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Iran's Contribution to the Civil War in Iraq

BY MOUNIR ELKHAMRI

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not represent those of the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army.

While the press debates whether or not there is a civil war in Iraq, there is a strong history of Iranian-sponsored unrest in Iraq that continues to the present. Captured Iraqi intelligence documents, now maintained by the Foreign Military Studies Office, show Iran's deep penetration in Iraqi society and institutions. Iran clandestinely supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq and took measures to turn it to her advantage.

The Iranian government maintained armed formations, such as the Badr Corps, inside Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion. While Saddam Hussein felt that he could dissuade a U.S. invasion through world opinion and the United Nations, Iran anticipated and welcomed the U.S. invasion since it would destroy her chief enemy in the region.

Iran has now moved covertly and overtly onto Iraq to subvert Iraqi institutions and eventually to assume total control. Iran has now entered a wider and more dangerous game by subverting the Iraqi police and armed forces into a "greater Shia" cause, which Iran hopes will lead to the fragmentation of Iraq and the inoration of oil-rich Shia lands into Iran.



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I. IRAN'S PREPARATIONS FOR THE U.S. INVASION OF IRAQ

The Badr Corps' Leaders Meetings with Allies

According to captured Iraqi intelligence reports (2001-2002), there were several meetings between the command of the Badr Corps of the Iranian Republican Guard and Iraqi Shia tribes. The Badr Corps also met with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leadership in preparation for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

On September 27, 2001, representatives of the Badr Corps met with members of the PUK, including PUK leader Jalal Talabani, in one of the PUK's political offices in Sulaymania, Kurdistan. During this meeting, the Badr leadership discussed possible enrollment of Badr Corps members and other Iraqis living in Iran in the University of Sulaymania. They also requested permission from Jalal Talabani to invest in Sulaymania. Talabani agreed to study their request for student enrollment and gave them the green light to invest in Sulaymania.¹

Then, on October 1, 2001, representatives of the Badr Corps and representatives of the KDP, which is led by Massoud Barzani, met in a Salahadeen resort located about 20 miles from Irbil, Kurdistan. The intent of the meeting was to renew and reinforce the Badr Corps' ties with the KDP. During this meeting, Badr Corps leaders also asked the KDP representatives about the United States' current and future intentions toward Iraq.²

On October 2, 2001, the Badr Corps leadership met again with Massoud Barzani, head of the KDP, to discuss different ways to reinforce relations between the Badr Corps and the KDP. The Badr Corps' representatives inquired about U.S. intentions in Iraq and asked Barzani's permission to allow the Badr Corps to open an office in Irbil. Barzani assured them that the United States was thinking about targeting Iraq once it finished its mission in Afghanistan. He expressed his worries about the possible involvement of the Turkish forces in the U.S. invasion, especially since Turkey had strong interests in northern Iraq. He also mentioned that normally the United States would only support the strongest political parties that were pro-U.S. These parties would assume control in post-Saddam Iraq. At that point, the majority of U.S. politicians supported the Kurds and the Shia Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).³

The Badr Corps' Military Meetings and Preparations

On November 4, 2001, the Badr Corps organized a meeting with the chief of staff, operations officer, intelligence officer and numerous tribal leaders who were loyal to the Badr Corps. During this meeting, the Badr Corps leadership emphasized the importance of jihadi activities in support of the Badr Corps' efforts to

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seize the Iraqi government once the United States invaded Iraq.⁴

A day later, the leadership of the Badr Corps held another meeting attended by Abu Mehdi Mohandess, the Corps commander's assistant; Abu Hassan al-Amari, the chief of staff; Abu Lequaa al-Safi the intelligence officer; Abu Ayoub al-Basri, the operations officer; and all the covert area commanders in Iraq.

During this meeting, they discussed the following scenarios in Iraq:

1. The possibility of transferring command between President Saddam Hussein and his son Uday.
2. The possibility of changing the key political figures in Iraq but keeping the same political structure.
3. The possibility of an organized military coup by a group of officers supported by the United States.
4. The conference noted that the United States might intervene in Iraq as they had in Afghanistan. In this case, the United States would likely rely on Kurdish forces and other Iraqi Islamic forces in theater.⁵

On December 10, 2001, the Badr Corps organized a meeting in which the majority of its commanders—Abu Hassan al-Amari, the chief of staff; Abu Lequaa al-Safi, the intelligence officer; Abu Ayoub al-Basri the operations officer—and representatives from the Iraqi province of Karbala were present. During the meeting, they discussed the probable U.S. invasion of Iraq and discussed the Corps' plan and preparations to reap the benefits from this opportunity.⁶

SCIRI asked the Badr Corps command to:

1. Prepare for and anticipate the beneficial U.S. invasion of Iraq. Provide the necessary and effective action to support the U.S. attack on Iraq.
2. Conduct reconnaissance missions, then disrupt and cause damage to the Iraqi military in the south, especially in the provinces of Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar because that would raise the Badr Corps soldiers' morale and spirit.
3. Prepare two battalions of the Badr Corps, the Mujahedee al-Hussein battalion and the Ansar al-Hussein battalion, and send them into the south of Iraq, in the areas of al-Amarah and al-Nasseria. They must collect information about military units and government officials and carry out attacks on political parties' offices and other government offices. Then they must control the main route between the Dewania and al-Kassem areas, which is located in Babil province, right after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

These forces were under the supervision of an Iranian intelligence general, General Mhamde, who secretly traveled in and out of Iraq and had a business office in Sulaymania (Hassaniat al-Hakim). Later, General Mhamde prepared a group of Kurds and integrated them into two platoons called Alkassem in order to collect information about Ninewa and Tamim provinces.⁷

II. IRAN'S PRESENCE IN IRAQ AFTER THE U.S. INVASION

Iraq as a Strategic Line of Defense for Iran

Iraq is considered to be the first line of defense for Iran against any foreign invasion, especially since Iraq has been the invasion route for military attacks on Iran in the past. Prior to and after the coalition's invasion of Iraq, Iran has been taking the necessary preparations and actions in order to strengthen its strategic position and control Iraq through its intelligence organization and its sectarian political parties.

These organizations and political parties used the coalition's initial position against the Sunnis and the de-Baathification of the Iraqi security forces to infiltrate, manipulate and control the new Iraqi security forces and ministries. Today, Iran considers Iraq as its frontline state against the United States and its allies, especially if the United States decides to attack Iran's nuclear installations.⁸

Different Forms of the Iranian Presence in Iraq

In 2004, the assistant commander of the Iranian Republican Guard announced, during his visit to London, that Iran has two brigades and other militia in Iraq in order to protect the national security of Iran.

On March 11, 2004, Iranian intelligence opened an office in Najaf called “The Office to Help Poor Iraqi Shia.” Through that office, they were able to recruit over 70,000 Iraqis from the south to join one of the militias loyal to Iran. Every recruit would receive \$2,000 in advance, then \$1,000 a month—a princely sum in Iraq today.⁹

According to a defecting Iranian Republican Guard Council (IRGC) officer, “The scale and breadth of Qods Force operations in Iraq are far beyond what we did even during the war with Saddam.”¹⁰ The officer

“When the Shia in the south of Iraq, who are loyal to Iran, claim their independence in Iraq’s southern provinces, they will control the second largest oil reserve after Saudi Arabia. Iran might eventually end up in control of almost 20% of the world’s oil reserves.”

was referring to the IRGC’s extensive activities in Iraq during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. “Vast areas of Iraq are under the virtual control of the Qods Force through its Iraqi surrogates. It uses a vast array of charities, companies and other fronts to conduct its activities across Iraq.”¹¹ He also stated, “We would send our officers into Iraq to operate for months under the cover of a construction company...Kawthar Company operated in

Najaf last year to carry out construction work in the area around Imam Ali Shrine, but it was in fact a front company for the Qods Force. Qods officers, disguised as company employees, established contacts with Iraqi operatives and organized underground cells in southern Iraq.”¹²

Iran’s Ideological Control over Southern Iraq

In the past two years, Iran has sent more than 2,000 students and religious scholars to Najaf and Karbala. About one-third of them belong to Iranian intelligence. It has also assigned representatives in major Shia cities to provide financial support to Shia students and school instructors—\$50 to \$100 per student and \$200 to \$500 per instructor. Iran has sent several Iraqi political figures who were living in Iran back to Iraq to infiltrate and obtain sensitive political positions in the new Iraqi government. Iran considers these figures a solid foundation in the process of incorporating Iraq, without its northern area of Kurdistan, the moment the coalition forces start leaving Iraq.¹³

Iran has a strong presence in the southern provinces of Iraq and a secret one in Baghdad. Iran also has a respectable presence in the north of Iraq where it is utilizing Iranian Kurds, Iranian communists, Iranian-Kurdish student exchanges and Iranian agents. There were numerous agreements between the Iraqi-Kurdish leaders and Iran prior to the coalition’s invasion of Iraq.

In one of the agreements, Iran agreed not to intervene in Kurdistan’s internal affairs or to go after the Iranian-Kurds who live in Kurdistan and are anti-Iran. In exchange, the Kurdistan government agreed to not allow any attacks on Iran from Kurdistan.¹⁴

Assassination of Scientists, Professors, Officers and Key Sunni Figures

After the fall of the regime, Iraqi citizens began to witness numerous assassinations and kidnapping attempts that targeted Sunni professors, scholars, doctors and especially those army officers and air force pilots that participated in the Iraq-Iran war. According to an ex-Iraqi Air Force pilot who is currently serving

in the new Iraqi army, when the coalition forces were busy fighting the insurgency and preparing for the first national election, the Iranian militias were busy assassinating over 90 air force pilots and other high ranking military officers that had participated in the Iraq-Iran war.¹⁵

In late 2005, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani condemned the assassinations and kidnapping attempts and sent an invitation to the rest of the former Iraqi Air Force pilots and high ranking officers to move to Sulaymania or Irbil in Kurdistan if they did not feel safe where they lived.

Iran's Control of Southern Iraq

According to an Iraqi officer, during al-Jaafari's administration numerous members of the Iranian intelligence were naturalized in Iraq and thousands of hectares were distributed in Shia cities such as Basra, Najaf and Karbala. In 2004, al-Alkeed Ghazi, an Arab-Shia naturalization officer, was assassinated because he refused to naturalize anyone that belonged to a militia. Iran also sent Iranian investors along with its intelligence officers in order to buy as many as 5,000 apartments, houses, stores and restaurants in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf and Karbala. These are used as living quarters and command centers for the Iranian agents and the other militia loyal to Iran.

These ongoing efforts are mainly to guarantee a successful vote for federalism in the south of Iraq. Similar scenarios were witnessed in the north of Iraq before the first and the second national elections, where a large number of Kurdish families relocated from Kurdistan to a different area north of Iraq—Mosul, Tal Afar, Rabia and others—in order to secure enough votes for the new Iraqi constitution and the national election.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq's Election and its Aftermath

Prior to the 2005 Iraqi national election, Iran sent a large number of its agents as visitors to Shia shrines in order to influence and secure the necessary votes for the Shia party running in that election. They smuggled in thousands of Iranian-made pictures, flyers and already filled-out voting ballots in order to support their Shia candidates. The Shia United Iraqi Alliance consisted of 18 conservative Shia Islamist groups such as: the Dawa party, led by ex-Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari; the pro-Iranian Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, led by Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim; the Iraqi Nationalist Sadr Movement, loyal to populist Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr; and others.¹⁶

According to the Iranian ambassador to the United Kingdom, Muhammad Husain Adeli, Tehran was ready to work again with the United States to ensure stability in the Middle East where their interests converged. Ambassador Adeli stated, "For the recent elections, there was not only implicit but explicit indirect and direct cooperation between the two, Iran and the United States, in order to keep the majority calm and in favor of the election."¹⁷ Tehran and Washington have not had diplomatic links since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and relations between them are currently tense.

Federalism

On July 31, 2006, Adel Abd al-Mahdi, a senior official in SCIRI and Iraq's vice president, pledged that the Shia Iraqi coalition—the biggest bloc in the Iraqi parliament—would raise the issue of a Shia federal state in the coming month. A few days before that announcement, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, chairman of SCIRI, repeated his call for a Shia federal region.¹⁸

The chairman of SCIRI also stated, "Federalism is constitutionally secured. We have to work seriously on this issue, and figure out the necessary mechanism to switch to federalism. Dear countrymen, this issue is important to your governorates' security, safety and reconstruction."¹⁹

He continued and urged his supporters to take the Kurds in the north of Iraq as an example of the importance of federalism: “Kurdistan was devastated by wars and suffered the same amount of negligence you suffered, but now—thanks to federalism—it has started to enjoy progress and prosperity more than any part of Iraq.”²⁰

Iraqi federalism is an important issue for Iran. When the Shia in the south of Iraq, who are loyal to Iran, claim their independence in Iraq’s southern provinces, they will control the second largest oil reserve after Saudi Arabia. Iran might eventually end up in control of almost 20% of the world’s oil reserves.

III. IRAQ’S CIVIL WAR

Today in Iraq, Shia militias—death squads loyal to Iran—have successfully infiltrated the new Iraqi security forces at all levels. They have also expanded their area of operations throughout Iraq. They are responsible for more civilian deaths than the Sunni and foreign insurgents who are the United States’ number one enemies in Iraq. These militias—the Mahdi Army, the Badr Brigade and others—are carrying out attacks under the authority of and in the uniforms of the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense. They arrest, kidnap, interrogate, torture and kill anti-Shia and innocent Iraqis.²¹

For the past year, dozens of corpses have shown up on the streets and garbage dumps of Iraqi cities on a daily basis. In most cases, the victims, who are overwhelmingly Sunni, are blindfolded and handcuffed. Their corpses show signs of torture—broken skulls, burn marks, gouged-out eyeballs, electric drill holes and other forms of abuse. The Shia militias’ secret detention centers are popping up everywhere, even within the Iraqi Ministry of Interior.

The reality is that Iraq is in a state of civil war, and some of its most ruthless and lawless combatants are members of the government’s own security units. Unfortunately, some of them, if not the majority of these new Shia militias, were once part of the new Iraqi security forces and were trained by coalition forces. Coalition forces have spent billions of dollars in training, thinking that these recruits would serve the Iraqis and would be loyal to Iraq instead of following the Iraqi and Iranian religious leaders’ political agendas.²²

The current situation in Iraq cannot be fixed by military “hit and run,” moving troops from one hot spot to another. The militias enjoy Iranian military, financial and spiritual leadership. On the other hand, the solution is not to bomb Iran, as doing so will only unleash Iranian forces around the world against neighboring Arab lands where the United States has a presence. What the United States needs to do is to restrain Iran and disarm and disband the Shia militias. These militias are out of control. America must keep Iraq together. It is America’s responsibility to restore order to avoid a civil war that would be similar to the Lebanese Civil War in the 1980s.

ENDNOTES

¹ Abedin, Mahan, "The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, October 2003.

² *Ibid.*

³ "The Iraqi Intelligence Reports on the Iranian Intelligence Activities," captured Iraqi intelligence records maintained by FMSO, April 18, 2006.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The Qods Force is an extra-territorial arm of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

¹¹ "Terrorists Training Camp in Iran," *Iran Focus*, February 27, 2006.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Dr. Mohamed Ayach Alkabessee, "The Iranian Role in Iraq after the Occupation," <http://www.iraq-amsi.org>, March 19, 2006.

¹⁶ "Iran Sets up New Terror Camp in Eastern Iraq," *Iran Focus*, April 16, 2006.

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¹⁸ "Iraq Elections: Parties to Watch," al-Jazeera, December 13, 2005.

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²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² <http://www.iraqirabita.org>.