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Iraqi perspective of the US-Iran tension

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The latest tension between Iran and the United States has created an unhealthy debate among local actors in Iraq and the wider Middle East, reflecting minimal insight into Washington or Tehran's policy environment. This in itself can be extremely detrimental to their own national agenda as well as the overall dynamics. The question here is: where is this US-Iran escalation leading and what policy would be best for the local players in Iraq (and elsewhere) to pursue?

Trump does not mean war

President Trump is getting the World used to his plain talks and surprise moves. However, at the end of each game, it becomes clear that his instincts are that of a businessman with focus on the short term gains for his country. He does not hide the fact that his crusade is all for money, not war, and his wars are for income not values. He never hesitated in milking, while ridiculing, his Gulf Arab allies, with little consideration to spreading the American values of democracy.

Looking at the Middle East landscape from President Trump's point of view, there are several rich or potentially rich countries like Iran, Iraq and Syria that need rebuilding, but their colossal business opportunities are only available to US rivals, including China, Russia and Europe. In Iraq, the US paid a hefty human and financial price for the regime change, yet it harvested peanuts in return. Worse still, when President Barak Obama and the

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Europeans struck the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), they failed to: (a) use the opportunity to limit the Iranian hegemony across the Middle East. If anything, they made Iran richer and even more capable of expanding its influence; and (b) make Iran's new business opportunities available to US companies.

Therefore, President Trump's key objective is not (has never been) to start a major war, which he knows would be costly, unpredictable and bad for his country's economy. While Iran tension is good for his populist appeal, wars are bad for re-elections too because US voters vote on the basis of economy, not victory at war. George H Bush's victory over Iraq in 1991 did not lead to his re-election, whereas Bill Clinton won purely on "The economy stupid" ticket. Trump knows he can start a big war, but cannot guarantee its finish on his own terms. He will also have a tough time convincing Congress and US allies (including Israel) who do not think war is warranted.

Therefore, President Trump's current military moves have so far not exceeded symbolic and defensive measures; for example he did not respond to Iran's provocative moves in the Gulf, and warned his advisors against pushing him towards military escalation. Of course, the current escalations have already reached dangerous levels that could be triggered by wild card, by design or by chance, but even then military responses are likely to remain limited.

If not war, what then?

President Trump has indicated that he wants the Iranians come back to the negotiating table and agree a new, amicable agreement. He has even made a phone line available to the Iranians for direct communication. This tactic has worked with the North Koreans, but is highly unlikely to work with the Iranians, who are different in more than one way. That said, Trump knows that the Iranian leaders are very pragmatic politicians and have mastered the art of negotiations. They too do not want war and, despite their hawkish rhetoric, may even take the initiative and start negotiating. In their previous negotiations, the Iranians have proven themselves sophisticated, tough and protractive. They know how to exhaust and frustrate opponents and end up with most of their objectives met. However, the White House is not deterred by all these, knowing that the sanctions are biting and protracted negotiations will be at the expense of the Iran's economy which may ultimately destabilise the regime too.

Iran's Response

Regime survival is the main concern, and ultimate focus, of Iran's leaders. As a country, they are perfectly capable of weathering the current storm in the short term, but they are neither capable of fighting the world's superpower in an all-out war, nor can they withstand an existential economic blockade forever. While they do not see the war being in their interest, they are getting prepared for all eventualities. The Iranian President is overseeing a crisis cell and designing parallel plans for short- and long-term military and economic escalations, and for political and diplomatic counter-campaigns.

The Iranian leaders are divided. Some, albeit a minority, believe that Iran should not wait for their fate to be determined by President Trump or the sanction strangle the regime. They believe the war would not be totally one sided and Iran has demonstrated its own and proxies' capabilities across the Middle East. These hawks prefer to start a war early, irrespective of its consequences, at the end of which the regime has greater chance of survival.

The predominant view in Iran, however, is to avoid war at all costs. Despite their tough rhetoric, Iran's strategy is not to provoke, or draw the US to, a war. Instead, hold on, buy time and wait until the next US presidential elections. A change of President may promise a new dawn, or the same President may adopt a new policy.

Iran has given the international community two months before pulling out of JCPOA. This may sound ill-advised as it may justify further US escalation, but in reality the Iranian are unlikely to execute this threat, knowing that they will lose the goodwill of the international community and further embolden the US and its Israel and Gulf Arab allies.

The Iranians are indeed holding on for now, and pursued diplomatic pathways to create pressure on the US. They have avoided direct confrontation with both the US and Israel (in Syria and Lebanon). Meanwhile, they are exploring alternative ways of increasing trade with neighbouring countries and diversifying their economy. They have reduced their oil-dependency by 37%, according to official sources.

Israeli intentions

Despite perceptions, Israel does not seem to prefer war and would not wish to push the US to a major war. Israel is content with the current state of play, and knows that war will not serve the purpose. Even if all of Iran's nuclear facilities were to be destroyed, their

reconstruction is not difficult and will only delay the programme by a few years, which has already been achieved by JCPOA.

Instead, Israel's objective is to force Iran to change behaviour in the region and forever suspend its nuclear ambitions. Yes, Israel had lobbied for a war on Iran for some time, particularly during the George W Bush administration, and was a fierce critic of the Obama lead JCPOA. Israel sees Iran's nuclear and military ambitions in its immediate neighbourhood as existential threats. Iran and its proxies' have reached unacceptable levels of military capabilities. Iran's middle range precision missiles are probably being scattered in dark spots across the Iraq-Syrian borders. That said, Israel seems to be confident about its conventional and non-conventional military capabilities when it comes to a war on Iran.

Iraq and its leaders

Iraq has long been a key back stage for the global and regional rivalries, and is in a precarious position. Both the US and Iran have long built their network of alliances among the local actors and used them to their respective advantages. Clearly, Iran has with time overwhelmed the decision-making process (top down and bottom up) in Iraq, and is more confident about Iraq's occult partiality. Many local actors (state or non-state) have long aligned themselves with Iran or acted as proxies and are willing to fight alongside Iran in an existential war. Using its obvious leverages, Iran has been trying to promote bilateral trade with Iraq, particularly on Oil and Gas, and is likely to use Iraq to bypass or even end the US blockade. Iran wishes Iraq to export less oil, and provoke a rise in global oil prices, which may derail the US plans and possibly end the sanctions. In this, Iran has so far failed.

The US, on the other hand, is exerting a lot of pressure on the Iraqis, warning them against any deceit or unwanted collaboration with Iran. Of course, the US appreciates that Iraq is too fragile and if pushed too hard, it may further destabilise and fall even further into Iran's domain. Interestingly, many local actors believe that a war on Iran would bring new opportunities and change the current Middle East dynamics and free Iraq from Iran's hegemony which so far has done little to promote rule-of-law, democracy or economic prosperity. Such wishful, unrealistic and grossly over-optimistic assumptions rely too much the US intentions which have not yet been articulated.

In contrast, there are others who are simply frustrated by the US policies and the way it treats Iraqis. They see little clarity, predictability or continuity in the US policy vis-à-vis Iraq. They cannot see that the Trump administration's priorities lie in stability or democracy in the

region, and its policies in Iraq are primarily in the context of Iran. The US has recently used more of a threat language than partnership initiatives to win Iraqis, unlike that used by the previous administrations.

It is not a surprise, therefore, that Iraq has attracted so much global attention and US/Iran scrutiny. Every move, event or policy by Iraqi state or non-state actors are watched carefully. Iraqi leaders are well advised to think twice before they side with either of the rival powers, or trigger a cascade of events. After all, small fish can only be victims in a sea of sharks and killer whales. The only sensible policy recommendation that can be made here is to wait this storm out and remain totally impartial.

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