



THE IRAN FACTOR

By ILAN BERMAN

April 16, 2004 -- AN Iranian delegation is now in Baghdad, supposedly to help talk down the firebrand Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his radical "al-Mahdi Army." The strange thing is, Iran is the chief culprit among the outside players behind much of Iraq's current instability.

U.S. officials have long expressed concerns about the Islamic Republic's corrosive activities in Iraq, ranging from drug trafficking to the funding of radical clerics. But recent revelations have exposed an Iranian strategic offensive of unprecedented magnitude - one aimed at preventing the establishment of a secular, pro-Western government in its eastern neighbor.

In a recent interview with the influential Arab-language daily Al-Sharq al-Awsat, a former Iranian official revealed that Tehran has successfully infiltrated hundreds of operatives from its clerical army, the Pasdaran, into Iraq via Kurdish areas not yet firmly under the control of the Iraqi Governing Council.

Since then, the official said, Iranian agents - including members of the Pasdaran's feared paramilitary "Qods Corps" - have established a major presence throughout the country, where they have begun active recruitment, propaganda and insurgency operations.

These activities include the formation of a cadre of radicalized Iraqi youth who will be mobilized during the country's upcoming parliamentary elections, as well as the targeting and elimination of prominent opposition leaders. Most notably, he credits the "Qods Corps" with the assassination of the Ayatollah Mohammad Bakr al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, who was killed in Najaf last August in an attack previously believed to have been carried out by Ba'athist loyalists.

An insurgency of this magnitude does not come cheap: According to that same interview, Tehran is now spending some \$70 million a month on its Iraq operations. The money pays off friendly Iraqi clerics, who provide indoctrination and religious legitimacy for a ready cadre of radical young Shi'a, and maintains an extensive network of safe-houses and bases for Iranian agents throughout the country.

The Al-Sharq al-Awsat interview was a blockbuster, but its claims - with the exception of the \$70 million figure and the Hakim killing - are confirmed by other sources.

Iraq's political vacuum has also drawn other undesirable characters. Iraqis say both Hezbollah (the Iranian-backed, Lebanon-based Shi'ite militia) and Hamas (the Palestinian terrorist group) have begun to put down roots in post-Saddam Iraq through the establishment of recruitment bases and offices in urban centers like Nasariah, Basra and Safwan.

Syria, meanwhile, has played an important supporting role, expanding the capabilities of both groups through ongoing financial and political assistance. U.S. officials also suspect that, despite its public denials (and mounting pressure from Washington), Damascus is still permitting foreign fighters to enter Iraq via the Syrian-Iraqi border. Even militants from groups as distant as Pakistan's Lashkar e-Taiba have recently been captured within the country.

The reasons for this foreign meddling are not hard to fathom. Iran, already grappling with a restive, disenfranchised domestic population, is eager to avoid having a "bad" example - a secular, pro-Western regime - emerge next door.

As for Syria, the world's only remaining Ba'athist state has good reason to want to preserve the vitality of its sister regime's nationalist opposition, both as a hedge against mounting international attention and to prevent a spillover of the political empowerment of Iraq's minorities on its own Kurdish population.

More broadly, both countries - and the groups working with them - fear that American efforts in the war on terrorism might decisively alter the region's turbulent status quo, and not in their favor.

With the deadline for a U.S. transfer of sovereignty to the emerging Iraqi government drawing closer, and with election-year mudslinging well underway in Washington, quelling Iraq's instability is rapidly emerging as an overriding priority for the Bush administration.

But so too should be the realization that the recipe for long-term stability in Iraq rests in taking up the thorny issue of external influence - and in unequivocally demonstrating to regional rogues that their troublemaking carries real consequences.

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