Understanding Iran's Motivations in Iraq: The Cost Calculus of External Support

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Introduction

Insurgent conflicts are conspicuously at the center of today's international security landscape. After decades of neglect, the U.S. military has spent the last few years feverishly trying to relearn some of the counterinsurgent lessons from its past. Arguably the most discussed lesson concerns the ultimate "prize" in insurgent conflicts—winning the hearts and minds of an indigenous population. In Iraq, increasing attention has focused on how to improve our politico-military policies in an effort to garner the support of Iraqis. However, Iraq also reminds us of another critical lesson from our past—the role and impact external supporters can have vis à vis successful insurgencies. As Jeffrey Record of the U.S. Air Force's Air War College points out, during the Vietnam War the North Vietnamese, "among the most tenacious and skilled enemies the United States has ever fought, could hardly have prevailed unarmed, which is how they would have had to fight absent the massive Soviet and Chinese assistance they in fact received."[1] He goes on to note that,

North Vietnam, the political and military engine of the Communists war in Indochina, had no arms industry; it had to import even small arms and small-arms ammunition from the Soviet Union, China, and other Communist Bloc countries…Had the Vietnamese Communists been isolated from external assistance, as were their fellow Communist insurgents in Malaya and the Philippines in the latter 1940s and early 1950s, they almost certainly would have suffered the same fate: defeat.[2]

While insurgencies are ultimately won or lost in the domestic political arena, successful efforts often depend on some measure of external support. The mere presence of such support does not guarantee an insurgent victory, but it can often provide the help an insurgency needs to turn the corner or sustain ongoing operations. Given the impact this variable has had on the outcome of a number of notable insurgencies from the past, including Vietnam, we must remind ourselves about how external support can affect insurgencies, but more importantly, what motivates external supporters to provide such assistance. By understanding an external supporter's motivations, counterinsurgents can work to more effectively offset such support, which can bolster their chances of fostering an acceptable outcome. As such, the U.S. should reevaluate its operating assumptions concerning Iran's support of the Iraqi insurgency, in order to improve its prospects for the long-term stabilization of Iraq and the region.

Understanding the Role and Impact of External Supporters

External support can come in the form of moral, political, or material assistance, from a number of places, including states, Diasporas, refugees, and non-state actors (i.e. non-governmental organizations).[3] From the Tamil Diaspora to Al-Qaeda, different types of external supporters have impacted a number of insurgent conflicts as of late. Notwithstanding the growing influence that these types groups can have, particularly in a post Cold War environment, the fact remains that the material support provided by states is the most influential type of external support an insurgency can receive. The role and impact external states have had on insurgencies like the American Revolution, the Vietnam War, and the Soviet-Afghan War speaks for itself. While other types of support and supporters have impacted various modern conflicts, no similar combination has been as instrumental in contributing to insurgent victories.

This combination is significant for two reasons: first, external states are typically in the best position to provide the high levels of material support an insurgency craves, in the form financing, supplies, and armaments. During the American Revolution, only a state like France could have consistently provided Washington's army with the amount of "gold, clothing, and cannons" he needed to engage the British army.[4] Second, given the relative capabilities of states, external state supporters are uniquely positioned to coordinate and provide for the advanced types of material support that insurgents cannot readily obtain from anywhere else, including intelligence, training, and relevant technology. Hezbollah's de-facto victory over Israel in the summer of 2006 was largely attributable to Iranian support in the form advanced military training, anti-tank weaponry, and Katyusha rockets.[5]

The Bush Administration has long been concerned about Iranian support for the Iraqi insurgency. It has said that Iran is providing military, financial, and operational support to the insurgency.[6] The bipartisan *Iraq Study Group* reported " Iran has provided arms, financial support, and training for Shiite militias within Iraq."[7] The current U.S. commander in Iraq, Army General David H. Petraeus, cited lengthy interrogations as having "revealed" that Iran has been providing funding, material resources, and "training on Iranian soil."[8]

However, insurgent reliance on state support does not come without risks. An external state's motivations are far less rigid, and therefore subject to change depending on the nature of the geopolitical considerations at hand. While a state's motivations can be diverse, they are by no means entrenched. While insurgents are well aware of this fact, given that the "donor-client" relationship is based solely on the interests of the state, the United States seems to have ignored this reality.[9]

The Geopolitics Behind Iran's Decision to Support the Iraqi Insurgency

Increasingly, U.S. policymakers continue to publicly call into question why Iran is supporting the Iraqi insurgency. In recent discussions about Iran's presumed role in Iraq*and* Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates commented, "What [Iran's] motives are other than causing trouble for us, I don't know."[10] This is by no means a trivial statement. Unlike conventional conflicts, the motivations tied to insurgent relationships are of the utmost significance, because counterinsurgent success largely depends upon being able to influence these relationships.

For the counterinsurgent, an understanding of the relationship between insurgents and their external state supporters is just as important, because it can be also be exposed under the right circumstances. The absence of such an understanding leaves the counterinsurgent in a dangerous position—predisposed to a widening the conflict—given the lack of a comprehensive strategy for negating this support. This is precisely what the counterinsurgent needs to avoid, if at all possible.

In 2001, RAND conducted a study entitled *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements,* which focused on twelve motivations for different external supporters that might best be grouped into three categories: sympathy, aggression, and defensive considerations. The first, sympathy, can be based upon of an ideological, ethnic, or religious compatibility with an insurgency. The second, aggression, focuses on attempts to garner regional influence or to foster some type of self-serving change through insurgent support.[11] It is the third motivation—based on defensive considerations—that deserves the most attention, when considering the role of state sponsors.

When it comes to discussing the role of Iranian support for the Iraqi insurgency, U.S. civilian and military leaders often characterize Iranian support as being of a fundamentalist nature, tied to either a co-religionist or aggressive narrative. Such a characterization has incited fears about a Shia revival throughout the region. U.S. policymakers attributed a similar fundamentalist characterization to China's support for North Vietnam, in which a similar narrative based upon ideology and aggression was constructed. Unfortunately, these narratives discount the notion that Iran's role in Iraq, as was China's role in North Vietnam, is also largely attributable to defensive considerations stemming from the role of the counterinsurgent.

The Counterinsurgent's Role in Inducing External Insurgent Support

The impetus for an insurgent-counterinsurgent struggle can vary, depending on the ideological, political, or moral context of the situation. But once the conflict is underway, an external state will focus on one question: which entity represents a greater threat—the insurgent or the counterinsurgent? When facing a threat, Stephan Walt has argued that states are most likely to balance against that threat, based upon its power, proximity, and aggression.[12] Within an insurgent-counterinsurgent context, we find that counterinsurgents typically poses a greater threat to an external states because of their ability to project their military capabilities, in conjunction with their proactive efforts to reassert their authority. This is particularly true of a counterinsurgency that involves a regional or outside power, as is the case in Iraq. A regional or outside power, like the United States, can appear very threatening to a proximate state, given that it has already demonstrated the requisite capabilities needed to project its power abroad.

As was the case during the Vietnam War, China viewed the introduction of U.S. assistance and troops as a threat to its national security. Yet, at the time, the United States viewed Chinese assistance as offensive in nature, which ultimately resulted in an escalation of the conflict, to include the rest of Southeast Asia. As the Vietnam War demonstrated, the consequences of the security-insecurity paradox are real.

A Look Back at the Vietnam War

Between 1955 and 1965, China supplied North Vietnam with enough weapons and ammunition to outfit 230 infantry battalions.[13] As reported years later in China's *Jen Min Jih Pao* (*The People's Daily*), Peking introduced some 320,000 troops into Vietnam over the course of the war, with an annual maximum number of troops topping out at 170,000. Most of these troops functioned as logistical and support personnel, as well as technical experts. By 1972, China had supplied both the DRV and the insurgent People's Liberation Army (PLA) of South Vietnam with 480 122-mm howitzers, 2,960 57-mm anti-aircraft guns, and 37,237 mortars.[14] The DRV's eventual conquest of South Vietnam could never have been achieved without the commitment and support of China. While the United States and South Vietnam would have had trouble totally eradicating the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong resistance movement, the DRV would never have been able to achieve total victory without the crucial support that China provided.[15]

China initially supported North Vietnam against the French for a number of reasons, including ideology and regional influence. But on the eve of the Geneva Convention in 1954, China became fearful that the "United States might step in [to replace France], thus menacing China on

its own doorstep." Suddenly, China's first priority became its own security. It quickly shifted its stance in support of a negotiated settlement that would allow France to maintain some stake in Vietnam, in order to prevent the United States from "filling the vacuum left by [a French] departure." Despite its ideological affinity, China proved all too willing to sacrifice the Vietminh and their nationalistic aspirations in order to enhance its own security.[16] It was clear that China's first concern was ensuring an agreement that would secure its southern border.

From China's perspective, Vietnam, along with Taiwan, were possible locations from where the United States might next attempt to initiate direct military hostilities against the Chinese. They saw the United States as determined to succeed where they had previously failed (i.e. Korea), and feared that a "ring of encirclement," beginning with Vietnam, could ultimately lead to the end of Communist China.[17]

An honest assessment of the situation in Southeast Asia supports this conclusion: the Korean conflict ended in a stalemate in 1953; by 1955 the United States was already preparing to begin training South Vietnamese troops. In 1956 President Eisenhower announced that the U.S would begin sending American military advisors to South Vietnam; by 1962, the United States formalized its escalating commitment to Vietnam by formally establishing the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). Four years after establishing MACV, the United States had 400,000 dedicated combat troops stationed in Vietnam. These successive developments only fueled China's cause for concern.[18] China viewed the continuing escalation as the likely precursor for a war between the two adversaries.[19] Thus, the strategic importance of Vietnam became the primer for Chinese foreign policy from the late 1950s through the 1970s.[20]

While the United States publicly announced, as early as February 1965, that it had no desire for "a direct confrontation" with China, Chinese officials remained skeptical, and for good reason.[21] In 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara sent President Kennedy a memorandum that discussed the military decision to bomb North Vietnam. McNamara wrote that this decision was built on the need to "contain Communist China." From the Eisenhower through Johnson administrations, nobody seriously considered that China might actually be worried about its own security. Instead, each viewed China's actions as inherently aggressive, built on an ideological commitment to the future of communism in Southeast Asia.

Some thirty years later, McNamara would come to acknowledge the folly behind the once prevalent notion that China was bent on establishing a Southeast Asian communist bloc at all costs. In his autobiography, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, McNamara points out his "totally incorrect appraisal of the 'Chinese Threat' to [American] security that pervaded [U.S.] thinking." He goes on to note that, "among other shortcomings, [U.S. policymakers] took no account of the centuries-old hostility between China and Vietnam," admitting their "lack of expertise and historical knowledge seriously undermined U.S. policy."[22]

China's post-1954 decision to support the DRV was based primarily on defensive and not ideological or aggressive considerations.[23] While China was eager to see its model of communism spread throughout Indochina, its primary concern remained its own national security, followed by its dominance of the region. China was fearful that an American victory would position a hostile U.S. on its Southern doorstep. If America were to succeed, China reasoned that it would only be a matter of time before the United States began establishing permanent military bases in Vietnam, within striking distance of Beijing.

Iran's Role in Iraq

Turning toward the issue of the day, we often hear of parallels between Vietnam and Iraq. While some comparisons are wildly off the mark, others have proven more instructive.[24] Such is the

case with the role and importance of external state supporters. As was the case in Vietnam, external support for the Iraqi insurgents, particularly on a strategic level, has proven deadly.

There is disagreement concerning what, if any role Iran is playing inside Iraq.[25] Given the pretext on which the United States went to war with Iraq—the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and Saddam's ties to al-Qaida—the Bush administration's credibility with respect to the intelligence arena has rightly suffered. Suffice to say, while a full understanding of Iran's role in post-Saddam Iraq will not be understood for quite some time, claims regarding their entrenched involvement remain highly probable.

One of the most vociferous arguments made by the United States' concerns Iran's supply of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), and similar technological assistance, to elements of the Iraqi insurgency. In its findings, the *Iraq Study Group* also noted, "there are also reports that Iran has supplied improvised explosive devices to groups—including Sunni Arab insurgents—that attack U.S. forces."[26] Weapons such as these have contributed to the proficiency with which insurgents have been able to attack American forces. As of May 2007, these types of weapons were responsible for 38.6 percent of all U.S. casualties.[27] Reports also suggest that other high-tech weaponry, including mortars and sniper rifles, purchased by Iran, have ended up in the hand of Iraqi insurgents.[28] U.S. intelligence officials have been quick to point out that Iran has consciously refrained from supplying Shiite militias with more sophisticated weaponry, such as the surface-to-air missiles that have been used by Hezbollah against Israel, so as not to provide the Bush Administration with any grounds for a direct military response.[29]

Iran's Cost Calculus

After 9/11, the United States faced a monumental decision—where do we go from here. Only time will tell if the Bush administration's approach has made us safer—to date the early returns are by no means clear. But what is clear is that by taking a more militant approach against a state like Iraq—we put a number of other states, including Iran, on notice.

After invading Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003, the American military firmly entrenched itself on Iran's Eastern and Western borders. While tensions between the United States and Iran have remained volatile since the 1979 Iranian revolution and subsequent U.S. Embassy hostage crisis, the Bush administrations increasingly provocative rhetoric (such as Iran's inclusion in the "axis of evil") has only served to escalate the looming prospect of future hostilities. Add to this equation Iran's ongoing nuclear dispute with the West, and from their perspective, the prospect of an imminent attack by the United States (or an ally like Israel) probably seems like an all too real possibility. Therefore, given its vulnerable position, it was no surprise to learn that just after the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq, Iran attempted to engage the United States in direct talks for the first time in over 20 years.

As first reported by *Newsweek* magazine in 2007, Switzerland's Ambassador to Iran at the time, Tim Guldimann, sent a fax to the U.S. Department of State which contained a one-page Iranian document termed a "roadmap" for comprehensive discussions with the United States on a number of high-profile issues. The one-page document was accompanied by a cover letter, in which Ambassador Guldimann stated that he "got the clear impression that there is a strong will of the [Iranian] regime to tackle the problem with the United States now and to try it with this initiative."[30] According to Guldimann's letter, the proposal had the approval of Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's President at the time, Mohammad Khatami, and its one-time Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi. It seems readily apparent that Iran was willing to make some concessions, probably in exchange for security guarantees. The U.S. never responded to this fax.

In 2007, Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said of the 2003 communiqué, "We couldn't determine what was the Iranian's and what was the Swiss ambassador's," adding that his "impression at the time was that the Iranians 'were trying to put too much on the table.'"[31] *Newsweek's* Michael Hirsch also reported that Larry Wilkerson, former Secretary of State Colin Powell's chief of staff, said in e-mail that the Iranian overture could have been the beginning of "meaningful talks" between the United States and Iran. However, Wilkerson added such a proposal "was a non-starter" given Vice President Cheney's opposition.[32]

In all likelihood, Iran's 2003 attempt to open up a dialogue with the United States points to the fact that they were likely worried that they might be the next member of the "axis of evil" to suffer a preemptive strike, particularly after the United States initially rolled right through the Iraqi army with ease. At the same time, the Bush administration was riding high following its display of "shock and awe," and was not interested in any dialogue. Not surprising, as the United States spent late 2003 moving to consolidate its hold over Iraq, there were no reports about Iran providing support to the Iraqi insurgency. In fact, at the time, Iran even agreed to suspend elements of its nuclear program. One can presume that at this point Iran was afraid to play any role in fomenting unrest in Iraq for fear that the Bush administration would use any pre-text it could to confront Tehran militarily. But as the security situation in the Iraq rapidly deteriorated, it seems likely that Iran felt increasing emboldened, and by 2004/05 they were willing to begin taking risks in order to help sustain an insurgency that was preoccupying the United States.

Over the last two plus years, as the balance of power in Iraq has continued to shift, reports concerning Iran's role in Iraq have steadily increased. The emerging success of the Iraqi insurgency appears to have given Iran some breathing room. If one is to assume that Iran is playing a significant role in the Iraqi insurgency, their actions are likely motivated by an overriding desire to bolster their own security vis-à-vis the United States. In 2005, Abbas Milani, Director of the Iranian Studies Program at Stanford University, said that it is increasingly obvious that Tehran wants to see American troops tied down in Iraq to ensure that a future war with Iran is "simply untenable."[33]

During this time, the Bush administration has seemingly vacillated between ratcheting up its aggressive rhetoric and offering a more conciliatory approach toward Iran. For instance, in March 2007, the U.S. Navy initiated a major exercise in the Persian Gulf designed to send a message to the Iranians, while reassuring "regional audiences" about the capabilities and determination of U.S. forces.[34] The timetable for the exercise, which had been previously scheduled, was accelerated in part as a response to the Iran's refusal to curtail its nuclear programs.[35] Two months later, while on a visit to the region, Vice President Cheney delivered a speech aboard the USS John C. Stennis warning that the "United States was prepared to use its naval power to keep Tehran from disrupting oil routes or 'gaining nuclear weapons and dominating this region.'"[36] This defiant message was curiously followed by calls for increased engagement between the United States and Iran on the part of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, as well as the first instance of direct diplomatic negotiations between the United States and Iran since 1979.[37]

Despite some recent indications that it might be willingly to engage Iran on some level, the United States' long-standing track record, coupled with pundit discussions of 'doubling-down' on its bet to remake Iraq and the greater Middle East, have kept Iran understandingly leery of what a stable Iraq could mean for its own future.

Policy Implications

It is clear that Iran is not looking to take on the U.S. militarily. The fact that Tehran has not committed to supplying certain types of support to the Iraqi insurgency belies this point. Iran is willing to bear some costs, including the possibility that the United States might take some direct

action against it, in order to balance against America's influence in the region. Iran is chiefly concerned with supporting the Iraqi insurgency in order to help bolster its own security, and has supported both Sunni and Shiite factions as a result.

Why does it seem like the United States has neglected to appreciate this motivation with regard to Iran? As was the case in Vietnam, in order to justify continued support, the United States has worked to build consensus for the war by framing it as a struggle between good and evil. While this helps to generate support at home, it also fuels a psychological conceptualization of the insurgency as ideological, aggressive, and fundamentally committed. While these motivations may certainly be true of many Iraqi insurgents, they do not reflect Iran's motivations.[38] Yet, by conflating the two the United States has absolved itself from having played any part in provoking a balancing response from Iran.

The United States should not rely on the 'us versus them' construct, while refusing to consider how our actions are being perceived abroad. It is imperative that U.S. policymakers, from the administration to the military, develop some self-awareness, and begin to appreciate how our actions provoke reactions. This is not to suggest that the United States should acquiesce to Iran's support of the insurgency, or ignore their attempts to develop nuclear weapons. The U.S. must appreciate that geopolitical considerations are principally driving these events, and not let our emotions get the best of us. The often-mentioned carrot and stick approach has utility, but to create meaningful incentives and expectations we must first engage Iran in open and honest communication. Dialogue is not a dirty word. Secretary Rice has indicated that the United States is willing to directly engage Tehran on some level. This engagement must push forward, and comprehensively address a myriad of sensitive issues, including the subject of security guarantees. While nuclear and regional concerns are of the utmost importance, it is time the United States realized that not every situation must default to a to a zero-sum calculation. The fear-mongering allusion to the Munich Agreement has lost its utility—the United States must begin to reaffirm a return to realism before we find ourselves on the verge of a wider conflict.

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2. *Ibid.*, 36-37.

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12. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

13. Xiaoming Zhang, "The Vietnam War, 1964-1969: A Chinese Perspective," *The Journal of Military History* V, no. 60 (October 1996): 736.

14. *Ibid.*, 737.

15. Despite escalating tensions between the Soviet Union and China, they collaborated in all types of areas to support Hanoi during much of the war. The Soviet-Chinese subplot within the Vietnam War is extremely intriguing. However, it lies beyond the scope of this paper. For more information on the role of the Soviet Union in the Vietnam War, see Robert A. Rupen and Robert Farrell, eds., *Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet Dispute* (New York: Praeger, 1967).

16. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 207-08.

17. As quoted in Zhang, Op. Cit., 734-35. Zhou Enlai articulated this "encirclement" concern in 1965, saying, "Our assistance to Vietnam is to break the ring of encirclement and defend [China]."

18. Karnow, Op. Cit., 734.

19. Zhang, Op. Cit., 742-43.

20. *Ibid.*, 733. Zhang goes on to note that at the time, the Chinese leadership was particularly concerned that the United States would not be able to accept successive setbacks with respect to the Nationalists in Taiwan as well as Korea. They believed that the "long-anticipated" direct invasion of China could likely result from their continuing escalation in Vietnam.

21. Zhang, Op. Cit., 744.

22. McNamara, Robert S., with Brian VanDeMark. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), 218-19.

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32. *Ibid*.

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37. As recently as April 2007, Secretary of State Rice asked that Iran attend a high-level conference on the future of Iraq, being held in Egypt. See Guy Dinmore et al., "US Urges Iran to Join Iraq Talks," *Financial Times*, April 22, 2007. Direct diplomatic negotiations between the U.S. and Iran took place on May 28, 2007. See Stockman, Farah, "Talks Called Positive as U.S. Asks Iran for Help on Iraq," *Boston Globe*, May 29, 2007.

38. While some continue to argue that Iran is driven by rigid ideological considerations, I contend that ideological motivations in the international system have proved fleeting when a state's core interests are at risk. In support of this contention, I would point to Iran's partnering with the United States and Israel during the Iran–Iraq War to procure some much needed weapons despite the fundamental ideological differences between both sides.