THE 'DEEPENING' OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN IRAQ AND   IRAN
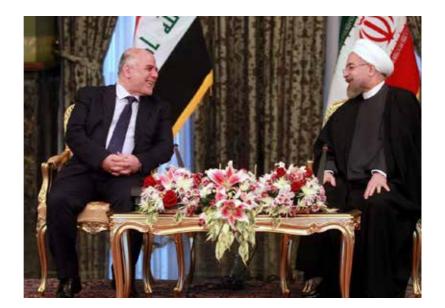
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This policy brief addresses implications of major developments that took place in 2014 for the bilateral relations between Baghdad and Tehran, including the parliamentary elections, the seizure of Mosul by ISIS, and the formation of new government in Iraq. Iran closely follows developments in Iraq because of its national security concerns and its regional strategies. In order to preserve its interests in Iraq, Iranian government adopted a cautious approach throughout the elections, played a critical role in the formation of Abadi government, and provided comprehensive military support to Iraq in its struggle against ISIS. Iran's political support to Abadi for the formation of the new government facilitated the preservation of Iranian interests in Iraq and strategic relations between Baghdad and Tehran. The comprehensive military support of Iran that was extended to Iraq to boost its struggle against ISIS led to the widening of military cooperation between the two countries. It is argued that major developments throughout 2014 furthered Iranian influence in Iraq, and culminated in the 'deepening' of strategic partnership between the two countries.

One of the most dramatic developments that took place in the last decade in the Middle East politics is the transformation of the relations between Iraq and Iran from hostility into 'strategic partnership.' Certainly, the United States played a major role in this transformation, simply by its intervention in Iraq in 2003 that destroyed the Baath rule and built a new federal and 'democratic' regime. Iran effectively utilized the structural change and new circumstances in the neighboring country, and elevated Baghdad-Tehran relations to a 'strategic' level. Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad paid his last state visit to Iraq in July 2013. One of the foreign policy priorities of Hassan Rouhani, who was inaugurated as the new Iranian President in August 2014, has been sustaining 'strategic relations' between Baghdad and Tehran. Hence, M. Javad Zarif, Minister of Foreign Affairs, paid his first visit to Baghdad in September 2013.

The consecutive visits between Tehran and Baghdad display critical place of Baghdad in foreign policy strategies of Iran, which is maintained by successive governments in Tehran. Iraq has a remarkable

place with regard to both regional strategies and defense policies of Iran. The increase in the volume of total trade between the two countries to a level above 12 billion dollars indicates that economic aspects of Baghdad-Tehran relations have also been growing. Although the regional power of Iran has perceivably increased partly due to its influence over Iraq, the Iranian leadership has two major concerns with regard to this country. Firstly, Iran follows closely the growing instability across Iraq that may eventually lead to the dissolution of the country. The second major concern of Iran is the re-empowerment of the Baathist groups in Iraq. In other words, Iran wishes a weak and 'compromising' government in Baghdad that would not pose threats to its invested interests in the country, but a government strong enough to keep the country united.[1]

The relations between Iraq and Iran, however, are heavily affected by internal and regional developments. In this regards, there have been three major developments this year, which closely affected and shaped bilateral relations between the two countries. They are the parliamentary elections in Iraq conducted on April 30, the seizure of Mosul by ISIS in June, and the formation of new government in Iraq in September 2014. This review addresses the implications of the aforementioned developments on Iraq-Iran relations. It is argued that each of the aforementioned developments has led to the furthering of the Iranian influence in Iraq, and the 'deepening' of strategic partnership between the two countries.

Iraq Parliamentary Elections of 2014 and Iran

Iran pursued a cautious policy vis-à-vis the parliamentary elections in Iraq that was held on April 30, 2014. Against the widespread belief about Iranian backing of the then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Iran always maintained contacts with various political movements. It was because the Iranian leadership was also aware

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of the fact that policies of Maliki alienated the Sunnis and the Kurds towards the regime. Iran was also concerned with the prospect about the rise of violence and instability in the country. Additionally, Iran had some reservations with Maliki, who was known to be an 'Arab nationalist,' and who was tempted to act 'independently.'[2]
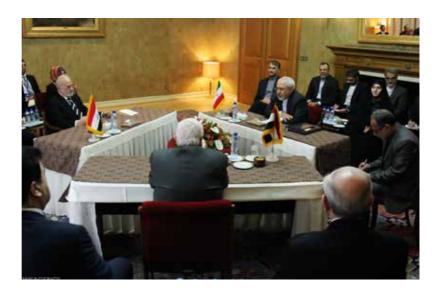
There are three important points that could be detected from the statements of Iranian statesmen, including President Rouhani, about the April 30 elections.[3] These points constitute the bases of Iranian discourse on Iraq, and reflect major concerns of the Iranian officials. First, they viewed participation in elections as the response of people to terrorism. The provision of stability in Iraq after the American military withdrawal has become one of the priorities of Iran. After the withdrawal of the American soldiers, however, the security situation in Iraq was worsened due to the sectarian-based political tensions and the adverse affects of the civil war in Syria. A number of Salafi movements led by ISIS and some bands organized by former Baathists have widened their maneuver capability in Iraq and increased their attacks in different parts of the country. Whereas the violence caused the death of approximately 4,000 civilians in

2011, this number rose to above 9,500 at the end of 2013.[4] The same organizations had called for the boycott of the elections shortly before April 30, and had warned people not to participate in elections. That is why the Iranian government welcomed relatively high participation rate (60 %) and called it 'Iraqi people's challenge against terrorist threats.'[5] This was largely because of the fact that the rising terrorist attacks and instability are viewed as threats not only to Iraqi people and the government in Baghdad, but also to the Iranian interests. Maintaining Iranian achievements in Iraq, which was acquired through the last decade, was dependent on the establishment of stability and security in the country. Additionally, the deepening of instability and the outbreak of security issues may have resulted in the dissolution of Iraq, or outbreak of civil war, or rise of a hostile regime to Tehran, all of which meant the emergence of new challenges for Iran.

The second point that Iranian authorities underlined in relation to the parliamentary elections was the territorial integrity of Iraq. Their stress on the territorial integrity could be regarded as a reaction to various scenarios that envisaged the disintegration of Iraq in response to the recent developments in the region. According to the Iranian leadership, such scenarios are imperialist designs that aimed at fragmenting and weakening the Islamic world. Moreover, the fact that the most probable candidates to be adversely affected from such scenarios are Iraq and Syria, one 'strategic partner' and the other 'ally' of Iran, respectively, further increased Iranian government's anxiety. The insistence of the territorial integrity of Iraq also could be regarded as the Iranian reaction to the Iraqi Kurdish statements for independence, which came just before the elections due to the rise of tensions between Arbil and Baghdad. Although Iran was one of the supporters of the establishment of a federal system in Iraq, it is not ready to accept an independent state of Iraqi Kurds.

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The third issue underlined by Iranian officials was the formation of a government supported by the majority of Iraqi people. A statement released by the Foreign Ministry soon after the elections expressed the Iranian hope that "the outcome of the elections would strengthen the trend of democracy in Iraq and enhance unity between the Iraqi nation and political groups." It also stated that "the formation of a government elected by people would accelerate the process of development in Iraq and further isolate terrorist and extremist movements in the country and the region."[6] This kind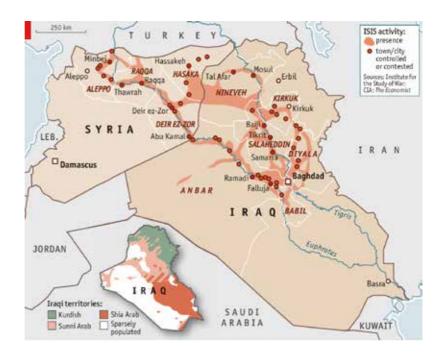 of statements included necessity of representation of different social groups in the government, as well. However, the principal concern of Iran is not the empowerment of participatory democracy in Iraq, but the preservation of power of the Shiite majority in the country and justification of that power through elections.

Outcomes of the elections were officially announced in late May. Accordingly, State of Law Coalition led by Maliki secured the elections by winning 92 of the 325 seats in the parliament. Since Iranian government had maintained its ties with Maliki while seeking for alternatives before the elections, the victory of State of

Law Coalition did not mean a defeat for Iran. However, Maliki could not have reflected his election performance in the administration of the country and national politics. Two subsequent developments stroke a heavy blow to Maliki's ambition to lead the government for the third time. Firstly, many political groups coming from different social backgrounds including the Shiites, particularly the Kurds, resisted to the third-term prime ministry of Maliki. Second, ISIS increased its attacks in Nineveh, Anbar and Saladin provinces and seized the control of many places including the second biggest city in the country, Mosul. Eventually, Prime Minister Maliki was forced to pay political cost of his sectarian policies, the estrangement of the Kurds from the regime, and the poverty of the security forces under his command to face ISIS. His rivals answered Maliki's call for national unity on the condition that he would give up his claim for the third period in prime ministry, whereas his call for international support remained unanswered. As a condition to provide military and political support to Iraq, the United States and its allies asked for the formation of a national unity government in Baghdad that would include different social groups.

Implications of the Rise of ISIS on Iraq-Iran Relations

Iran is the first country to provide unconditional support to the Maliki government. Rather than any fixed policy of keeping Maliki in power at any cost, the preservation of strategic interests of Iran played a decisive role in the extension of that support. Therefore, Iran is the first country to provide support against ISIS threat not only to the central government in Baghdad represented by Maliki, but also to the Kurdistan Regional Government. Iran has taken action in the face of the rise of ISIS -called by Iranians as '*takfiri* terrorist'-, its threat to the political regime in Iraq, its approach to Iran-Iraq border, and its hostility to the Shiites. President Rouhani declared Iran's red-lines by stating that

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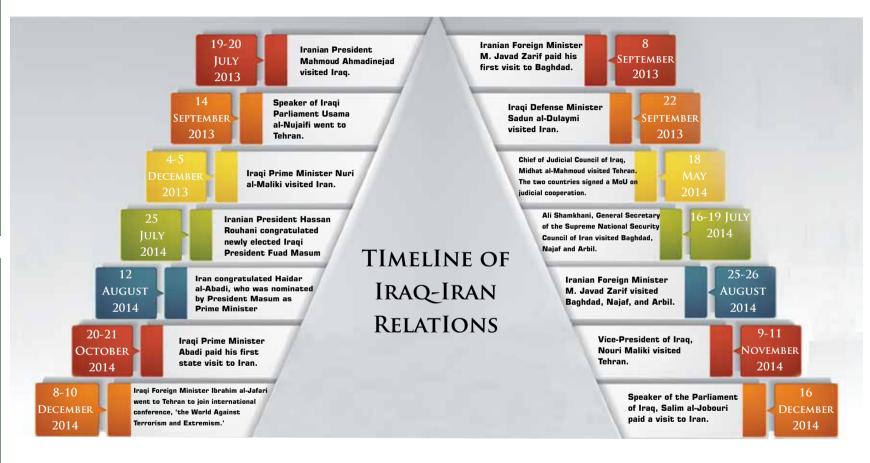
Iran would not allow the fall of Shiite shrine cities Samarra, Karbala, Najaf, and Baghdad to the hands of ISIS.[7]

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Iran has seen the rise of '*takfiri*' and extremist movements in the region as a threat to its interests. In addition to the common perception as a source for destabilization, Iran's concerns with regard to extremist movements could be analyzed under three headings. First, these movements primarily threaten Iran's regional allies, the Assad administration in Syria and the central government in Iraq. Additionally, the seizure of vast lands in Iraq, stretching from the Turkish border in the north to the Jordanian border in the southwest, has disrupted territorial connection between the members of the 'resistance front' led by Iran. Second, the extremists excommunicate the Shiites and consider them enemies. Because Iranian government views itself as the protector of all Shiites, any danger surrounding the Shiites in the region is regarded as a threat

by Iran. Finally, the advance of the '*takfiri*' movements to the Iran-Iraq border is regarded as a major threat to the security of Iran. In this regard, Iran's experience with Taliban in Afghanistan played a decisive role. After capturing the north of Afghanistan in 1998, Taliban had killed 13 Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i Sharif and exerted a heavy pressure on the Shiites in the region. That is why Iran was on the brink of a war with Taliban. Hence, the advance of ISIS in Khanakin, in the province of Diyalah, 20-km close to the Iranian border, increased security concerns of Iran. Therefore, Tehran increased security measures at the border area.

Iran has also been concerned with the possibility of the return of the American troops to Iraq under the pretext of fighting against ISIS. For this reason, Iranian officials asserted that Iraqi forces have enough capacity to fight ISIS and promised the Iraqi government every support that it needs in struggling against terrorism.

Moreover, claiming that the United States and its allies are mostly responsible for the emergence of ISIS, Iranian officials called the coalition against ISIS 'ridiculous' and opposed the military intervention of foreign powers in Iraq. On the one hand, the rise of ISIS threat against the government in Baghdad alarmed security considerations in Tehran. On the other hand, it provided a reasonable base for the improvement of the strategic relations between Iraq and Iran, and an opportunity for Iran to contain US influence in Iraq.

Iran's support to the Iraqi government to fight against ISIS could be classified into three groups. First, Iran provided arms and munitions to the Iraqi army, the Shiite militia forces and the Kurdish peshmerga. Additionally, in coordination with Russia, Iran supplied 7 SU-25 jet fighters with their pilots and a number of drones to the service of Iraqi government. Hence, defense infrastructure of Iraq, who lacked an efficient air force, was

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TimeLine of Iraq-Iran RelatIons

19-20 July 2013 — Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Iraq.

14 September 2013 — Speaker of Iraqi Parliament Usama al-Nujaifi went to Tehran.

4-5 December 2013 — Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited Iran.

25 July 2014 — Iranian President Hassan Rouhani congratulated newly elected Iraqi President Fuad Masum

12 August 2014 — Iran congratulated Haidar al-Abadi, who was nominated by President Masum as Prime Minister

20-21 October 2014 — Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi paid his first state visit to Iran.

8-10 December 2014 — Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari went to Tehran to join international conference, 'the World Against Terrorism and Extremism.'

8 September 2013 — Iranian Foreign Minister M. Javad Zarif paid his first visit to Baghdad.

22 September 2013 — Iraqi Defense Minister Sadun al-Dulaymi visited Iran.

18 May 2014 — Chief of Judicial Council of Iraq, Midhat al-Mahmoud visited Tehran. The two countries signed a MoU on judicial cooperation.

16-19 July 2014 — Ali Shamkhani, General Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran visited Baghdad, Najaf and Arbil.

25-26 August 2014 — Iranian Foreign Minister M. Javad Zarif visited Baghdad, Najaf, and Arbil.

9-11 November 2014 — Vice-President of Iraq, Nouri Maliki visited Tehran.

16 December 2014 — Speaker of the Parliament of Iraq, Salim al-Jobouri paid a visit to Iran.

improved to some extent. The second dimension of Iranian support to Iraq is military training. It became obvious that training of Iraqi security forces was poor. Iraq established 'National Defense Forces' on a voluntary base in response to calls of the Iraqi government and the ulama – Ayatollah Sistani – to 'enlist in the national security forces to fight against terrorism' soon after the fall of Mosul to the ISIS.[8] These voluntary forces also lacked adequate military training. Additionally, the Shiite militia forces like *Badr, Asaib-e Ahl-e al-Hak*, and *Kataib-e Hizbullah*, which are in coordination with Iran in different levels, took action and moved into the conflict zones. Iranian officers attached to the Qods Force of the Revolutionary Guards have taken charge of training voluntary forces and the militias in addition to formal security forces. Third, Iran is engaged in a close cooperation with the Iraqi security forces on intelligence sharing. Furthermore, the Iranian officers provide tactical consultation throughout the military operations. Iraqi security forces, the militia, and the peshmerga undertake operations in close cooperation with the Revolutionary Guards.

Iran's support to Iraq is not limited to the logistical support, military training, intelligence sharing and military advise. Iranian F-4 jets straightly bombed some ISIS targets around Diyala. The role of Iran in 'liberating' some towns is repeatedly admitted by various Iraqi, Iranian and Kurdish authorities. The activities of Qasem Sulaimani in Iraq are pretentiously reported in some media outlets.[9] Although the exact number of Iranian officers, who are in Iraq for training or advising, is unknown, different sources report that between 120 and 500 Revolutionary Guards are active in Iraq.[10]

The Abadi Government and its Relations with Iran

Iran's decision to support Iraqi government against ISIS did not mean an effort to keep Maliki in power. Neither of the

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Iranian officials congratulated the election victory of Maliki; instead, they waited for the formation of the government in accordance with alliances in the new parliament. The parliament, which convened in July 2014 elected Fuad Masum as new president of Iraq. Iran immediately congratulated Haidar al-Abadi, who is nominated as prime minister by President Masum on August 11. Although Maliki insisted on his claim to be prime minister for a while, he could not secure Iran's support.

In the mid of negotiations for the establishment of new government, two high-level figures of the Iranian administration visited Iraq consecutively. Firstly, Ali Shamkhani, the General Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, visited Baghdad, Najaf and Arbil on July 16-19. Later, Foreign Minister Zarif visited the same cities on August 25-26, and negotiated with leading political figures. The consecutive visits principally aimed at coordinating a smooth transition in government in Iraq, and promoted the formation of a new government. In this regard, Iran persuaded Maliki to give up his claims for the prime ministry, and convinced the Iraqi Kurds to take part in the new government; thereby it helped to save 'national integrity of Iraq.'[11] Additionally, the Iranian officials repeated Iran's promise to support Iraqi government to fight against ISIS.

There are several factors that affected Iran's decision to support the Abadi government. Above else, activities of the Maliki government relegated both the Sunnis and the Kurds to the margins of the political system, and made it difficult to govern Iraq. Secondly, Iranian government could not tolerate political quarrels and power vacuum in Baghdad in a critical period, when ISIS continued to advance in Iraq. Additionally, the tense relations between the Maliki government and the regional countries, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, were believed to be responsible for instability in Iraq. Moreover, the growing cooperation between the Maliki government and

Tehran heightened concerns of a number of regional governments with regard to the Middle East strategy of Iran, which accelerated the polarization of the regional countries. In other words, through his internal and foreign policies, the Maliki government endangered Iranian interests in Iraq and in the region. Nevertheless, Maliki could secure neither the support of the United States, nor the support of any of the regional governments. In this regard, Iran reviewed its position and decided to support Abadi. The anticipation that Abadi would adopt a compromising and moderate policy inside and outside Iraq led many of the political parties in Iraq and the regional countries, including Iran, to support Abadi government. Thereby, soon after the formation of Iraqi government under Abadi, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq started to normalize.

Having formed his cabinet and secured parliamentary approval on September 8, Abadi paid his first official visit to Tehran on October 20-22. The principal agenda of the visit was the fight against ISIS. Abadi thanked his Iranian counterparts for their support against ISIS. Iranian officials repeated their support to Baghdad to preserve territorial integrity of Iraq and to struggle against terrorism. Both Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei and President Rouhani asserted that the formation of a coalition against ISIS under the leadership of the United States is meaningless because the same forces helped to the emergence of the '*takfiri*' group. They underlined that the primary responsibility for the struggle against terrorism "should be shouldered by Iraqi government and popular forces."[12] Interestingly, just before his trip to Tehran, Abadi had stated that Iraq did not need foreign soldiers to fight against terrorism. The same issues that were brought to the agenda by the Iranian leaders during the visit illustrated both the similarities in the views of the two governments, and the Iraqi government's compromise with the major concerns of Iran.

Iran's support to the Abadi government does not mean that

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it suspended its ties with Maliki. That is why Iranian officials did not forget 'valuable contributions' of Maliki in providing stability in Iraq, while declaring their support to the Abadi government. Soon after Abadi's visit to Tehran, Nuri Maliki, now Vice-President, visited Iran on November 9-11 and was received by the highest authority in Tehran. This visit meant that Maliki is still an influential figure in Iraqi politics, and Iran continues to support different political actors in order to save its interests in Iraq.

Conclusion

Iraq is critically important for Iranian government both for its regional policies, and for security of its borders. That is why Iran could not remain indifferent to the developments in Iraq. The structural changes in Iraqi politics after the American intervention led to the rise of the Iranian influence in this country. Eventually, the relationship between Iraq and Iran has evolved into a strategic partnership. The major developments that took place in Iraq-Iran relations over 2014 have led to the deepening of the strategic cooperation between the two countries that dates back a decade. The parliamentary elections and the formation of Abadi government did not decrease Iran's influence in Iraq; on the contrary, the two countries have come closer. Iran's political support to Abadi for the formation of government facilitated the preservation of the Iranian interests in Iraq and strategic relations between Baghdad and Tehran. The comprehensive military support of Iran that was extended to Iraq to help in its struggle against ISIS led to the widening of military cooperation between the two countries. It is not a simple military cooperation between the two governments, since the critical role of the Revolutionary Guards either in military theatre, or in the training of security forces, militias and volunteers have paved the ground for the consolidation and widening of the Iranian influence in Iraq. Therefore, developments in 2014 culminated in the deepening of strategic partnership between Iraq and Iran.

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