

Viewpoint: Pouring More Arms into Iraq Risks Regional Conflagration

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Anyone following the casualty reports out of Iraq over the last six months will notice that the conflict is becoming steadily more deadly for both Iraqi civilians and the U.S. military.

The increase in casualties is in part the result of the upsurge in sectarian violence in Baghdad and other cities, where American troops are increasingly vulnerable to guerrilla tactics favored by the insurgents and the anti-U.S. Shiite militias.

But there is another reason why more U.S. military personnel are being killed and maimed: The insurgents and militias are fielding a new array of dangerous conventional weapons. While the Sunni insurgents mostly continue to use the leftover equipment and ammunition from Saddam Hussein's ammunition dumps, the Shiite militias are seeing their weapons upgraded and improved courtesy of Tehran and Moscow. There are even rumors of Iranian arms deliveries to Sunni insurgent groups.

In Iraq, the latest rocket-propelled grenade launchers, new surface-to-air missiles, sniper rifles and increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, are killing increasing numbers of American troops and destroying their equipment.

The appearance of these deadly weapons on Middle Eastern battlefields comes amid reporting by the Congressional Research Service that Russia has abandoned its policy of restraining arms sales to the developing world. The Russian arms spigot to Tehran has been reopened, with new weapons flowing onward to Hezbollah and Iran's Shiite partners in Iraq. Russian motivations seem clear: the need for hard cash combined with an eagerness to further undermine the eroding U.S. position throughout the Middle East.

The appearance of these arms on battlefields in Iraq and Lebanon represents a dangerous escalation to these conflicts and could provide the spark that sends the whole region up in flames. President Bush's recent warning to Iran serves notice of this possibility.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps is deeply involved in the arms deliveries. Iran's leaders, indirectly supported by Russia, are playing a dangerous game in actively stoking the fires of regional conflict.

It's worth remembering that the United States once played a similar and dangerous game with another adversary over 20 years ago. In mid-1985, President Reagan authorized the transfer of Stinger surface-to-air missiles to mujahedeen battling the Soviets in Afghanistan, and the missiles are credited with contributing to the Soviet defeat and withdrawal in 1989.

Reagan's decision to provide the Stingers represented a potentially dangerous escalation in the conflict—daring the Soviets to respond. Luckily for the United States, the Soviet political leadership had already decided that Afghanistan was a lost cause and made no corresponding moves.

The situation today differs in one important respect. Unlike Afghanistan in the 1980s, Iran's desire to increase the level of pain inflicted upon the United States and Israel comes during a much more unstable environment in which the political leadership in neither Washington nor Jerusalem is ready to back away from a confrontation.

On the contrary, powerful elements within the U.S. government might gladly seize upon Tehran's escalating provocations as an excuse to mount the long-rumored strikes on Iran's nuclear infrastructure. This would almost certainly lead to a much-feared wider regional war. In Israel, hawks in the Likud are already girding for a return engagement with Hezbollah.

Stinger missiles in Afghanistan in 1985 and new Russian arms spread by Iran in the Middle East must be seen in the context of a very different and arguably less stable strategic framework. American escalation in Afghanistan came after 30-odd years of U.S.-Soviet confrontation in which both sides accepted that escalation to all-out war was not an option.

In today's Middle East, there is no history of strategic stability in which the actors understand the "rules" governing their dangerous interactions. Iran's provision of arms to Hezbollah and the Shiite militias underscores its attempts to push the limits of all the actors concerned with no assurance that any of the parties understand their roles in the broader bargaining framework.

How much "pain" is the United States *San Jose Mercury News on Sunday, January 21, 2007*.and its military prepared to accept in Iraq, courtesy of Iranian-supplied arms? Do Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and its client militias in Lebanon and Iraq understand the potential consequences of using new and more-lethal arms to kill increasing numbers of U.S. and Israeli troops?

The unknown answer to these questions and the uncertainties of the underlying geopolitical framework all suggest that strategic miscalculation by any number of actors could quickly result in escalation and a wider regional war.

The unstable strategic environment makes direct dialogue with Tehran even more urgent than is suggested in the recently released Iraq Study Group report. As the Bush administration considers the way forward in Iraq, it should closely analyze the implications of strategic miscalculation in the blind alley into which Iran and its arms deliveries may be dragging the entire region.

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