

# Iran Policy Committee

Insights International Peace and Security

## The Threat that Iran poses to Iraq

Wednesday, January 20, 2010

By Raymond Tanter

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran has sought to dominate Iraq politically, economically, and militarily. The most recent and visible manifestation of Iran's meddling with its neighbor was the late December 2009 seizure of a portion of the remote Fakka oil field in Maysan Province in southeastern Iraq; although the Iranians, however, withdrew after three days, the seizure made it clear that Tehran has the capability to enforce its will on Baghdad. Also, there is the threat of suicide bombing in Iraq by foreign Arabs; in addition to Syria—Iran's only Arab ally—Iran itself has become another entry point for foreign suicide bombers to enter Iraq, e.g., for Arabs entering Iraq from Afghanistan.

### **Political Threats**

Despite promises to the United States not to do so if Washington took action against the main political opposition to Tehran based in Iraq, thousands of Iranian-sponsored clerics crossed into Iraq from Iran. They carried books, compact discs, and audiotapes that promoted the Iranian version of militant Islam in spring 2003, following Operation Iraqi Freedom. Furthermore, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Qods (Jerusalem) Force established and continues to support armed underground cells across the Shiite southern region of Iraq, using the humanitarian organization, the Iranian Red Crescent, as a front.

The Jerusalem Force has medical centers and local charities in Najaf, Baghdad, Hillah, Basra, and Amarah to gain support from the local population. Even as Tehran began to send Iranian operatives into post-Saddam Iraq, members of what has become Iraqi Hezbollah infiltrated the country. Because most of Iraqi Hezbollah's members are Arab, they constitute an even more effective Iranian proxy in Iraq than Farsi-speaking Iranian agents trained in Arabic.

Tehran tasked Iraqi Hezbollah with sending agents and clerics across a major portion of southern Iraq. Indeed, once major combat operations came to an end on 1 May 2003, Hezbollah "holy warriors" crossed into the country not only from Syria, but from Iran as well, again despite pledges from Tehran to

Washington not to interfere in Iraq. Initially, these operatives numbered nearly 100, but this relatively small figure has increased and belies their potential impact on behalf of Tehran.

Hezbollah established “charitable” organizations in Iraq to create a favorable environment for recruiting, which is a tactic Lebanese Hezbollah had previously tested and honed in southern Lebanon with Iranian assistance. Furthermore, according to Mohammed al Alawi, Hezbollah’s chief spokesman in Iraq, the organization’s agents act as local police forces in many southern cities (e.g., Nasiriya, Ummara), ignoring the official Multinational Force-Iraq and Iraqi government ban on illegal militias.

Overall, Tehran uses Iraqi Hezbollah to supplement its own penetration of local Iraqi governing offices and judiciaries. The Iranian regime has used Iraqi Hezbollah to smuggle Iraqis living in Iran back into their native country. A significant number of Iraqis have dual nationalities and have resided in Iran for many years; some have even served as Revolutionary Guards commanders. Hezbollah helps conceal their long association with Iran; indeed, some of these individuals have joined Iraqi police forces since the end of major combat.

Additionally, Iraqi Hezbollah cased coalition assembly centers in Iraq and tracked the timing and order of movements by various coalition vehicles including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and motorcades. Iraqi Hezbollah agents videotaped locations in two-person teams, often with public transportation like taxis. Footage of targets is sometimes concealed behind commonplace imagery (e.g., wedding festivities) to avoid detection by coalition forces. Such reports echo Iraqi Hezbollah’s own public statements, voiced as early as mid-April 2003, regarding its willingness to attack U.S. forces in Iraq and its increasing ability to do so.

### **Military Threats**

A more nefarious aspect of the Iranian threat to Iraq is Tehran’s transfer of weapons to its proxies in Iraq. In Joint Guidance for 2010, General Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that “Iran...ships weapons to surrogates inside Iraq.” According to the Department of State 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism,

Tehran was responsible for some of the lethality of anti-Coalition attacks by providing militants with the capability to assemble improvised explosive devices (IEDs) with explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) that were specially designed to defeat armored vehicles. The Qods Force, in concert with Lebanese

Hizballah, provided training both inside and outside of Iraq for Iraqi militants in the construction and use of sophisticated IED technology and other advanced weaponry.

Tehran pursues its perceived interests in dominating Iraq by such means as supplying arms to its proxy forces there. Indeed, Iran's shipment of IEDs to Iraqi proxies is part of the Iranian regime's broader effort to subvert the Iraqi government while making Baghdad dependent on Tehran for protection against such threats. The transfer of IEDs into Iraq is particularly troublesome as U.S forces withdraw because Iraq lacks intelligence and technology in the American arsenal to counter the IED threat.

According to revelations made by the main Iranian opposition group, the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK), since 2006, Iranian ordnance factories have produced an advanced form of roadside bomb incorporating EFPs to satisfy orders placed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). These IED/EFPs are often placed along roadsides at choke points where vehicles must slow down, such as at intersections and junctions. This procedure gives the operator time to judge the moment to fire—when the vehicle is moving more slowly. Detonation is controlled by a cell phone triggering device, cable, radio control, TV remote control, or passive infrared sensor. IEDs can be deployed singly, in pairs, or in arrays, depending on the tactical situation.

Within Iran, ordnance factories are located in the Lavizan neighborhood of northern Tehran where weapons production occurs at three independent industrial sectors called Sattari, Sayad Shirazi, and Shiroodi. The Sattari Industry specializes in making various types of anti-tank mines and bombs, and now parts for IEDs.

In 2008, there is a production site at Parchin, to the southeast of Tehran, also revealed by the MEK. A new generation of roadside bomb was being produced by affiliates of Iran's Ministry of Defense for use by proxies in Iraq. Tehran began to transfer the Sahere ("Vigilant" in Farsi), to Iraq along its southern border with Iran. This weapon targeted U.S. armored vehicles and tanks. During 2007, the Qods Force transferred new bombs mainly through the border crossings of the Misan province, particularly at Majr al-Kabir. The bombs were then distributed to Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq.

One recipient of the Sahere has been Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which used the weapons against American forces in Sadr City, Hay Al-Amin, Eskan, and Al-Sholeh districts of Baghdad. According to a militia report to the Qods Force headquarters in Tehran,

In the Hay Al-Amin area of Baghdad, a full column of American forces was set ablaze using these bombs. This heroic operation was carried out by the Sheikh Hossein al-Zobaidi group. But regrettably the brothers who took part in exploding these bombs did not have a chance to pull back on time and as a result of the aerial bombardment of the area, fourteen members of the Sheikh Hossein al-Zobaidi group were martyred.

Confirming MEK revelations, in January 2007, Commander, Multinational Corps-Iraq, LTG Ray Odierno and then-Director of National Intelligence, John Negroponte, released similar intelligence documenting the Iranian supply of the most deadly roadside bombs. A February 2007 Pentagon briefing in Baghdad revealed Iran's supply of sophisticated weapons technology to Iraqi militias and was a comprehensive presentation of evidence regarding Iran's destabilizing role in Iraq.

Documents captured along with Iranian Qods Force members arrested in Iraq during 2006 revealed that the Iranian regime was also assisting Sunni groups, such as al Qaeda and Ansar al Islam, in addition to Tehran's Shiite insurgent proxies.

British officers in Iraq also have acknowledged the presence of Iranian weapons in Iraq. In March 2007, they attributed over 30 British casualties from an attack on a base in Basra to Katyusha-style rockets and mortars originating in Iran. The British military distinguished new Iranian-supplied weaponry from the older mortars looted from Iraqi army bases that had been used by the militias in the past.

Not only does Iran produce IEDs for Iraqi proxies, it also trains them in bomb-making. The Jalil Abad Qods Force garrison is used to train Iraqi Hezbollah members to assemble bombs, use Rocket-Propelled Grenades (RPGs), and fire Katyusha rockets. Iraqi insurgents have also used "sticky IEDs," which are magnetically attached to vehicles to carry out precise assassinations of Iraqi officials. These compact IEDs are magnetically attached to the underside of automobiles and detonated with timers or by remote control.

Iraqi government officials, mainly from the army and police are the primary targets, but local officials, judges, journalists, and Sons of Iraq members have also been attacked. The danger from a force protection perspective is that insurgents will begin employing sticky IEDs against U.S. military officials and other high risk personnel. This risk is especially acute during the period of the 2010 drawdown of U.S. forces.

There are fewer American intelligence gathering operations and lack of effective use of Iranian dissident intelligence sources in Iraq, which are under increasing threat from Iranian regime proxies in the Iraq Security Forces.

## **Countermeasures**

The U.S. military has deployed a number of successful countermeasures to address the threat from IEDs in Iraq. Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs) were originally employed by Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) units at the outset of Operation Iraqi Freedom; but with the growing IED threat, the Marine Corps championed the vehicle as a troop carrier during 2007. MRAPs proved much more effective than simply up-armorizing Hummers, which had been a short-term solution. Although MRAP Vehicles, signal jammers, and special road clearing vehicles have helped lower the percentage of casualties from IEDs from 60% during 2006 and 2007, the number of roadside bomb attacks remains high.

Insurgents will almost never detonate an IED in close proximity to their cache and almost never launch an IED attack so far from their cache that they risk being intercepted. Software is available to combine proximity with other factors like demographic composition of neighborhoods. If an attack is believed to be carried out by an Iranian-supported Shiite group, it is extremely unlikely that the militia's weapons cache would be in a predominately Sunni area. After inputting such information, an algorithm determines the most likely cache sites.

## **Conclusions**

Because the Iranian regime continues to pose political and military threats to Iraq, it is important to counter these threats. Research of the Iran Policy Committee suggests that the most effective antidote to the political threat in Iraq would be for the international community to protect Iranian dissidents in Iraq from the growing threat posed by Iraqi proxies of Iran.

Regarding the military threat posed by Tehran to Baghdad, such as the transfer of weapons to Iran's regional Shiite proxies and Sunni insurgents, countermeasures are essential tools for the U.S. military to leave in the Iraqi arsenal. Iranian weapons are going to Shiite militias that include rogue elements of Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army militia and a breakaway faction of the Badr Corps, the armed wing of a

powerful Iraqi Shiite political party.

Given the high priority placed on Iran's nuclear program and Tehran's diplomatic intractability to date on its nuclear file, a diplomatic solution to Iran's transfer of improvised explosive devices is unlikely. And as Tehran develops a nuclear weapons capability, it will likely be even less vulnerable to diplomatic pressure and more emboldened to pursue its perceived interests via the transfer of arms to its proxies in Iraq. Hence, as U.S. forces withdraw from Iraq, it is important to leave Iraqi Security Forces with the capability to counter the improvised explosive device threat from Iran.

The good news is that Washington has designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Qods Force and Iraqi Hezbollah as foreign terrorist organizations. According to research of the Iran Policy Committee, the bad news is that Washington also continues to designate Tehran's main political opposition in exile with extensive influence in Iran—the National Council of Resistance of Iran and Mujahadeen-e-Khalq—as foreign terrorist organizations. This research suggests that removal of the terrorist tag from these two organizations would be one way to decrease the political threat posed by the Tehran to Baghdad and the military threat to American forces as they withdraw from Iraq.

But perhaps the best hope for countering the Iranian threat to Iraq as American forces draw down is to increase the Iranian regime's problems at home. To the degree that the United States can rhetorically and covertly support Iran's growing "Green" movement, encourage dissidents within Iran to work with oppositionists in Paris and in Iraq, such as the National Council of Resistance of Iran and Mujahadeen-e-Khalq, respectively; and divide the Iranian regime with "crippling sanctions," Tehran will be less capable of being a growing threat to Iraq.

*Raymond Tanter, Ph.D. is Visiting Researcher at Georgetown University, Professor Emeritus at The University of Michigan, and President and co-founder of the [Iran Policy Committee](#).*