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Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

# **Pragmatic and confrontational strategies**

## **A brief reading of the political conduct of the (former) Iraqi and Iranian regimes**

**Hamid Reza Al-Ibrahimi**



## About

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

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# Pragmatic and confrontational strategies

## A brief reading of the political conduct of the (former) Iraqi and Iranian regimes

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Hamid Reza Al-Ibrahimi\*

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### Introduction

From 1975 to 1980, Iraq went through its best phase in its contemporary history in terms of political stability, economic stability, and doubling of its national capacity. This phase crystallized in the pragmatic process of Iraqi political building and dealing with Iran in resolving conflicts, particularly after accepting the 1975 Convention on Shatt al-Arab. The Iraqi State was able to resolve the conflict with Iran on the one hand and to break up the relationship between Iran and the Kurds in northern Iraq on the other. The central Government has thus recovered much of the military and economic capacity that had been drained in the northern conflicts, as well as its high focus on national expansion.

But what turned those five golden years into four lean decades? How the Iraqi Government was unable to re-produce the pragmatism that it pursued in the mid-1970s in the crises of Iran and Kuwait. Its outreach to the world, particularly its eastern neighbor, has been weaker than it was. In practice, it has not even been able to maintain its field presence on Iraqi territory and has fallen at the lowest possible cost to American forces.

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## **Political directions of the former Iraqi regime compared to Iran**

In short, an important point must be made: The general thought of most Middle Eastern States is either “pragmatic security” or “purely military”. The result of these ideas is tyranny and the closed space of freedom, but in the long run, these two types of thinking will lead to very different results in the field of diplomacy and internal development.

In other words, security thinking has priority in solving problems. Military thinking has priority in using a difficult solution, even if it doesn't solve the problem. This thinking is based on the authenticity of violence. It depends only on the use of hard solutions to deal with all threats internally and externally, while in security thinking, though not paying attention to freedom and democracy, has priority in solving internal and external problems. It is possible to adopt a multifaceted set of solutions to deal with crises depending on the circumstances. In Governments concerned with security, a wide range of economic, diplomatic, and military options are used to promote domestic and international objectives, not just purely military.

If we are to make an operational comparison between Iran and Iraq in using the latter options to control internal and external crises, it must be accepted that both parties did not wish to use reasonable options to control crises in the early 1980s.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein eliminated Al-Bakr and confusingly suppressed the Ba'ath Party leadership in the famous “Al-Khuld” Hall incident. Externally, he abandoned all experiences of the agreement with Iran and was deluded by the collapse of Iranian military power in the post-revolutionary period, taking the military approach to solving problems with Tehran.

On the other hand, in the post-revolution chaos, the Iranian government completely liquidated the diplomatic, military, and security power of the “Shah” regime, destroying Iran’s bargaining power, and destroying nationalist technocrats in the interim government, causing the temporary opening space that has engendered after the revolution to disappear.

But this course of development has continued to face other challenges. Both sides have committed themselves to a strict security approach domestically, but at the international level, although the divide has increased with the beginning of the war, Iraq has first realized the need to resort to diplomacy and redouble its efforts instead of militarism. The element that facilitates Iraq’s entry into a new diplomatic phase is Iran’s departure from the diplomatic landscape, and the emphasis on a military solution to its crisis with Iraq. In the meantime, Iraq has regained its pending relationship with the United States, and the supply of European arms for large-scale restructuring of military infrastructure, as well as extensive intelligence ties with Washington about Iran’s military position regarding FAO. Almost all Arab powers have been mobilized against Iran except Libya and Syria, while establishing a very close and intimate relationship with the Eastern Front and especially the Soviet Union, to the extent that the composition of the Iraqi army was unique.

At the same time, they were using sophisticated aircraft such as the French “Mirage” and “MiG-29” in their air force, while exhausted Iran was facing the Iraqi Air Force disproportionately. Saddam gave broad powers to all his commanders, including Fadel al-Barrak, to gain full control of his internal surroundings, to avoid any internal security problems during the war, particularly after the failed attempt to assassinate Saddam in Dujayl.

Diplomatically, Iraq has also launched a large-scale operation in Washington, where Iraqi Ambassador Nizar Hamdoon and Iraqi Envoy to the United Nations Riad Al-Qaisi made extensive efforts to match visions between public opinion and Baghdad's demands for peace.

All these pragmatic Iraqi endeavors at all levels in the last six years of the war have put Tehran under diplomatic, economic, and military pressure, while it has borne fruit by forcing Tehran to accept resolution 598 and end the war. Here, the pragmatic paper is used for internal and external gains.

For the first time, under those circumstances, Tehran faced new realities on the ground that forced it to accept certain international norms, moving slowly at the domestic level to adhere to political relativism, so it gradually resumed its relations with Europe and the international financial institutions to begin a period of restoration and initiation in the war, while experiencing a somewhat more open cultural and political atmosphere in which the constraints and effects of the war were reduced. In contrast, Iraq has lagged behind all the pragmatic achievements of the past decade.

As for Iraq, immediately after the end of the war and without learning from the experience of the Kurdish conflict in the 1970s, Saddam stepped towards the northern governorates. Tens of thousands of Kurd citizens were killed and displaced by the Anfal incident, and they came under the control of Saddam's regime. Although that domination continued briefly, it has torn the last strands of Kurdish affiliation with Iraq. This gap has remained for the present day and will probably last forever. While Iraq had intermediate solutions with the Kurd leaders, it preferred to war with the Kurd over the diplomatic option, thereby gradually eliminating everything it had planted in previous years.

Saddam dealt with the West in a way that did not interact with Western public opinion on several issues, such as the execution of British-Iranian journalist “Farzad Bazoft”, in what he considered to be the absolute and faithful creditor of the Arab Gulf States and their strategic depth, and he expected them to meet all his economic and security requirements unconditionally as protector of the Arab nation.

The Iraqi security and diplomatic system have become synonymous with Saddam, and Iraqi institutions have lost their options and functions in practice. Amid these repercussions, the wave of external debt, and the destruction of Iraq’s social fabric. Iraq has lost its rational choices, trying to solve problems only militarily. However, Saddam didn’t realize that war was like a sword, it can only be held from one end, the other end will cut you. Saddam believed that the world would deal with the case of his invasion of Kuwait, as it did with “Al-Assad” when he entered Lebanon, in the absence of a regional deterrent, rejecting all the Arab cushions to solve his problems with Kuwait and help him to meet the debt accumulated by the wars, because he practically imagined Kuwait as an easy target. While Saddam’s folly took root soon after the occupation of Kuwait, he believed that he could trade the West for Kuwait to fulfill his demands, ignoring even Soviet reactions, until after the liberation of Kuwait he ended up destroying the infrastructure that maintained Iraq’s unity.

Saddam’s regime did not learn from the era following the fall of Kuwait. Instead of moving towards relative freedom of society and gradually returning to the international community. strict and foolishly legitimate laws were placed on the agenda, such as: Cutting off the hand of the thief and other provisions to regain the lost glory of Sharia law as a result of Arab nationalism joining forces against him after the conquest of Kuwait.

On the opposite front was the Islamic Iran that worked to return to the international fold in the shadow of cultural openness. While the Iraqi security apparatus has gradually lost its stability, having largely succeeded in ensuring its security and stability. Saddam overthrew the first and most influential security commander Fadel al-Barrak, fearing cooperation or collusion with foreign States, and weakened his security institutions to create a major security divide within the Government, leading to the escape of many prominent and influential leaders outside the country, such as the general chief of Iraqi general military intelligence, “Wafiq al-Samarrai”, former army chief of staff “Nizar Al-Khazraji”, and even his close friend and brother-in-law and military industrialist “Hussein Kamel”. In addition, much of the information about Iraqi military industrialization leaked outside the country under that gap.

These developments took place at a time when Iran was providing a de-escalation program with the West, tactically rather than strategically, and began to reopen its inner space with a political project called. “Reform”, although these external and internal developments in Iran were not sustainable and were tactically pursued. it managed to bring back the country from the threat of a post-war abyss to significant stability in the late 1990s.

Despite having less diplomatic power and experience than Iraq at the time, Iran was able to negotiate its nuclear program in several stages, in a marathon way, to reach relative agreements that avoided the dangers of war, while Iraq, despite the complete destruction of its chemical and missile program, was once again in doubt and a source of global pessimism, and thus failed to break the global consensus against it in the aftermath of 9/11, which was also the case of the Iraqi weapons file was withdrawn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and controlled by



Saddam himself, with his lingering and unbalanced decisions.

The outcome of Iran's domestic and global political climate at the end of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency may not be much different from that of Iraq in 2002, but Iran managed to get through this phase safely with Rouhani's help.

The Iranian regime's flexibility in dialogue saved it at various stages because its priority was to solve the problem, not just to use sheer force and violence.

But the important point that seems to revolve around Iran today: Is Iran's movement against the West and its internal closure are the same behaviors that Saddam followed after 1988?