

The Iran Problem

Contributed by Washington Post, David Ignatius
Monday, 14 April 2008

By David Ignatius

Wednesday, April 9, 2008; Page A19

The language that Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker used yesterday to describe the Iranian role in Iraq was extreme -- and telling. They spoke of Tehran's "nefarious activities," its "malign influence" and how it posed "the greatest long-term threat to the viability" of the Baghdad government.

Iran was the heart of the matter during Senate testimony on the war. With al-Qaeda on the run in Iraq, the Iranian threat has become the rationale for the mission, and also the explanation for our shortcomings. The Iranians are the reason we're bogged down in Iraq, and also the reason we can't pull out our troops. The mullahs in Tehran loom over the Iraq battlefield like a giant Catch-22.

The order of battle in Iraq isn't likely to change significantly for the rest of the year. That was Petraeus's implicit message when he was asked about additional troop withdrawals after July, when U.S. forces are to return to pre-surge levels. He spoke opaquely about a 45-day period of "consolidation and evaluation," followed by an additional, open-ended period of "assessment." The translation was that he wants to keep the most robust force there possible, to prevent security from deteriorating on his watch. That's understandable for a commander, but it means the question of future troop strength will land squarely on the shoulders of the next president.

And, inescapably, the issue of containing Iran will fall to the next American president, too. Can a new administration draw the malign adversary that Petraeus and Crocker described into a new security architecture for the region? Can America reduce its forces in Iraq without creating a dangerous vacuum to be filled by Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Shiite militias?

Who will bell the Iranian cat? That was the question lurking behind yesterday's testimony. U.S. officials, even the most sophisticated ones such as Petraeus and Crocker, sometimes speak as if Iranian mischief in Iraq is a recent development. "The hand of Iran was very clear in recent weeks," Petraeus said at one point. But it has a long history.

Iran's covert campaign to reshape Iraq has been clear since the U.S. invasion in March 2003. Iranian intelligence officers prepared lists of Iraqis for assassination in the weeks and months after the war began; they sent Iranian-trained mullahs to take over the Shiite mosques of central and southern Iraq that had been smashed by Saddam Hussein; they pumped an estimated \$12 million a week in covert financial support to their allies as the January 2005 election approached; they infiltrated all the major Shiite political parties, and many of the Sunni ones, too.

The Iranians have fixed the political game. They are on all sides at once. They have links to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Dawa party; they funnel money to the Badr organization of Shiite cleric Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, which is a key recruiting ground for the Iraqi army; they provide weapons, training and command and control for the most extreme factions of the Mahdi Army. Moqtada al-Sadr, the Mahdi Army's nominal leader, is actually living in the Iranian holy city of Qom, suffering from what intelligence sources believe may be clinical depression. A useful ploy would be to invite him to come home and see if he can be drawn into negotiations.

The Iranians were able to start the recent trouble in Basra and Baghdad through one set of operatives, then negotiate a cease-fire through another. In short, they play the Iraqi lyre on all its strings.

Fighting a war against Iran is a bad idea. But fighting a proxy war against it in Iraq, where many of our key allies are manipulated by Iranian networks of influence, may be even worse. The best argument for keeping American troops in Iraq is that it increases our leverage against Iran; but paradoxically, that's also a good argument for reducing U.S. troops to a level that's politically and militarily sustainable. It could give America greater freedom to maneuver in the tests with Iran that are ahead.

Somehow, the next president will have to fuse U.S. military and diplomatic power to both engage Iran and set limits on its activities. A U.S.-Iranian dialogue is a necessary condition for future stability in the Middle East. But the wrong deal, negotiated by a weak America with a cocky Iran that thinks it's on a roll, would be a disaster.

Crocker has it right when he says, "Almost everything about Iraq is hard." That's especially true of the Iran problem. Petraeus and Crocker were taking the hard questions yesterday, but soon enough it will be one of the presidential candidates who were dispensing sound bites yesterday: John McCain, Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton.

The writer is co-host of PostGlobal, an online discussion of international issues. His e-mail address is isdavidignatius@washpost.com.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/08/AR2008040802901.html>

 The Iranian chess game
 Friday, 11th April 2008, The Spectator

In the Washington Post David Ignatius observes that, in their testimony to the Senate on the war in Iraq, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker portrayed the malign and nefarious influence of Iran as lying at the very core of the ongoing difficulties in Iraq. Ignatius makes two very important points: Iran's covert campaign to reshape Iraq has been clear since the U.S. invasion in March 2003. Iranian intelligence officers prepared lists of Iraqis for assassination in the weeks and months after the war began; they sent Iranian-trained mullahs to take over the Shiite mosques of central and southern Iraq that had been smashed by Saddam Hussein; they pumped an estimated \$12 million a week in covert financial support to their allies as the January 2005 election approached; they infiltrated all the major Shiite political parties, and many of the Sunni ones, too.

The Iranians have fixed the political game. They are on all sides at once. They have links to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Dawa party; they funnel money to the Badr organization of Shiite cleric Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, which is a key recruiting ground for the Iraqi army; they provide weapons, training and command and control for the most extreme factions of the Mahdi Army. Moqtada al-Sadr, the Mahdi Army's nominal leader, is actually living in the Iranian holy city of Qom. The first point is that, although Petraeus implied that Iranian meddling in Iraq was a recent development, it was actually clear from the get-go. Yet although the Americans (and the British) knew full well that Iran was a key factor in stoking the fires of insurrection in Iraq, they chose to remain silent about it and went to enormous lengths to avoid acknowledging it, even to the extent of issuing rules of military engagement against hot pursuit over the Iranian border to catch Iranian terrorists responsible for attacking coalition forces (and who can forget Britain's humiliation last year over Iran's kidnap of the 15 British marines when Britain's terms of engagement forbade any act of defence in case of "escalation" into war with Iran). So why has it taken all this time to say what was plain from the start, that throughout this period Iran has been waging war on us?

The second point is a grim one. For all the apparent success of the surge, the reduction in violence in Iraq and the reported "awakening" by the Sunni Iraqi sheikhs to the iniquity of al Qaeda, the fact is that Iraq is now a puppet state of Iran. As Ignatius observes, Iran has fixed the Iraqi government, the Iraqi army and the Iraqi insurrection. Even Ayatollah Sistani, once no friend to the Iranian Shia, has now buckled under. The purpose is strategic. Iran is the great chess player of the Muslim world and it is steadily moving its pieces into a checkmate position. It is now playing in Iraq a similar role to the one it is playing in Lebanon, where it controls the government and has an army, in the form of Hezbollah, poised to attack Israel (again), and which it is also developing in Gaza where it is aiding Hamas.

But it's worse even than that. For Iran's chessmen are now in position not just here and in several other trouble spots around the world but also in the west. While Britain, America and Europe have been (rightly) transfixed by Sunni terror in the form of al Qaeda and the allied cultural onslaught by the Muslim Brotherhood, they have totally overlooked the fact that an Iranian Shia terrorist infrastructure has been built in British, American and European cities. In Britain, for example, dozens of extremist Shia mosques have sprung up in London alone, some of which are serving as the base for unknown numbers of Hezbollah cells in the UK. We don't know about them because, unlike al Qaeda, they are not announcing their presence through sporadic attacks. They are, instead, waiting.

What are they waiting for? A signal.

Here is the nightmare scenario. Iran is racing to develop the bomb (the picture above shows Ahmadinejad at Natanz) while the west obligingly provides it with the time to do so. Le Monde, for example, has obtained documents showing that, contrary to the infamous American National Intelligence Estimate, Tehran was indeed pursuing a military nuclear program after 2003 (what a surprise). In response, President Bush may or may not attack Iran before he departs the White House. If he decides not to do this, history will record that he allowed this seismic threat to civilisation to realise its deadly ambition. But if he should decide to do it, the response is unlikely to take the form of rockets fired from Iran since it will very likely be paralysed by the US attack at an early stage. Instead it will unleash its sleeping weapon — its terrorist army around the world. Hezbollah will attack Israel from Lebanon, maybe along with Hamas from Gaza; in Iraq, it will attack US forces who will be sitting ducks; and Europe will be subjected to unquantifiable acts of terror.

When British officials are told about the threat from Shia radicals in their midst, they shrug it off. They believe that, since the British government will not join the Americans in a war against Iran, Britain will not be a target for retaliation. Once again, they could not be more wrong. To Iran, Britain and America are linked as the greater and lesser Satans; Britain indeed is seen as the very fount of historic western imperialism, particularly in the Middle East. So Britain would get hit regardless, even though there's no longer any British spine to snap. And so probably would America.

The terrible thing is that we have sleepwalked into this and are still in the same trance. Iran declared war upon the west in 1979 when Khomeini came to power. We ignored it. When Hezbollah attacked western interests in the decade that followed, we ignored it. When Hezbollah pointed thousands of rockets at Israel, we ignored it (and blamed Israel when it finally tried to fight it). And now that we have it in our own cities, we are doing nothing whatever about it. But we are thus ignoring an unconscionable threat, one that is within. We have been recklessly oblivious before, to the growth in our midst of al Qaeda. We are doing it again. Who can forget the placards on London's streets waved by suicidally stupid British liberals during the Lebanon war proclaiming 'We are all Hezbollah now'? That could soon be truer than anyone thought.

As I have said before, all roads lead to Iran. One way or another, the regime has to be taken out. It would be great if this could happen through the Iranians themselves rising up and overthrowing it. But how likely is this?

This is the decision President Bush is having to weigh. He is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. The consequences of war with Iran, along the lines sketched out above, would be dire and would extend way beyond the region. But the alternative may be war with a nuclear Iran, genocide or the nuclear blackmail and inevitable throttling of the west — or all three. It's a hard decision, made harder because the dilemma is largely self-inflicted through almost thirty years of supine refusal to acknowledge reality. But ultimately, the self-delusion has to end. The only question is whether it will do so in time to avert catastrophe, or will dawn amongst the ashes.