

Combating Terrorism Center's Report On Iran's Role In Iraq

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Textbook copy of Iranian meddling in Iraq and what is similarly happening in Lebanon today. Iran is facilitating, supporting, training, arming, directing militia's in Lebanon, circumventing the duly elected government of Lebanon and destabilizing the nation. Iran is a problem that must be addressed by the international community for its meddling and destabilizing of Iraq and Lebanon.

motown67 Dec 12 2008 - 12:13am In October 2008 the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point released a report, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq, Politics and 'Other Means,'" that covered Iran's role in Iraq from the time of the Iranian Revolution to the present. The study found that Iran uses all kinds of tools to influence Iraq. It backs both the government as well as Shiite militants, and has extensive economic ties. This seems at odds because Tehran supports Iraq, while undermining its stability at the same time with militias. In fact, this is part of Iran's strategy to keep the country divided. Tehran's main goals are to limit the U.S. so that it doesn't intimidate Iran, make sure Iraq is not a threat, and influence the rest of the region. The 1980s Iran-Iraq War largely shaped these objectives when Saddam Hussein's regime was Iran's major threat, and the U.S. tilted towards him. Since the U.S. invasion, the instability in the country has meant the Americans are tied up in Iraq, and can't seriously think about a major military operation against Iran. Its political allies are in the government, and the Iraqi constitution created a federal system that keeps Iraq weak. It is hard to argue then that Iran has not achieved many of its goals.

Iranian Policy

At the heart of the Combating Terrorism Center's report is the study of Iran's policy towards Iraq. U.S. strategy in Iraq is based upon achieving specific goals such as a democratic government that is an ally in the war on terror. Iran on the other hand, thinks in terms of a process. They don't want a specific end state, but rather the influence to shape events within Iraq no matter who is power. That's why they support a variety of groups from the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), to the Dawa Party to Moqtada al-Sadr to Special Groups even though they are opposed to each other. Iran supported the Americans at first as well, because the creation of a new political system was the vehicle for Iran's allies to gain power in the new government. At the same time, Iran began reaching out to Sadr and Shiite militants. With connections to all these parties, it is trying to ensure that no matter what happens in the country they will be able to play a role. Tehran can change tactics therefore, but its policy won't. This is a much more dynamic policy than the U.S. one, and the authors fear this could cost the Americans in the long run.

Iranian Revolutionary Guards

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards have been the main tool Tehran has used to exert influence within Iraq. In the 1990s the Revolutionary Guards created the Qods Force to run its foreign policy that runs parallel to Iran's foreign policy establishment. In 1998 General Qassem Suleimani took over the Qods Force, and is still the current commander. The Qods Force is divided into four corps, the first of which is known as the Ramazan Corps. It was created in the mid-1990s and is responsible for Iraqi affairs. The Ramazan Corps is in charge of funding Iraqi politicians and delivering economic aid. It also maintains contacts with Shiite militias, and runs three camps along the Iraqi border to train them. The commander of the northern camp in Nasr, Mahmoud Farhadi was actually captured in Iraq by the Americans in September 2007. He is probably one of the highest ranking Iranian officers in custody.

Early Ties To Shiite Parties

It was during the Iran-Iraq War that Iran through the Qods Force began funding Iraqi Shiite groups. Iran originally helped form the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), and supported the Dawa party to oppose Saddam. Later it courted Sadr and Special Groups after the U.S. invasion. The diversity of groups that Tehran supports shows that they are only a means to an end of achieving wide-ranging influence throughout Iraq. Iran hopes to sway the government when they want, and also raise the violence level on the streets if need be to achieve its goals.

The Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) has historically been the party closest to Iran. In the 1980s Tehran helped form the SIIC, which was led by Ayatollah Baqir al-Hakim. At the time, Iraqi Shiites were divided between Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, the uncle of Moqtada, and Ayatollah Hakim. In 1980 Saddam had Sadr murdered, and Hakim fled to Iran fearing assassination as well. When the Iran-Iraq War started, Hakim's followers began organizing both inside and outside of Iraq. Hakim agreed to follow Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and later his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in return for help from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The Iranians ended up forming the Badr Brigade, the SIIC's armed wing,

which became a formal part of the Qods Force and took orders directly from Tehran. During the Iran-Iraq War, Badr fought alongside the Iranians, and felt betrayed afterwards when Khomeini signed a peace agreement with Saddam. After the Gulf War in 1991, Badr was also sent into the south to try to organize and take over the Shiite uprising. Up to 2001, the militia received up to \$20 million a year from Iran. Badr also had contacts with Hezbollah, which provided aid and training.

Later, when the SIIC began cooperating with the U.S. in the run up to the invasion, some senior Badr members left the organization. Many of these still operate out of Iran as suppliers to Iraq's Special Groups, such as Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani. He was the former head of Badr operations in Baghdad in the 1990s, and now runs a smuggling network that is believed to have introduced the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) to Iraq from Iran.

Meanwhile, within Iraq, many Shiites continued to follow the Sadr family. Many of those joined the Dawa party. Iran began funding them as well, even though the organization was divided over this alliance. The Sadr family had always been opposed to Iran and Khomeini's ideology of a theocratic state ruled by clerics. One faction headed by current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was more open to the Iranians, while another, led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, was opposed.

Iran Makes Its Move After The U.S. Invasion

After the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 and deposed Saddam Hussein, Iran supported the American efforts to create a new political system, while at the same time building up its military capacity within Iraq. On the one hand, Tehran believed that elections would allow its allies to gain power. The SIIC and Dawa had already positioned themselves before the invasion as exile groups willing to work with the U.S. At the same time, Iran began a dual track policy of infiltrating thousands of Badr Brigade fighters into Iraq, supported by the Qods Force. They also had Hezbollah send some operatives to work within the country. They eliminated opponents of Iran and set up operations against the U.S.

Iran's next major move was to reach out to Moqtada al-Sadr. He was an enticing figure as he had strong support amongst the Shiite poor, was anti-American, and had his family's name. On the other hand, Moqtada had little religious training, and couldn't compete directly with the top Iraqi ayatollah's such as Hakim, Ali al-Sistani and Abdel Majid al-Khoei. This power struggle allowed Iran to gain influence with Sadr. On April 7, 2003 Kadhem al-Huseini al-Haeri, a student of Sadr's uncle Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, who lived in Qom, Iran, named Moqtada as his deputy in Iraq. In April 2004, Sadr launched an uprising against the United States that sputtered on for months. Iran eventually convinced him to cease his hostilities so that the 2005 elections could take place.

The 2005 Iraqi elections were a turning point for Iran's policy. All three of Iran's allies, the SIIC, Dawa, and Sadr participated. The SIIC gained the most as it had the largest amount of money, was better organized, and had religious authority. In the provincial elections, it took over most of the south, while all three parties gained seats in the parliamentary balloting. Iran also supported the Iraqi constitution, which set up a federal system that would weaken the authority of the central government. Iran's Shiite allies were the main writers of the document. Iran also ensured its passage by stuffing the ballot boxes. A major goal of Iran's policy was thus achieved as it successfully positioned its friends in the new Iraqi government.

Sadr's Tribulations Are Iran's Gain

The 2005 elections caused a major dilemma for Sadr, which turned out to be to the advantage of Iran. Sadr was divided between being a militia leader and a politician. As he began to move towards politics he lost standing amongst his followers who were opposed to the Iraqi government. That led to a fracturing of his movement, and Iran was all too happy to pick up the pieces.

The Mahdi Army was always a loosely organized, grassroots movement with Sadr as its titular head. Local chiefs got weapons and funding on their own, and carried out independent policies. Revenge, crime, and an anti-U.S. stance were what drove most of them. After the 2004 uprising, many commanders continued to carry out attacks on Americans. The U.S. began calling these Special Groups. Some started looking towards Qais Khazali, who broke away from the Mahdi Army, for leadership rather than Sadr. In turn, Khazali began receiving support from Iran and Hezbollah. Frustrated by these defections, Sadr kicked out 40 militia leaders in October 2006 to try to assert his control. The problem was Sadr had no real authority over these 40 commanders who continued to run their own forces. This was an important symbolic move as Sadr was trying to control what violence had his name on it. The threat of his militia after all was what Sadr's power was based upon. He would threaten attacks if he didn't have his say in national politics. The creation of these new Special Groups undermined Sadr's position as they broke off followers and undermined Sadr's command over violence.

The fracturing of the Sadr Trend suited Iran. They disliked Sadr's political moves because he continued to be a nationalist and anti-Iranian, and was a wild card. He could stop or start military actions when Iran didn't want him to, which would harm Tehran's larger political policy. The Special Groups on the other hand, were committed to fighting the occupation using violence, so Iran began moving towards them. They could be regulated by the amount of lethal aid Iran provided them. That didn't mean the Mahdi Arm was cut off. As Iran had done before, it continued to back all variety of

Shiite groups.

At the same time, the SIIC and Dawa began turning on Sadr. In Late 2006, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki made his move to kick Sadr out of his ruling coalition. The SIIC, which had a long-time rivalry with the Sadr family, wanted to force Moqtada to pick between politics or violence. Sadr couldn't make the choice because he relied upon the Mahdi Army to give him standing. At the same time, he was losing face as he was blamed for Special Group attacks and the increasing criminal activity of his militiamen. This growing conflict amongst Iraq's ruling parties also served Iran as it divided the majority Shiites.

In 2007, Sadr ended up moving away from both his militia and the political system. As early as February, he moved to Qom, Iran to undergo religious training. There are some reports that he is being held by Iran, and has restrictions on his activities. His militia also came under increasing pressure from the Americans as the Surge took off. In April Sadr withdrew his ministers from Maliki's cabinet. In August he declared a cease-fire. These were all a sign of weakness as he was forfeiting his two main means of influence within the country, his say in the government and his militia, while giving in to more Iranian influence.

In the spring of 2008, Maliki's government moved against Sadr. Maliki launched operations against the Mahdi Army in Basra, Sadr City, and Maysan province. Sadr's followers, Special Groups, and local militias and gangs were scattered as a result. What many claimed was a defeat for Iran, actually highlighted their role in Iraq as the head of the Revolutionary Guards General Suleimani brokered the Basra and Sadr City cease-fires. This brings to fore Iran's multi-faceted policy in Iraq. It both armed the Mahdi Army and Special Groups, while supporting the government that improved its standing afterwards. Thousands of Iraqi militants also fled to Iran for more training and reorganization. Again, it wasn't that Iran wanted one group to come out on top, it just wanted to make sure that it had influence over events.

Status Of Forces Agreement and Prime Minister Maliki

The recently passed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that set military and diplomatic relations between Iraq and the United States, was the most recent focus of Tehran. At first, Iran seemed to oppose the deal, but Prime Minister Maliki's new standing after his security operations allowed him to negotiate a timetable for a U.S. withdrawal. Iran then seemed to shift its stance, seeing the SOFA as the easiest way to get the U.S. out of Iraq. The Combating Terrorism Center said a sign that Iran was in fact standing behind the SOFA was the limited activity by Special Groups during the negotiations. Iran has often turned the violence off and on within the country to suit its political purposes.

On the other hand, Maliki's new power could pose a long-term problem for Iran. Tehran's dual military and political strategy has angered the Prime Minister. As he has grown as a leader he has found fewer reasons to listen to Iran as he has to think about the Iraqi public more, especially with elections forthcoming. Iran still has many other political allies within Iraq, which include the Kurds, who were not mentioned at all in the Combating Terrorism Center's paper. Tehran also continues to back Special Groups, which can be used to harass the U.S., or turned on the Iraqi government or politicians if it wants. Iran's economic role was also only given short thrift in the report, even though it has become one of Iraq's main trade partners, and provides energy, and reconstruction funds.

Recommendations

The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) concluded its study with some suggestions for U.S. policy. First it noted the limitations of current U.S. strategy, namely that it focuses almost exclusive on Iran's military support for Shiites, which obscures Iran's more important political moves. In fact, Iran has achieved most of its goals without using violence, but rather through supporting the U.S. effort to create a new political order and carry out elections. This the authors warn, could be the downfall of the U.S. as it believes Iran could end up having more influence in Iraq in 5-10 years unless the U.S. develops a multi-faceted stance to match Tehran's. The CTC writers believe that the U.S. should support Maliki's nationalism, because he is souring on Iran's role in his country. The Americans should also push for open list voting, which would make Iraqi politicians more answerable to the public rather than Iran. Next they suggest that the U.S. co-opt Sadr. He still has a nationalist, anti-Iranian stance, and if the U.S. can work with former insurgents, why not with Sadr. Giving Sadr a chance to participate in the government again could be the means to do this. The U.S. could also create a Sons of Iraq program aimed specifically at Shiites to deal with the local militia commanders and Special Groups. Calling for more transparency could also expose Iran's funding for Iraqi politicians that would turn the public against them. There are two major problems with these suggestions however. First, the U.S. is losing influence in Iraq as it is drawing down forces, and agreed to a withdrawal date in the SOFA. This means it has fewer options and less ability to shape events. Maliki's nationalism also cuts both ways. He is just as likely to deny U.S. demands as Iranian ones. Maliki is unlikely to make any changes to Iraq's voting system or financing as a result. Maliki, the Dawa Party, and the SIIC are also grave rivals of Sadr and would reject working with him. Finally, some members of the SIIC and Dawa will always be close to Iran due to their years of cooperation, and see no reason to limit its influence within Iraq. Iraqi politicians can also play the two sides off of each other to their advantage. For all of these reasons, Iran will probably continue to play a large role in Iraq no matter what the U.S. does.

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