, 2005, p. 6). However, Iraq's problems in recent years such as instability and terrorism may turn the tables for Iran, so that Iraq's oil exports may decrease. Also, Iran's nuclear agreement with Western powers, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (J.C.P.O.A), may allow Iran to increase its oil.

4. Cooperation indicators

The available evidence seems to suggest that after the fall of Saddam, reasons for cooperation between the two countries have greatly outweighed causes of disagreement and conflict. Albeit, it cannot be claimed with certainty that the existing cooperation may be downscaled in the future relations between the two countries. Likewise, it may not be predicted that they would definitely hostile. In this section, the objective evidence in relation to existing cooperation and prediction of possible continuity of this cooperation in the future relations of the two countries are considered. After the fall of Saddam, Iran has improved its financial and economic relations with Iraq. During 2003-2007, oil export has increased up to 300% and Iraq has turned into the second commercial partner of Iran (Katzman, 2010, p. 55). Meanwhile, the political relations of the two countries have also improved. The former prime minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki, visited Iran four times, signing several agreements between the two sides. At a meeting in August 2007, an agreement on the construction of joint pipelines between Basra and Abadan was made and finalized in the following November (Rahimi, 2012, pp. 25-26). On June 8, 2008, an agreement was reached for selling Iran's electricity to Iraq (Ebrahimi & Nasur, 2013, p. 2). In this time period and during the Ahmadinejad's first term presidency, i.e. 2005-2009, Iran increasingly expanded its relationship with Iraq in spheres of the media, tourism, and migration between the countries. They also made common investments in areas including schools, hotels, and infrastructures of Iraq Southern cities such as Basra, Karbala, and Najaf (Rahimi, 2012, pp. 27-28). In 2008, Ahmadinejad visited Iraq for the first time after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This visit led to the grant of one-billion-dollar loan to Iraq in the field of infrastructure development. The agreement included the construction of Najaf airport, agreement to cooperate on issues such as security, education, customs and tariffs, industry and environment, and the development of a free trade zone in Basra (Sonmez, 2012, p. 321). Accordingly, commercial

interactions between the two countries reached to 8 billion dollars in 2010 (Eisenstadt, Knights & Ali, 2011, p. 3).

Irrespective of economic cooperation, religious and political interactions have increased as well. Since 2003, Iran has attempted to expand its relation with Iraqi political elite and parties, particularly Shiite groups like Dawa party, Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and Al-Sadr's followers. These groups are considered by Iran to play a constructive role in Iraq after Saddam. At first, Iran tried to consolidate the role of the Dawa party in the power structure in Iraq. In this way, Tehran not only supports the Shiite Muslim groups due to its historical relations and cultural commonalities with them, but also believes that these groups are better options compared to Iraqi secular nationalist parties who are mainly anti-Iranian nationalist Arabs. Nevertheless, establishing relations with certain groups of Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq is also Iran's objective in foreign policy. In addition to enhanced relations with the Iraqi elite, the increasing trend of cultural interactions between ordinary citizens of the two countries is representative of these countries historical relations traced back to the Safavid era. Nowadays, more Iranians are traveling to holy Shiite places in Iraq than ever before. Iraqis, on the other hand, visit the holy city of Mashhad in the North East of Iran (Rahimi, 2012, pp. 25-26). Beyond the ominous legacy of the eight-year war, these two countries have commenced a new era of relations (Gerges, 2014, pp. 339-343). What is more, these interactions play a considerable role in the national security of Iran. In fact, Iranian security forces take advantage of increased ties and cultural relations between the two countries as a deterrent tool against American threats, with the belief that Iraqis may retaliate any invasion of those who attack their fellow co-religionists. They strive to make Iraq's Shiites closer to the influence circle of Iranians and their political beliefs (Nader, 2015, pp. 2-3).

As a matter of fact, Islamic extremism in Iraq is another factor leading to the cooperation between the two countries as long as it is considered a threat to both of them. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a coalition of the former members of the al-Qaeda and the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein that have created a disastrous combination. The social and political origin of this group goes to Iraq's dissatisfied Sunnis and to some extent to the civil war in Syria over the past five years. Meanwhile, it seems necessary to look at this group as the third wave of Jihadism, or global jihadi movement. The first wave included the political and religious activities of people such as Ayman al-Zawahiri who had assassinated Sadat. The sec-

ond wave occurred when in the 1980s, a number of jihadists traveled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union. The important point is that there is no simple and rapid solution to get rid of this group in the region. Hence, we will most likely witness the continuation of the cooperation between Iran and Iraq in the near future in this regard (Gerges, 2014, p. 339).

5. Competition along with cooperation

The evidences emphasizing the strengthening of cooperation between Iran and Iraq may not necessarily mean that cooperation will be continued in the future without any obstacle. Politics and political processes are fluid and dynamic. Any prediction is contingent upon the absence of drastic transformations and unexpected events. Therefore, any prediction regarding the continuity of cooperation in the relation of Iran and Iraq has to be cautious and take into account all challenges and civil, regional and trans-regional obstacles. In short, it can be suggested that cooperation would be continued in the future, though at a lower level. For such a claim, besides the religious links, other factors can be referred to, including: 1) common security threats on the part of the Al-Qaeda and Takfiri groups as well Kurdish separatism; 2) The vulnerability of the Iraqi government alongside security, economic, welfare and humanitarian considerations can also pave the way for the continuity of cooperation.

Even though on the basis of the evidence currently available and strong religious and political ties, the persistence of cooperation in the future relations between Iran and Iraq cannot be overlooked, cooperation is, for some reasons, overshadowed by a series of limitations as well as challenges. It can be claimed that the long-lasting and historical identity crisis of Iraq may provide either an opportunity or a challenge for the relations of the two countries. Religious-historical links between Shi'ite Iran and the majority Shi'ite population in Iraq in the context of Iraq's national identity crisis can be considered as a good sign for the continuity of cooperation between two countries. On the other hand, the identity crisis can lead to the sectarianism and instability in Iraq. Likewise, the increased vulnerability of the government may result in the growth of pan-Arabism and nationalist movements, and may even lead to a schism among Shi'ite political groups and the spread of nationalist thoughts among the Shi'a spearheaded by people such as Ayad Allawi. Identity crisis may also undermine the political legitimacy of the Iraqi government, as the attacks of Moqtada al-Sadr followers to the Iraqi

parliament and the government of Haider al-Abadi point to this possibility. Therefore, such an unstable social and political context and the possible growth of pan-Arabism may challenge the future relations of Iran and Iraq. Moreover, issues such as Kurdish separatism, political instability, intervention of regional and international powers, economic differences including competition over the sale of petroleum, and finally the environmental issue of dust may create challenges and tensions in the relations between the two countries.

6. Conclusion

In the present study, three scenarios, namely cooperation, competition, and competition along with cooperation for the future of Iraq-Iran relations are proposed and discussed. Each of the scenarios under scrutiny has a number of evidence as well as useful and predicting variables that can be referred to and used in prognosticating the future relations of the two countries. However, as it was mentioned above, predicting in the social sphere, particularly in the area of politics cannot be definite; and the issue of future Iran-Iraq relations is no exception. We cannot definitely tell whether the future relations between the two countries will be based on cooperation or rivalry, given the complexity and intervention of measures taken by transnational, national, and regional in the Middle East, in general, and in Iraq, in particular. On the basis of existing evidence and complexities mentioned in the study, the authors argue that the futures of Iran-Iraq relations will be based on a combination of cooperation and competition. It is noteworthy that by taking into account the aforementioned cautions, the scenario predicted in this study is focused on the middle-term future.

Increase in violence and instability in Iraq can lead to a rise in nationalist, rather than, religious emotions, driving the country away from Iran and leading to competitive relations with Iran. The outcome of Iraq's recent parliamentary shows the superiority of nationalist emotions, giving the highest number of seats to the Sairoon block led by Moqtada al-Sadr. Likewise, the increased vulnerability of the government may result in the growth of pan-Arabism and nationalist movements, and may even lead to a schism among Shi'ite political groups. Identity crisis may also undermine the political legitimacy of the Iraqi government, as demonstrations by Moqtada al-Sadr's followers in the past against the Iraqi parliament and the government of Haider al-Abadi point to this possibility. Moreover, issues such as Kurdish separatism, intervention of regional and international powers, differences

over economic interests, including competition over the sale of petroleum, and finally environmental issues such as dust pollution may create challenges and tensions in the relations between the two countries.

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