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Iran's covert actions in Iraq

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On April 4, 2004, Sheik Muqtada al-Sadr, a pro-Iranian Iraqi cleric, called on his followers to "terrorize your enemy," meaning the Americans and all those Iraqis cooperating to bring about a constitutional government.

This led tens of thousands of the cleric's armed and unarmed followers to attack U.S. and Coalition forces in four Iraqi cities. This was a preview of the violence and turmoil Iranian covert action could inflict in the coming months.

This threat is the current September 11, because the administration has not yet "connected the dots" revealing Iran's secret but discernible activities.

Following removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, the Iranian clerical dictatorship began a covert effort to set up an allied Shi'ite Islamist extremist regime in 60 percent Shi'ite Iraq. Iran has prepared this for many years and recruited political, military and covert agent assets among the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shi'ites who fled Iraq to live in Iran.

The Iranian dictatorship is acting to bring about a "second Iran" in Iraq in five ways:

(1) Those Iraqi Shi'ite clerics who agree with the heretical Khomeini view that the clergy should rule society in all aspects are used by Iran to build a power base from their mosques and associated social services. Iran views as the future religious leader of Iraq Ayatollah Al Haeri, an Iraqi cleric who has lived in Iran for the last 30 years and who, when Baghdad was liberated last year, issued an edict telling Iraqi clergy not to cooperate with the United States.

(2) Iran established the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq as a political movement that could win elections or take power town by town with the help of covert Iranian funds and propaganda. This organization also has an Iranian-trained and -armed paramilitary group of about 30,000. Both the political and the armed wings began moving from Iran into Iraq in March 2003. Iran also funds the Dawa Party. Leaders of both these Iran-linked parties are on the Iraqi Governing Council.

(3) Iran is working covertly with Iraqi extremist Sheik al-Sadr to use political and coercive means, including murder, to intimidate and take over Iraq's Shi'ite leadership. The murders of several prominent Shi'ite clerical leaders who favored democracy and cooperation with the coalition repeats Iran's covert actions since December 2001 in post-Taliban Afghanistan. There, a number of moderate Muslim clerics and political leaders were killed. It was Sheik al Sadr who issued the call to violence in Iraq on April 4, 2004. The next day, the coalition announced an Iraqi judge had issued an arrest warrant for Sheik al Sadr for the April 2003 murder of the respected moderate cleric, Ayatollah Al Kohei.

(4) Hezbollah, the Iranian-supported and often -directed terrorist organization has moved hundreds of cadres into Iraq as reported since last November. They along with Hamas, another Iranian-supported terrorist organization, have opened offices in Iraq and are recruiting Iraqis to be the foot soldiers and suicide killers in the massive

terrorist attacks planned against U.S. and coalition forces. Iran is most likely to order these to begin fully after the planned July 1, 2004, turnover of civil authority to the Iraqis. It also is quite likely Iran will use its links with Hezbollah and al Qaeda to facilitate major terrorist attacks inside the United States this summer and fail to try to force the U.S. out of Iraq and increase the odds of an electoral defeat of President Bush.

(5) Iran has spent heavily seeking to dominate radio and television broadcasting in Iraq. A survey by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty found Iran is the source of 33 of 59 AM broadcasts and of 41 of 63 AM/FM/TV broadcasts heard in Iraq. In comparison, the U.S.-supported Iraq Media Network has one television station, two radio stations and one newspaper.

The Bush administration must immediately counter Iran's covert assets and planned actions or risk major setbacks to its goals in Iraq. Indeed, if Iran brings about an anti-U.S., pro-Iranian Shi'ite extremist regime in Iraq, the risks to the United States and its allies from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) would dramatically increase. And it would defeat the Bush "forward strategy for freedom" in the entire Middle East.

A first step is recognizing, analyzing and understanding the intent of Iran and its Iraqi allies and what they have done to date. Next, there is an urgent need to work with moderate Shi'ite leaders to build pro-democratic political parties and a broad pro-democratic political coalition that can withstand and overcome the pressures, coercion and terrorism of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite groups. This means revising the currently self-defeating and much-too-limited efforts to aid genuinely democratic Shi'ite and other political parties and groups.

The pro-democracy Iraqi media also needs to be enlarged, and, as a corollary, the pro-extremist, Iranian-funded media needs to be restricted. This is an inescapable element of the early stages of a post-dictatorship transition where anti-democratic groups and media have sources of support far greater than those now available to moderates.

It also is necessary to quickly arrest all extremist leaders advocating violence and disarm their thousands of armed followers. It may be necessary to detain many of these armed extremists for some time, to assure they cannot join anti-U.S. terrorist operations.

Such detention should be humane. Efforts should be made to educate these misguided people about the values of political democracy and tolerance and to counter lies they have been told by extremist leaders for the last year.

The best defense against Iranian destabilization of Iraq is helping Iran's people to politically liberate themselves from their dictatorship. While the Iranian regime has a 25-year record of effective and brutal terrorism and secret action abroad, it is weak, fragile and vulnerable at home.

Polls and a series of partially open elections since 1997 reveal more than 75 percent of Iranians completely reject the extremist Shi'ite clerical regime that is perceived as very corrupt and a total economic failure. The people know the dictatorship has spent much of Iran's oil wealth supporting terrorism, Islamic extremism and on WMDs and ballistic missiles.

Ironically, while the United States may face difficulty fending off covert Iranian political action in Iraq, it has the symbolic credibility of its democratic institutions and the knowledge and experience to encourage the Iranian people to free themselves.

President Bush has spoken eloquently and often about the Iranian people's right to freedom. Now he needs to instruct his State Department to cease all its open and

secret "dialogue and engagement" activities with the clerical regime. These legitimize the dictatorship and discourage those in Iran who might otherwise act to bring about a democratic future.

Taking these actions now in Iraq and encouraging the Iranian people to liberate themselves this summer could result in two democracies. Otherwise, there is grave risk the removal of Iraq's Saddam Hussein will ultimately result in two Irans -- two Shi'ite extremist regimes in the region.

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