Ayatollah Sistani Defies Iran to Promote Self-Governance in Iraq

Hailed a liberator and a savior against ISIS after it dedicated its men, military expertise and efforts in neighbouring Iraq, Iran has now become the subject of Iraqis’ ire over its perceived political and ideological patronage, as well as the perceived arrogance with which Tehran has looked upon protesters, advocating violence to quell the budding rebellion.

If Iraq’s future still remains murky as the country contemplates constitutional bankruptcy, it is evident that its people, beyond all manner of religious, ethnic or tribal differences very much intend to stand together in their calls for self-governance and independence from foreign interventionism - even if by the hands of its most trusted allies against Islamic radicalism. But then again Iraq and Iran always enjoyed a complicated history, one peppered with betrayal and religious codependency.

But how did we get here when only a few months ago Iran stood strong in its regional alliances, claiming to its names several Arab capitals by virtue of its religious network and its self-affirmed call for all nations to define their respective identities in the rejection of both imperialism and western military interventionism - especially when wielded through Riyadh’s influence?

A child of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s islamic revolutionary ideology (1979) Iran post-shah wanted to rebuild the
region to its image and thus counter the rise of its religious nemesis turned theocracy: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Crippled by punishing sanctions and relegated to the very outskirts of the international community Iran was never meant to rise a regional hegemon ... and yet it did. From the fall of Saddam Husein to the rise of Shia political Islam as a new powerful regional force within a formerly disenfranchised and long-suffering religious minority base, Iran steadily asserted its role as mediator, patron and mentor first in Lebanon, then Syria, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen.

But Iran may well have misread and more importantly misunderstood those it believed it ruled over, or at least exercised power over through an intricate mesh of military, economic, religious and political influence. If Iranians are still willing to bow to clerical rule on the basis they hold that the religious leadership can best direct society’s future, Iraqis wish to embrace secularism and self-political determination.

Unlike Iran, Iraq is not a religiously monolithic society and so any attempt for any particular denomination to rule over all others is bound to end in violence and chaos ... just as we are seeing today. That of course and the fact that Iraq’s leading political class entrenched its rule in blind thievery.

In other words, Iraq cannot be looked at as an extension of Iran’s Islamic Revolution; it is very much its own nation-state even if its borders were in comparison to that of Iran only recently drawn.

If Iraqis’ calls for an end to the mullah’s rule is anything to go by, Iran’s influence over Iraq’s politics will not survive the winter - especially if we consider that such cries have been let out in ‘Shia country’, those very regions of Iraq which remain majority Shia and formerly held Iran in great esteem due its role in defeating ISIS.

The crown-jewel to Iran’s growing hegemonic power, Iraq is fast becoming the very liability that could send the Islamic Republic reeling, and thus prompt a grand unravelling that ultimately will play right in the hands of the United States and offer Saudi Arabia the respite it so very much needs against it self-appointed foe. Iran’s decision to shut down all internet access following a wave of popular unrest earlier in November needs to be read within the dynamics of Iraq’s discontent over Tehran’s diktat.

Today Iran is facing off Iraq’s most senior cleric: Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a man whose influence and religious clout extend far beyond Iraq’s borders, arguably THE most powerful religious figurehead across the Shia Muslim world.

His office has now become the new front line of this political war shaping up between Tehran and Baghdad ... only here, Iran stands to lose more than just an ally, while Iraq only ambitions to assert its right to self-governance away from corruption.

Last Friday Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi announced he would submit his resignation to parliament, hours after Ayatollah Sistani called for a cabinet change amid deadly protests. “We call upon the House of Representatives from which this current government emerged to reconsider its options in that regard,” a statement from Sistani’s office read.

The sudden turnaround came after nearly two months of bloody protests against the ruling class that have left more than 400 dead and 15,000 wounded and was met with cheers from protesters in Baghdad’s iconic Tahrir (Liberation) Square. Needless to say that Iran’s leadership did not take kindly to the news.

Right on the heels of Mahdi’s resignation, Iran’s powerful General Qassem Suleimani - the commander of the Quds force of Iran’s powerful Revolutionary Guards Corps arrived in Najaf to meet with Ayatollah Sistani. But for all the prodding and nudging Iran could master, Sistani refused to renege on his statement of support for the protesters against the government.

And just like that Iraqis’ hopes for a secular democracy free of foreign influence found their biggest supporter in a Shia cleric - the irony of the situation has not been missed by anyone, least of all Iranians.

As Sir John Jenkins, one of Britain’s longest-serving regional ambassadors, who led missions in Baghdad, Riyadh, Damascus, and East Jerusalem told the Guardian in late November:

“There was a time when Iranian pretensions to defend the oppressed and punish the corrupt resonated more widely in the region. But what is left is only a distant, fading echo of this – as many Shia scholars warned would happen. We see the consequences in the reactions of Iraqi, Lebanese and now Iranian Shia protesters who are tired of being instrumentalized and want a better life now not in some Khomeinist paradise.”

How Iran will handle its stand-off with Iraq is anyone’s guess, but it will undoubtedly define the region’s geopolitical makeup.
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