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Iraq's Victory, Iran's Loss

By JOHN R. BOLTON

IRAQ'S peaceful elections and strong voter turnout last weekend were a major success for both that country and the United States — not that there was much celebration in American news coverage.

The elections could also redefine Iran's role in the region. Critics of the Iraq war claimed that overthrowing Saddam Hussein in 2003 strengthened Iran's position. Had we left Mr. Hussein in power, the theory goes, Iran would be less of a global threat. This argument is fundamentally wrong.

Long before the American ouster of Mr. Hussein, Iran was supporting terrorist groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank. It was seeking hegemony in Syria and Lebanon, and was well along in its clandestine program to acquire nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. After Mr. Hussein's conviction and execution, Iran increased efforts to advance its radical brand of Shiite Islam in Iraq. But the success of the election should substantially retard those efforts.

Mr. Hussein defended his repressive regime — and his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction — in the name of protecting Arab nations from Iran. Western critics of Mr. Hussein's removal are basically parroting the arguments of a tyrant. Surely some other Iraqi government could have advanced the Arab cause without invading Kuwait, or using chemical weapons against its own citizens.

Iraq's provincial elections actually weaken Tehran's hand.

First, they were not entirely dominated by Shiite voters. After mostly boycotting the 2005 Iraq elections, Sunnis participated on Saturday in large numbers. Many of them seem to recognize that their abstention had been a mistake. If they follow through in the general elections that should be held later this year, the composition of Iraq's Parliament will change substantially.

Moreover, it's unfair to assume that Tehran calls the shots among Iraqi Shiites. This gives too much credit to Iranian propaganda, and too little to the good sense of the Shiites themselves. Now they must decide whether taking orders from mullahs in Tehran is really more attractive than electing their own representatives in Baghdad.

Despite these successful elections, the sectarian and communal violence will not necessarily end, and we may even see the ultimate fragmentation of Iraq. Nor will the elections put an end to Iran's ambitions. Tehran appears to believe that its influence in the region is expanding, and that its neighbors and the United States have failed to respond effectively. This belief is unsurprising, given the Obama administration's acquiescent attitude toward Tehran.

Still, the elections could make a deep impression on the citizens of Iran and its vassal, Syria. Young, educated, sophisticated Iranians, dissatisfied with their country's religious orthodoxy and economic failures since the 1979 revolution, will draw their own conclusions from Iraq's peaceful democratic process.

Uncomfortable though it may be for some on the American left to admit, the "surge" continues to work, politically and militarily. The moment has come for the Obama administration to acknowledge what those fingers dipped in purple ink truly represent — a triumph for democracy.

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