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THE NEW IRAQ AND THE PALESTINE QUESTION

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Iraq has only limited time or interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict these days, and really thinks its own problems, understandably, are more central to its national interests and priorities. But a few months from now, Iraq will have a new government, and its foreign policy in the region will begin to be articulated more clearly than it has been since 2003. It is useful to consider what factors will affect Iraq's policy, and whether Iraq will become a more active and influential player in the long-running saga of Israel and its neighbors.

A recent trip to Iraq, focused mainly on the future of U.S.-Iraq relations, was an opportunity to probe Iraqis of diverse political and professional orientation on Iraqi policy towards the Arab-Israeli

conundrum. It was not prominent on anyone's agenda, and Iraqis had to be pressed to express views about it. Two explanations come to mind:

- Iraq's domestic problems, from questions of daily security to access to basic services, are preoccupying. Conditions in the country have improved, dramatically in the Kurdish Regional Government in the north and in many provinces, but less so in Baghdad and in disputed areas such as Diyala province and Kirkuk. Iraqi society and its political life are still focused overwhelmingly on domestic matters. One Iraqi pleaded, "How can we think about the suffering of the Palestinians when we are suffering too?"
- Iraq has not yet developed a dynamic foreign policy. The current foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, has worked tirelessly to restore Iraq's formal role in regional and international institutions, and to improve its image. But given the shifting nature of coalition politics in the country, it is not unreasonable to conclude that it may be too early for Iraq's new and changing elites to have forged a

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strong consensus on its international posture and its position on the crises of the day.

The history of Iraq's engagement on the Palestine question is tumultuous: over 100,000 Iraqi Jews fled to Israel in the 1950s and tens of thousands of Palestinians found refuge in Iraq over the years, some fully integrated as part of the cultural and artistic elite, others living more marginal lives and mistreated on occasion by Saddam and Iraqi society. Official policy towards the dispute has largely conformed to the Arab world mainstream as defined by the summits and pronouncements of the Arab League, but there have been many deviations from that norm that could lay the groundwork for an independent Iraqi policy, rather than one closely coordinated with and constrained by the pan-Arab position.

According to a 1998 article by Israeli expert Ofra Bengio, Iraq's policy can be understood in three phases: from 1948 to the early 1960s, when Iraq treated the issue as an external one and contributed militarily to the Arab-Israeli wars; from the 1960s to early 1980s, when Israeli engagement in the Kurdish struggle drew Iraqi leaders to see that Israel could affect its core national interests; and from the 1980s through the late 1990s, when Iraq's approach to the issue was often uneven and unpredictable, lurching between radical rhetoric for domestic legitimacy, and moderate overtures intended to break its international isolation.

The overly ambitious Saddam Hussein used the Arab-Israeli conflict to advance Iraq's interests in

often contradictory ways. His policies mixed distinct national interests—such as his interest in limiting the involvement of outside powers in his struggle with the Kurds; his desire to find alternative routes for the export of Iraqi oil, including resurrecting the pre-1948 pipelines to Haifa and the Mediterranean; his hope to win western support and supplies during the war with Iran—with his need to maintain Arab solidarity on Palestine to shore up Arab world support and arms flow. Thus the policies lurched from ideologically driven anti-Israel postures, to pragmatic overtures to the U.S., Israel and various intermediaries.

Iraq and Israel were also real adversaries. Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear facilities in 1981, and a decade later, Iraq returned the favor with SCUD attacks on Israel, presumably to draw Israel into the Gulf war and bolster Arab support for Iraq, an effort thwarted by successful U.S. diplomacy that persuaded Israel to sit out the war.

So what factors will shape the fourth phase of Iraqi policymaking towards Palestine and Israel? First are the enduring realities of Iraq's geopolitics, as a potentially very wealthy oil exporter that is virtually landlocked and in need of diverse routes to move its natural resource to market. It is also a twilight zone country of the Middle East, nestled between the Arabs to the west and two former empires, Turkey and Iran, to the north and east, both of which have considerable influence these days over its political and economic life. It is in many ways a bi-national state, with a large Arab majority and a significant Kurdish minority

comprising under 20% of the population. (In addition, there are a dwindling number of other ancient sects and minority groups.)

Second are Iraq's new political possibilities: out of the ashes of a devastating war is emerging a more modern and confident country that has broken with the Arab mainstream of monarchies and authoritarianism, and also needs to demonstrate that it is not under the control of any of its predatory neighbors. Parts of the Iraqi political leadership, such as the Sadrists, will surely continue to harbor anti-Israel views, and the absence of any progress on Palestine will provide few incentives for Iraq to take any bold initiatives. Yet Iraq could choose a more independent foreign policy from its neighbors, especially as part of a bargain to maintain a special relationship with the United States that includes security cooperation if not security guarantees. The Kurds, who have played a disproportionately important role in national leadership since the fall of Saddam in 2003, may be able to nudge their Arab compatriots in this direction. Such a policy could lead to open contact and commercial cooperation with Israel, if not formal recognition, alongside support for Palestinian statehood.

Such an evolution of Iraq's policies could occur, and would serve Iraq's interests. It could prove useful in demonstrating that Iraq's majority Shia community does not follow Iran's lead blindly; it would signal that educated, secular Iraqis can help shape a cosmopolitan foreign policy for the country. But Iraq might not see sufficient benefit compared to the possible costs of such a course. It is not yet feeling or thinking like a free actor, and would carefully weigh the signals from its powerful neighbors before embarking on a more progressive or activist approach to the peace process.

One Iraqi politician said, "We won't be Egypt, but we won't be Iran either – with support to radical groups. Maybe we'll be more like Saudi Arabia." A careful policy that embraces the principle of comprehensive peace but believes the burden for action is in Tel Aviv or Washington may not be the most exciting option for Iraq, but it's better than some of the alternatives.

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