

PolicyWatch #1198

## Fighting Iran in Iraq

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The February 11 intelligence briefing in Baghdad revealed specific information about the transfer of weapons and weapons technology to Iranian allies in Iraq. This has furthered an extensive discussion of Iran's role in Iraq, especially as it relates to violence in the region. The involvement of Iran's clerical regime in Iraq is not new, or simple. It can be measured in decades, and is multifaceted and comprehensive, demanding an equally broad response from the United States and U.S. allies.

Iran's preferred outcome is that Iraq be dominated by Shiite elements under the sway -- if not the direct control -- of the Iranian regime. Iran may not be interested in having a collapsed state next door, but it has no interest in a viable Iraqi government independent of Tehran, standing as a symbol of American success in the region. If it cannot dominate the nation, a weak and conflict-ridden Iraq will at least serve Iran's interests. More broadly, in the wider contest between Tehran and Washington, Iran is exploiting U.S. involvement in Iraq to weaken U.S. capabilities and will.

### Dimensions of the Iranian Challenge

The Iranian challenge in Iraq has at least six major dimensions:

*Military.* The United States has now provided concrete evidence of Iranian weapons in Iraq, including rocket-propelled grenades, 81mm and 60mm mortar rounds, and components for improvised explosive devices (IEDs) with explosively formed penetrators. The latter are especially important because they are capable of penetrating the armor on the heaviest coalition vehicles. At least 170 American soldiers have been killed by these devices. Press reports also indicate that over 100 fifty-caliber sniper rifles, sold to Iran by Austria, were found during a raid on an arms cache in Baghdad. Even at long range, these weapons are capable of penetrating the body armor worn by coalition troops, as well as many lightly armored vehicles.

Iran also provides military training and advice to its allies and accomplices in Iraq. These activities are carried out by the elite Quds (Jerusalem) Force, a component of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and one of the principal groups that Iran uses to conduct clandestine operations. Quds Force leaders are close to the most senior leadership of the regime, including Supreme Leader Ali Hussein Khamenei. The IRGC commander himself has stated that Iran can provide military assistance to any country in the region, including Iraq, based on its war experience. In all probability the group's actions are known and directed by the Iranian regime and as such are actions of the state of Iran.

*Political.* Iran attempts to influence Iraq's internal political situation through connections to numerous political parties and factions. Observers in Iraq note that Iran casts a wide net of influence rather than focusing on one or a few players. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Dawa, the Sadr movement, and other Shiite organizations are all reportedly in contact with Iranian operatives within Iraq -- in addition to consulting with Iranian officials in Tehran. U.S. intelligence indicates that Iran is also providing financial aid to Iraqi extremist organizations. The fact that Iranian agents detained by the United States have included Quds

Force personnel in a SCIRI compound and in a long-established Iranian government office in the Kurdish region underscores the scope of Iran's reported activity in Iraq.

*Social.* Through the provision of social services, medical care, and support to the Shiite religious community, Iran has created a network of influence at all levels in Shiite Iraq. Some Iraqis travel to Iran for medical care unavailable in Iraq, free of charge. Iranian media extend widely across southern Iraq, including at least one television network (al-Alam).

*Religious.* Under an agreement between the two countries, 1,500 Iranian pilgrims a day cross into Iraq. That is 547,500 people a year -- by far the largest group of civilian foreigners entering Iraq. Such pilgrims are a major presence in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. As explained by Washington Institute visiting fellow Mehdi Khalaji in Policy Focus no. 59, [\*The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism\*](#) (September 2006), Iran has become a major influence on Shiite religious education circles in Iraq.

*Economic.* Iran has growing trade ties with Iraq, particularly and is establishing a branch of its state bank in Baghdad. Tehran is offering assistance in reconstruction, based on its own experience of post-war rebuilding. Iranian businessmen are very active in the Kurdish region, especially around Sulaymaniyah, and throughout southern Iraq. On January 15, Iraq and Iran signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" to expand cooperation in air, land, and sea transportation. While Iran represents these activities as being beneficial to Iraq, they are arguably as beneficial to Iran; in at least several cases, Iranians seem to be profiting well from their role in Iraq. These activities also have the effect of creating a denser web of relationships between the two states.

*Diplomatic.* Iran's leadership makes frequent public statements concerning the situation in Iraq, attempting to present itself as Iraq's friend, as supportive of Iraq's independence, and as critical of the United States and its activities in Iraq. It receives both elected Iraqi officials and factional leaders in Tehran as official guests. Muqtada al-Sadr has made at least two visits to Iran, including one during which he pledged to use his Mahdi Army to defend Islamic states if attacked by the United States. Iranian ambassador to Iraq Hassan Kazemi Qumi, who is reportedly a senior officer in the Quds Force, has publicly stated that it is Iran's intention to expand its economic and military activity in Iraq, while denying any involvement in attacks on Americans.

## **Iranian Capabilities**

Iran has significant capabilities for wielding influence in Iraq. These include:

*History and experience.* Both the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) have extensive experience in the Kurdish region and in southern Iraq from the time of the Saddam Hussein regime. Iran provided assistance to Kurdish elements including both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in their struggles against Saddam, and had extensive dealings with SCIRI, Dawa, and the exiled leaders of both. Iranian operatives well know the complex human, physical, and operational terrain of Shiite Iraq.

*Appropriate military capabilities.* Chaotic and unsettled conditions in Iraq make it a good operational area for special forces and unconventional capabilities. The IRGC and Quds Force, as well as the MOIS, are well adapted for operations in Iraq. They have the skills to establish safe houses, monitor the movement of coalition forces, tend weapons caches, facilitate cross-border travel, smuggle munitions and money, and recruit individuals as intelligence sources.

*Geography.* Iraqi officials along the 870-mile Iraq-Iran border are not able to exercise serious control, and, in some cases, are complicit with smugglers. Iran probably uses both official and unofficial crossing points to move men, money, and materials into Iraq. According to U.S. intelligence, there are three primary areas of Iranian cross-border arms smuggling: the Mandali area east of Baghdad, the Mehran area in the southern marsh region, and the Basra area.

*Surrogates and allies.* In addition to its own forces, Iran employs surrogates and allies to aid its activities in Iraq. Hizballah in Lebanon is reportedly assisting Iran by providing military and unconventional warfare training and IED technology to Shiite fighters. U.S. intelligence reports indicate that 1,000 to 2,000 militiamen had been sent to Lebanon for training as of November 2006.

*Will.* Finally, Iran has the interest and the will to carry out prolonged underground action in Iraq. It has an interest in shaping the future government and direction of Iraq, and in weakening U.S. resources and will. Tehran is capable of fighting a long war of its own, and Iraq is a good place to do it. Furthermore, at least some in the Iranian government seem to think that escalating tensions with the United States will make Washington back off from pressing Iran on its nuclear program.

## **Iranian Challenges**

Iraq is not completely open to Iranian influence. Many Iraqi Shiites are opposed to Iranian involvement based on either religious differences or nationalism. The religious establishment in Najaf is in competition with the Iranian clerical establishment and is not beholden to it. Iraqi Shiites retain some sense of Iraqi nationalism and do not necessarily welcome the Iranian embrace. Iran must be careful not to overplay its hand in Iraq. The U.S. detention of Quds Force personnel in Iraq focuses attention on Iran's broad range of activities and the extent of its influence. It also places Iraqi politicians in a difficult situation, forcing them to take positions on the Iranian presence. The Iraqi government was severely embarrassed by the detention of Iranian diplomats and IRGC officers, and was forced to address the purpose and extent of Iranian activity -- even while working to release those detained.

## **Implications**

Iran is using all means necessary to achieve its aims in Iraq. Some of these means are overt and represent the normal stuff of diplomacy and influence. Others are secret operations carried out by clandestine elements of the Iranian regime, and are intended to remain undiscovered -- or at least deniable. Iran employs the Quds Force for precisely this kind of activity. The Quds Force's known presence in Iraq is itself evidence of clandestine Iranian operations. The fact that Iran's ambassador in Baghdad reportedly is a high-ranking member of the Quds Force proves the boldness -- even brazen cynicism -- of the Iranian regime.

While it is clear that Iran is aggressively involved in Iraq, it is not clear what the United States should do about it -- and it is important to decide this carefully. Iran's capabilities in Iraq are not less than -- and, broadly considered, may exceed -- those of the United States, and there is little doubt that Tehran is exerting only a fraction of the effort it could. The United States could face grave difficulties if it decided to confront Iran in Iraq. To date, both sides have exercised restraint even while taking occasional jabs at one another. Both Iranian and U.S. rhetoric have cooled. The February 11, 2007, intelligence briefing in Baghdad was notably restrained, even low key. To be sure, however, the basic perception that Iran is challenging U.S. goals in Iraq and killing American soldiers has not changed.

The United States is not yet fighting Iran in Iraq, although it is increasingly engaging Iranian agents there. Washington is still concentrating on achieving its goals in Iraq, rather than on the broader competition with Iran. An expansion of the Iranian role in Iraq -- particularly more direct involvement in attacks on U.S. forces -- or increased U.S. operations against Iranian operatives could push the situation toward a more direct conflict, although one still fought mostly below the surface. It remains to be seen if the United States and Iran have the skill and the patience to manage such a conflict and avoid escalation.

Iranian behavior in Iraq says something about the state and its leadership. Iran's leaders are ruthless, clever, and willing to take risks in Iraq. This should be noted and understood as Iran acts on other issues. The choices for dealing with the Iranian challenge, both in and outside Iraq, are not clear, and the consequences of making the wrong choices are dire. But by the time the choices are clear, it will be too late for anything but acquiescence to the presence of a nuclear-armed Iran driven by hostility toward the West -- or a war to prevent

it.

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