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Regime change in Tehran is necessary for peace in Iraq.

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Much is being made about the irony of an Iranian envoy arriving in Iraq to help negotiate a solution to the U.S. standoff with radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. How could we allow a charter member of President Bush's "Axis of Evil" to negotiate a "peace" with the thuggish Sadr and his band of fanatical militants?

Indeed, the irony is as thick as Sadr's own beard. But the fact that Iran holds sway over him and other Shiite militants in Iraq should surprise no one. Despite repeated denials by the State Department, it is an open secret throughout the Middle East that Sadr has been receiving support -- if not precise orders -- from the mullahs in Iran for some time now.

That the war being waged by Shiite militants throughout Iraq is not just a domestic "insurgency" has been documented by the Italian Military Intelligence Service (Sismi). In a report prepared before the current wave of violence, Sismi predicted "a simultaneous attack by Saddam loyalists" all over the country, along with a series of Shiite revolts.

The Italians knew that these actions were not just part of an Iraqi civil war, nor a response to recent actions taken by the Coalition Provisional Authority against the forces of Sadr. According to Italian intelligence, the actions were used as a pretext by local leaders of the factions tied to an Iran-based ayatollah, Kazem al-Haeri, who was "guided in his political and strategic choices by ultraconservative Iranian ayatollahs in order to unleash a long planned general revolt." The strategic goal of this revolt, says Sismi, was "the establishment of an Islamic government of Khomeinist inspiration." The Italian intelligence agency noted that "the presence of Iranian agents of influence and military instructors has been reported for some time." Our own government will not say as much publicly, but Donald Rumsfeld and Gen. John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, have recently spoken of "unhelpful actions" by Iran (and Syria).

The London-based Al-Hayat reported on April 6 that the Iraqi Governing Council was actively discussing "the major Iranian role in the events that took place in the Iraqi Shiite cities," noting that the Iranians were the predominant financiers of Sadr. Another London newspaper, Al Sharq Al-Awsat, quoted a recent Iranian intelligence defector that Iranian infiltration of Iraq started well before Operation Iraqi Freedom. Hundreds of intelligence agents were sent into Iraq through the north. After the fall of Saddam, greater numbers came across the uncontrolled border, masquerading as students, clerics and journalists -- and as religious pilgrims to the now-accessible holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.

The editor of the Kuwaiti newspaper Al Seyassah recently wrote a front-page editorial saying that Hezbollah and Hamas were working with Sadr, "backed by the ruling religious fundamentalists in Tehran and the nationalist Baathists in Damascus." No classified information was required for that claim, since Sadr himself has publicly proclaimed that his militia is the fighting arm of both Hezbollah and Hamas. Nonetheless, the State Department still doesn't believe -- or won't admit publicly -- that there's a connection between Sadr's uprising and Iran's mullahs. Just last week, State's deputy spokesman, Adam Ereli, told reporters that "We've seen reports of Iranian involvement, collusion, provocation, coordination, etc., etc. But I think there's a dearth of hard facts to back these things up."

One wonders what Foggy Bottom's analysts make of Sadr's recent visit to Iran, when he met with Hashemi Rafsanjani (the number two power in the regime), Murtadha Radha'i (head of intelligence for the Revolutionary Guards) and Brigadier General Qassim Suleimani (the al-Quds Army commander in charge of Iraqi affairs). And what might they say about the fact that much of Sadr's funding comes straight from Ayatollah al-Haeri, one of the closest allies of the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei?

Americans must understand that the war in Iraq is in reality a regional war which unites religious fanatics like the Iranians and radical secularists like the Syrians and Saddam's Iraqi supporters. The terrorists include Shiites like Sadr and murderous Sunnis like al Qaeda leader Abu Musab Zarqawi (who, despite his celebrated contempt for Shiites, has openly proclaimed common cause with Sadr).

Iraq cannot be peaceful and secure so long as Tehran sends its terrorist cadres across the border. Naturally, our troops will engage -- and kill -- any infiltrators they encounter. But we can be sure that there will be others to take their place. The only way to end Tehran's continual sponsorship of terror is to bring about the demise of the present Iranian regime. And as it happens, we have an excellent opportunity to achieve this objective, without the direct use of military power against Iran. There is a critical mass of pro-democracy citizens there, who would like nothing more than to rid themselves of their oppressors. They need help, but they neither need nor desire to be liberated by force of arms.

Above all, they want to hear our leaders state clearly and repeatedly -- as Ronald Reagan did with the "Evil Empire" -- that regime change in Iran is the goal of American policy. Thus far, they have heard conflicting statements and mealy-mouthed half truths of the sort presented by Mr. Ereli, along with astonishing proclamations, such as the one by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, in which he averred that Iran is "a democracy." (One wonders whether he will liken Muqtada al-Sadr to Patrick Henry.)

Mr. Armitage notwithstanding, we can reach the Iranian people by providing support to the several Farsi-language radio and TV stations in this country, all currently scrambling for funds to broadcast a couple of hours a day. We can encourage private foundations and individuals to support the Iranian democracy movement. The current leadership of the AFL-CIO has regrettably abandoned that organization's traditional role of supporting free

trade unions inside tyrannical countries, but there are some individual unions that could do it.

This sort of political campaign aimed at toppling the Iranian regime -- allied to firm punitive action within Iraq against terrorists of all stripes -- will make our task in Iraq manifestly less dangerous. Ultimately, security in Iraq will come in large measure from freedom and reform in Iran (as well as in Syria and Saudi Arabia). This is a truth that we should not hide from, nor be fearful to take on.

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