

## **BAD NEIGHBOR**

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"The Americans may think they will have peace in eight months. But, even if they stay eighteen years, we will never give them peace." Sheik Muhammad Al Abadi, a member of the Badr Corps, the more radical military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (Sciri), an Islamist political group, didn't mince words as we sat in January at his home in the southern Iraqi city of Al Amarah. At the time, I was seconded to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq from the Pentagon, where I had been an Iran and Iraq policy adviser. Al Abadi's walls were decorated with a picture of his late older brother and a large portrait of Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. An older man whispered to Al Abadi that I was American, and the bespectacled thirty-something changed the subject. Several months later, the sheik's prophecy would come true, and widespread violence would erupt throughout southern Iraq.

Since the violence began, American officials and the media have blamed the bloodshed on poor postwar planning, miscalculations of the strength of radical cleric Moqtada Al Sadr, and even Shia anger at Iraq's new provisional constitution (see Joshua Hammer, "Preoccupied"). But there's another factor largely unappreciated by the U.S. media and unchallenged by the CPA: the well-organized, highly effective infiltration of Shia into Iraq by the government of Iran.

The Iranian security apparatus, having sparred with American forces in Bosnia and Afghanistan, was well-prepared to challenge the United States in Iraq. Almost a month before the opening salvos of the war, the Islamic republic began broadcasting Arabic-language television across the border. As U.S.-led coalition forces fought Saddam Hussein's fedayeen in Basra and advanced on Najaf in March 2003, units of the Badr Corps poured into northern Iraq from Iran, where Sciri was based, provoking a strong warning to Tehran by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. According to an April 25, 2003, report by well-connected Iranian journalist Ali Reza Nurizadeh in the London-based Arabic daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, elite Iranian Revolutionary Guards "brought in radio transmission equipment, posters, pamphlets printed in [the Iranian holy city of] Qom, and huge amounts of money, some of which was used to buy weapons for the Badr Corps."

I arrived in Baghdad in July 2003. With temperatures soaring to 120 degrees Fahrenheit, most CPA staff remained inside air-conditioned headquarters, located in a former Saddam palace. Junior American diplomats tended to stay

at their desks, while ambassadors traveled in armored cars among well-armed personal security details. What was good for security, however, was bad for political intelligence. After 35 years of dictatorship, Iraqis avoided talking to armed men, and the CPA staffers, penned up in their palace complex and out of touch with average Iraqis, missed evidence of increasing Iranian influence.

My first night in Baghdad, several Iraqis intercepted me in the Rashid Hotel lobby. Three years before, I had taught for a year in Iraqi Kurdistan; friends had planned a reunion. We talked, ate, and drank until shortly before the 10 p.m. curfew; throughout the evening, Arabs and Kurds alike warned that Iranian intelligence was taking advantage of the U.S. failure to secure Iraq's borders. Later that month, several Iraqis warned me that over 10,000 Iranians had entered Iraq. Coalition officials I spoke to seemed unconcerned, suggesting that the influx was simply Iraqi refugees returning home. But these American diplomats seemed unable to differentiate between returnees speaking Iraqi Arabic and people proficient in Persian, who spoke little or no Arabic; many of the Iranians coming into the country fell into the latter category.

Over subsequent months, I frequently visited the Iranian frontier. Traveling back roads along a smugglers' route in Iraqi Kurdistan, I encountered no U.S. patrols within 100 miles of the border, though American officials had vowed to police the frontiers. And, when I returned to Baghdad, I saw the results of open borders. I often visited Sadr City, a sprawling Shia slum named for Moqtada Al Sadr's slain father. Among posters of Moqtada Al Sadr, Khomeini, and other religious figures, hawkers sold everything from U.S. Agency for International Development rations to stolen cars to forged documents, such as passports and manifests. Safe-passage documents for traveling from Iran to Iraq cost only \$50.

Sadr himself has become a recipient of Iranian cash. Iran's charge d'affaires in Baghdad, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, maintains close relations with Sadr. According to the April 6 edition of the Arabic newspaper al-Hayat, Qomi is not actually a diplomat but rather a member of the Revolutionary Guards, the elite Iranian terrorist network dedicated to the export of jihad; Qomi previously served as a liaison to Hezbollah. Meanwhile, Italian intelligence reports show that many Revolutionary Guards have moved to southern Iraq in recent months to organize and train Sadr's armed wing. This Iranian operation reportedly hides its true intentions under the guise of religious charities in Karbala, Najaf, and Kufa, while financial support is channeled to Sadr through Ayatollah Kazem Al Haeri, a Qom-based cleric and close confidant of Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. (The Office of the Supreme Leader retains a budget for which Khamenei is not accountable to Iran's president or parliament.) Italian intelligence has identified one of Haeri's students as Khamenei's personal representative to Sadr.

Sadr is not the only Islamist Shia leader receiving aid from Tehran. When I visited Nasiriya, a dusty town in southern Iraq, local clerics complained bitterly about Iranian intelligence officials swarming into town, creating a network of

informers and funneling money to anti-U.S. forces. At a town-hall meeting in Nasiriya last October, tribal leaders repeatedly condemned the United States for failing to confront the "hidden hand"--Iranians coming into the city.

By January, the anti-U.S. Badr Corps, trained and financed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, had established a large office on Nasiriya's riverfront promenade. Below murals of Khomeini and the late Ayatollah Mohammad Bakr Al Hakim hung banners declaring, no to America, no to Israel, no to occupation. Two blocks away in the central market, vendors sold posters not of moderate Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, but of Supreme Leader Khomeini. By January 2004, Zainab Al Suwajj, the granddaughter of Basra's leading religious figure, was reporting that Hezbollah, which has close ties to the Revolutionary Guards, was operating openly in southern towns like Nasiriya and Basra, helping to stir up violence. The next day, at his daily press briefing, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said, "No, I don't know anything about Hamas and Hezbollah in Iraq. ... We'll stop them if we can get them." Coincidentally, I visited Basra on January 14 without informing the local CPA coordinator. One block from the main market, Sciri and Hezbollah had established a joint office. A large Lebanese Hezbollah flag fluttered in the wind.

The Iranian government has not limited its support to a single faction or party. Rather, Tehran's strategy appears to be to support both the radicals seeking immediate confrontation with the U.S. occupation and Islamist political parties like Sciri and Ibrahim Jafari's Dawah Party, which are willing to sit on the U.S.-backed Iraqi Governing Council and engage with Washington, at least in the short term. The Iranian journalist Nurizadeh wrote in April 2003, "[President Mohammed] Khatami [and other Iranian political leaders] ... were surprised by the decision issued above their heads to send into Iraq more than 2,000 fighters, clerics, and students [to] the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and al-Dawah Party." My own experience backed up his claims. This February, I spoke with a local governor from southern Iraq who wanted to meet me after he learned that I lived and worked outside CPA headquarters. The governor complained that the CPA was doing little to stop the influx of Iranian money to district councilmen and prominent tribal and religious officials. The money, he said, was distributed through Dawah offices established after a meeting between Jafari and Iranian security officials.

Twice in the last twelve years, large-scale Iranian destabilization efforts have confronted U.S. military interventions. In Bosnia, after significant internal debate, George H.W. Bush's administration chose to block Iranian infiltration, risking revenge attacks against the United States by Iranian-linked terrorists. In September 1992, Tehran attempted to ship 4,000 guns, one million rounds of ammunition, and several dozen fighters to Bosnia. An Iranian Boeing 747 landed in Zagreb, where, in response to U.S. pressure, the Croatian military impounded the weapons and expelled the jihadis. Today, there is little threat of radical anti-U.S. Islamism in Bosnia.

Almost a decade later, the current Bush administration identified an Iranian challenge in Afghanistan. Speaking before the American-Iranian Council on

March 13, 2002, Zalmay Khalilzad, senior National Security Council adviser for the Middle East and Southwest Asia, declared, "The Iranian regime has sent some Qods forces associated with its Revolutionary Guards to parts of Afghanistan. . . . Iranian officials have provided military and financial support to regional parties without the knowledge and consent of the Afghan Interim Authority." Rather than combat this Iranian challenge, the Bush administration chose diplomacy. "Notwithstanding our criticism of Iranian policy, the U.S. remains open to dialogue," Khalilzad continued. Today, visitors to Herat, a main city in western Afghanistan, consider Iranian influence there to be extremely strong.

In the wake of Sadr's uprising, Washington is faced with the same choice: End Iran's infiltration through forceful action, or wish it away. How long can we afford to keep choosing the latter?

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