



**Combating Terrorism Center**  
at West Point



## **Occasional Paper Series**

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# **Iranian Strategy in Iraq**

## **Politics and “Other Means”**

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## Preface

Iranian strategy in Iraq is a subject of great importance and intense study. Many discussions of Iran concentrate on reports of lethal aid, pronouncements of Iranian leaders, or Iranian nuclear ambitions. While these data points provide part of the picture, it is vital to put each of the Iranian actions into their broader, historical context. In this light, Iran's actions are part of a deliberate, strategic policy to increase its power and influence in Iraq and throughout the region.

In this report, Colonel Joe Felter and Brian Fishman of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point have detailed the objectives, methods, and expansiveness of the Iranian attempts to affect policy and politics in Iraq. Having spent much of the summer 2008 in Iraq, they have identified many of the documents, reports, and interviews that explain the Iranian strategy and provide both the historical context and the strategic motivation for Iranian actions. By using first hand reports from detainee interviews, Iraqi intelligence services, and coalition forces, they have a unique, empirically-based study that provides rich detail about Iranian action. They combine those reports with volumes of scholarly writing to provide the strategic and intellectual context for Iranian actions.

This report is significant not only for its conclusions, but because we are following the tradition of previous CTC reports and releasing all possible supporting documents on our website. We encourage other scholars to examine these documents and reach their own conclusions. Through that increased study all of us will become better educated and better education can contribute to better policy.

This report supports the CTC's mission to better understand terrorist threats, to educate leaders, and to provide policy analysis. As part of the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy, the CTC's faculty and staff are integral to teaching cadets and providing outreach to educate and inform current and future leaders.



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## Authors' Note

*Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means"* assesses Iran's strategy to project influence in Iraq and the means it uses to do so. This report is not a comprehensive analysis of Iranian foreign policy. Iranian support for terrorism outside Iraq and its burgeoning nuclear program are beyond the scope of this report. Furthermore, the report does not fully address Iran's efforts to use economic and social levers to project influence in Iraq, primarily because of our inability to find good data. This area demands further research.

In addition to public sources, this report draws on a substantial body of information never before released to the public. These include internal Iraqi intelligence documents written before 2003, details from reports of Significant Activities by U.S. and Coalition Forces, as well as summaries of interrogations of detained militants.

We recognize the inherent problems in using some of the sources cited in this report. For example, we cannot independently confirm the accuracy of information contained in the Iraqi intelligence documents. Indeed, we have serious concerns that Iraqi intelligence agents relied on information from the anti-Iranian terrorist group, the Mujahidin-e Khalq Organization. Data provided by the MKO is sometimes accurate but often considered not credible because of the MKO's endemic interest in portraying Iran in as negative a light possible. Likewise, unclassified information from Coalition Forces' significant activities reports can lack important context. Finally, information obtained from interrogations of detained militants must be interpreted with extreme caution. Detainees may be misinformed or lying, interrogators may misunderstand or poorly transcribe information, and the context of a detainee's story may be missing. Readers should be wary of these problems, as we have tried to be.

In an attempt to address legitimate concerns about our data, we provide as much original source documentation as possible and identify the data's limitations in the text and in footnotes. When possible, we strive to corroborate newly released data with already public information to avoid relying on a single document, transcript, or summary report.

Much of our research would not have been possible, however, without the unique access afforded academics based at West Point. We accept that this situation makes peer review difficult, though all of our sources are being

released with our paper. We have done our best to balance the sometimes conflicting demands of soldiers whose lives often depend on secrecy and the need for more informed academic and public debate of issues critical to U.S. national security. There is no doubt our effort is imperfect, but we have worked to be as forthright as possible and provide this report and its supporting documentation with the hope and expectation that others will expand on this research to learn more about Iranian policy and strategy.

We thank many officials at U.S. Central Command and Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I) for their cooperation with our unusual requests to release raw information.

Supporting documentation and sources can be accessed at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu>. Please contact the authors at the emails listed below for substantive questions about the report. Please direct other questions regarding the report to the U.S. Central Command Public Affairs Office POC LCDR Bill Speaks at [speaksw@centcom.mil](mailto:speaksw@centcom.mil) or 813-827-2240.



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The opinions expressed in this report are the authors' and do not reflect the official positions of the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, the U.S. government, or any of the individuals or organizations that agreed to release information for this report.

## Executive Summary

Iran has a robust program to exert influence in Iraq in order to limit American power-projection capability in the Middle East, ensure the Iraqi government does not pose a threat to Iran, and build a reliable platform for projecting influence further abroad. Iran has two primary modes of influence. First, and most importantly, it projects political influence by leveraging close historical relationships with several Shi'a organizations in Iraq: the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Badr organization, and the Dawah political party. Second, Iran uses the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Qods Force (QF) to provide aid in the form of paramilitary training, weapons, and equipment to various Iraqi militant groups, including Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and the Special Group Criminals (SGCs). Iran also projects influence through economic initiatives and various religious programs. Iranian influence in Iraq is inevitable, and some of it is legal and constructive. Nonetheless, Iranian policy in Iraq is also duplicitous. Iran publicly calls for stability while subverting Iraq's government and illegally sponsoring anti-government militias.

Although Iran publicly protested the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, its agents and allies initially cooperated with U.S. forces. Iraqi refugee groups with deep ties to Iran participated in U.S.-sponsored pre-invasion conferences, and Iran urged its surrogates to assist U.S. forces and position themselves to seize power through the electoral process. Yet even as its political allies came to power in Baghdad with U.S. backing, Iran began supporting anti-government, anti-coalition militia movements typified by JAM and, later, the SGCs. The two-tracked strategy offered Iran unique levers to increase violence in Iraq and then to benefit when violence subsided. Another advantage has been that, intentionally or not, Iran's two-pronged approach obscured the importance of Iran's political influence in Iraq by focusing the international media and U.S. policymakers on Iran's lethal aid to militia groups.

Iran has achieved three major accomplishments in Iraq. First, the unstable security situation and political opposition means the U.S. is not in a position to use Iraq as a platform for targeting Iran. Second, Iran's political allies have secured high-ranking positions in the Iraqi government. Third, the Iraqi constitution calls for a highly federalized state. Iran values a decentralized Iraq because it will be less capable of projecting power, and because Iran is primarily concerned with Iraq's southern, oil-rich, Shi'a-dominated provinces. Iran

believes that increased southern autonomy will leave those provinces more open to Iranian influence. Iran's successes in Iraq are not all a function of its own efforts. For example, a democratic Iraq will almost certainly be highly federalized because of the power of Iraqi Kurds to distance themselves from the Iraqi government, and because of increasingly heated sectarian divisions that can be mitigated by devolving power to regional governments.

Iran's effort to manipulate Iraqi surrogates predates the 2003 U.S. military operations. During the 1980s and 1990s, Iran helped organize and finance ISCI's predecessor, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and its Badr Corps Militia. It also worked closely with elements of the Islamic Dawah Party and helped train and fund its militant wing. Before 2003, the Badr Corps served as Iran's most important action arm inside Iraq, and was considered an official component of the IRGC-QF. Badr received training and weapons from the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hizballah to attack both the Iraqi regime and the Mujahidin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), an Iranian terrorist group. Numerous senior individuals in the Badr Corps during the 1990s play critical logistical roles funneling weapons to militants in Iraq today, including Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani—the first major Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) smuggler—and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the terrorist and former Badr Corps commander who was elected to the Iraqi parliament before fleeing to Iran. In some cases, these people had direct ties to current Iraqi politicians, including Hadi al-Ameri, who was al-Muhandis' Chief of Staff.

Iran's support for Iraqi refugee groups in the 1980s and 1990s has important consequences today. The refugee groups often disagreed over how closely to associate with the Iranian regime. SCIRI was most closely linked to Iran's clerical regime, going so far as to recognize Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of guardianship of the jurist—*velayat-e faqih*—which implied Ayatollah Khomeini was their Supreme Leader. The Dawah party, however, was bitterly split over *velayat-e faqih*. Meanwhile, many Shi'a that remained in Iraq grew resentful of the Iraqi refugees that pontificated about Saddam's regime without facing its brutality firsthand. Most supported Iran's religious government but rejected *velayat-e faqih*. The political and doctrinal disagreements were often reflected in debates about which religious figures to follow. SCIRI was led by Ayatollah Baqir al-Hakim, while many Dawah supporters and Iraqis still in Iraq supported Ayatollahs from the al-Sadr family. These divisions laid the groundwork for contemporary divisions between the establishment ISCI and Dawah parties in Baghdad and the anti-establishment Sadrist movement.

Despite its successes, Iran faces numerous hurdles projecting influence in Iraq. Many Iraqis—including Shi'a—despise ISCI, Iran's primary political ally, precisely because of its close relationship with Iran. In 2007, ISCI took its current name and abandoned the title Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which had implied a closer relationship with Tehran. ISCI also publicly stated that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is its most important religious influence—thereby distancing the organization from Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, whom it had previously considered supreme. Meanwhile, Iran's militia allies in Iraq tend to oppose Iranian political influence there. Moqtada al-Sadr and others are willing to accept Iranian training and weapons to pursue their political, religious, and criminal aims, but they remain hostile to Iranian political influence and thus are unreliable allies.

### **Key Findings**

- Iran's primary strategy to influence events in Iraq since the U.S. invasion has been to support allies in the Iraqi political establishment. To do so, Iran has supported Iraq's electoral process and supported its Iraqi allies' political ambitions. An elected Iraqi government is the U.S.' best hope for a stable Iraq but also Iran's primary mode of projecting power in Iraq.
- The primacy of Iran's political strategy is particularly important now because of the political sensitivity of the U.S.-Iraqi negotiations on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and a Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which will govern the role of U.S. forces in Iraq after December 31, 2008. Iran likely prioritizes using supportive Iraqi politicians to influence the SOFA/SFA negotiations as a means to constrain U.S. freedom of action in Iraq over the long-term, rather than increase violence now.
- Popular opposition suggests that Iraqi politicians will be more amenable to publicly support a SOFA/SFA after the Iraqi provincial elections, which were originally planned for October 2008, but will not occur until 2009.
- Iranian programs to support Iraqi militias are very robust. The IRGC-Qods Force, augmented by Lebanese Hizballah trainers, sponsor basic and advanced paramilitary training at camps in Iran and Lebanon. Iranian supplied weapons are being employed against Coalition and Iraqi forces, including the most lethal of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), known as Explosively Formed Penetrators. Iran has supplied shaped IEDs that resemble EFPs to Iraqi opposition groups since at least 2001.



- The Iraqi government has cracked down on Iranian-affiliated militias in the last six months. The Iraqi government's effort does constrain Iran's ability to employ violence inside Iraq, but it will not prevent Iran from exerting influence through supportive Iraqi politicians.
- Iranian influence in Iraq can be beneficial when it is a force for stability and economic growth. Iranian pilgrims to Iraq's shrine cities bring in needed revenue; cross-border trade is natural and productive; even the presence of Iraqi politicians with strong links to Iran does not necessarily undercut Iraqi sovereignty or security. These politicians will serve an important moderating function when the inevitable disputes between Iran and Iraq arise.
- Iran will likely try to maintain a non-governmental militant action arm inside Iraq for the foreseeable future, regardless of the political orientation of the Iraqi government or the presence of U.S. troops. These militant elements will serve both as a hedge against a potentially hostile Iraqi government and a lever to pressure any U.S. troops that remain inside Iraq.
- Moqtada al-Sadr is personally erratic and a determined opponent of the U.S. presence in Iraq, but his history of ardent Iraqi nationalism and support for a strong Iraqi central government means he is a potentially important bulwark against Iranian political influence in Iraq.
- Iran aims to evict all U.S. troops from Iraq. In lieu of achieving that goal, Iran will target U.S. troops and resources in order to demonstrate it has the capability to undermine the U.S. project in Iraq. At least one purpose of Iran's strategy is to demonstrate a credible deterrent against a U.S. strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. If the U.S. maintains a persistent force of any kind in Iraq, it should be structured to minimize Iran's ability to credibly threaten that force.
- Confrontations with the U.S., in Iraq and elsewhere, bolters the political stature of Iranian leaders with their own constituencies.
- Some ISCI/Badr politicians will retain a close relationship with the Iranian regime for the foreseeable future. However, ISCI/Badr members, like all Iraqi politicians, will become increasingly independent of Iran as they are

forced to cultivate a politically viable constituency within an Iraqi population suspicious of Iran. Many political leaders, including Prime Minister al-Maliki, a Dawah party member, have shown promising signs of frustration with Iranian meddling in Iraq. Even superficial demonstrations of independence from Iran are positive developments that reflect the maturing of the Iraqi political process.

## Key Recommendations

- The United States should counter Iran's overarching Iraq strategy, not just its support for militias. Whether designed as such or not, Iran's support for JAM and SGC has obscured its support for ISCI/Badr, as well as its political efforts to weaken the Iraqi central government. Victories over JAM and the SGC militias are important, but they will be pyrrhic if not coupled with a focused strategy to constrain Iranian influence in the Iraqi political system. This strategy must be built on a policy that clearly explains which forms of Iranian influence are acceptable and which are not acceptable. If the U.S. overlooks Iranian efforts to shape Iraqi politics and society, it may suffer a severe strategic setback even if violence in Iraq subsides.
- The United States' strategy should use all forms of national power, including diplomacy, to counter negative Iranian influence in Iraq. Iran has a relatively cohesive strategy in Iraq that coordinates military, economic, and diplomatic efforts. The U.S. strategy should be similarly nuanced and coordinated. Diplomatic efforts, including both direct negotiations with Iran and a stronger effort to coordinate Arab responses to Iran's meddling in Iraq should be a part of that strategy. A key diplomatic goal should be to increase transparency of economic development money spent in Iraq to ensure that Iranian-sponsored projects can be identified and are difficult to use as cover for more nefarious activities.
- Encourage Prime Minister al-Maliki's increasingly nationalist views. Prime Minister al-Maliki comes from a staunchly pro-Iranian wing of the Dawah Party; his recent crackdown on JAM and the SGCs is an effort to improve his party's electoral prospects in the provincial elections and to weaken al-Sadr politically. Although the crackdown is self-serving, it demonstrates the increasing importance al-Maliki places on a domestic Iraqi constituency.

- Increase accountability in the Iraqi Government. Neither the United States nor Iraqi nationalists have effectively responded to Iranian infiltration of the Iraqi government through ISCI/Badr or the Dawah Party. One way to increase accountability is to force all Iraqi politicians to be directly accountable to specific constituents, whether by using single-member districts or allowing Iraqi voters to vote for individuals rather than political parties. Legislation to maximize transparency of government and political parties would enable and compel ISCI/Badr politicians to be more independent of their Iranian suitor.
- Offer Moqtada al-Sadr incentives to participate in the Iraqi political process. Moqtada al-Sadr is unpredictable and violent, but he symbolizes Iraqi nationalism for millions of Iraqis. The United States should not tolerate JAM violence, but should incentivize al-Sadr's participation in the Iraqi government; his presence serves as a counterweight to Iranian-backed groups that favor a federalized Iraqi state.
- Target IRGC-QF operatives and logisticians in Iraq. U.S. and Coalition forces should prioritize identifying and targeting Iranian agents who provide Iraqi militias such as JAM and Special Groups with training and weapons. Undermining the logistical support will have more significant, long-term effects than will strikes on rank and file militia members.
- Support a Shi'a "Sons of Iraq" program to employ low-level JAM and SGC militiamen. In limited cases, the Iraqi government and the U.S. should officially authorize former JAM and SGC members to support Iraqi Security Forces, in a program similar to the Sons of Iraq program. This will require developing some form of amnesty criteria commensurate with the program provided to former Sunni militants in exchange for cooperation. The Iraqi government should also embed professional cadres from the Iraqi Army for command, control, and monitoring.
- Increase international public accountability for Iran's illegal activities in Iraq. Sunshine is the best disinfectant. The Government of Iraq should aggressively confront Tehran with evidence of Iran's illegal activities in Iraq and expose them broadly to the international community.

## Introduction

Since 2003, the United States, al-Qa`ida, and Iran have implemented programs to influence Iraqi politics and society. Of the three, Iran has the most at stake in Iraq and is the most integrated in Iraqi society. Iran's goals for Iraq directly impact its fundamental and enduring strategic interests: preventing chaos on its border, limiting American power-projection capability in the region, ensuring Iraq does not threaten its political or cultural integrity, and building a platform for projecting influence across the Middle East. Although many aspects of these objectives clash with U.S. interests, Iran shares important ends with the United States, primarily: preventing widespread chaos in Iraq that could spark a regional conflict and the return of dictatorial Arab nationalist rule.

This report provides an overview of Iran's multi-faceted efforts to pursue its national interests by influencing the political and security dynamics in Iraq from the Iranian Revolution to the present day. Although the report describes Iran's direct and indirect lethal aid to surrogates in Iraq since the U.S. led invasion, it ultimately concludes that U.S. policy focuses on Iranian lethal aid to Iraqi militias at the expense of countering Iran's primary mode of power projection in Iraq: support of Iranian-affiliated Iraqi political parties. The misplaced prioritization is a function of the fact that, as an unnamed U.S. general said of these political parties to the *New York Times*, "They aren't trying to kill us."<sup>1</sup> This rationale is entirely understandable considering the U.S. military's tactical and operational necessities in Iraq. However, the strategic focus on Iran's lethal aid to Iraqi militias—at the expense of countering its overall power projection strategy—may result in a major U.S. policy failure and vastly increased Iranian influence in Iraq and the Middle East. The U.S. needs a comprehensive strategy for countering Iranian influence in Iraq that includes rolling back the influence of Iranian-backed Iraqi politicians.

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran has actively tried to influence Iraq's domestic affairs, primarily by supporting Iraqi political refugees and militias to weaken Saddam Hussein's regime. Iran uses many of the same methods today. The fundamental consistency of Iran's strategy through the Iran-Iraq war, the post-Gulf War decade, and the post-Saddam era suggests that ending this policy will be very difficult. In contrast to American *goal-based* policymaking, Iran views its policy toward Iraq as a long-term *process* to contain Iraq-based threats

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<sup>1</sup> Glanz, James and Alissa Rubin "US and Iran Find Unexpected Common Ground in Iraq's Shiite Conflict" *The New York Times* April 21, 2008

and manipulate Iraqi territory and resources, rather than a policy with a clearly defined end-state. This distinction is critical because it suggests that Iran's means and methods to influence Iraq may shift, but its interventionist policy will not, no matter the setbacks it faces. Iranian strategy in Iraq is currently tailored to meet the challenge of U.S. presence, but its intervention will persist in various forms long after the U.S. withdraws.

Iran uses the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Qods Force (QF) as its primary mechanisms to intervene in Iraq. The IRGC-QF funds political parties, funnels money and weapons to anti-coalition militias, and provides Iraq significant economic aid. Consistent with Iran's practice in both Lebanon and Iraq for the past 25 years, Iran supports a variety of organizations, often backing factions on multiple sides of a dispute. In Iraq, that dichotomy is often between the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)) and Moqtada al-Sadr's Office of the Martyr al-Sadr (OMS) and Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia. Iran's primary means of projecting power in Iraq is to support friendly politicians from ISCI, the affiliated Badr Organization, and friendly factions of the Dawah party. Iran has also found OMS/JAM useful for disrupting U.S. plans in Iraq, but has likely determined OMS/JAM is an unreliable proxy for achieving its long-term political goals. Iran's division of support between various political factions suggests it is less concerned about dictating specific outcomes in Iraq than in ensuring its continued influence to shape the general tone of Iraqi politics.

It is a mistake to think of all Iranian influence in Iraq as nefarious. Iran should have a close relationship with the Iraqi government and strong economic and social ties to the Iraqi people. Nonetheless, Iranian policy over the last five years has been two-faced: offering Iraq's government moral support while arming militias that undermine governmental authority; funneling advanced weapons to attack its enemies, but providing humanitarian aid for the Iraqi people; and encouraging free elections, but attempting to manipulate their results.

Iran's memory of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and concerns of a resurgent Sunni dictatorship drive its Iraq policy as much as its fear of the United States. Nonetheless, Iran likely sees its ability to disrupt the U.S. project in Iraq as a means to foil or deter a U.S. strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Although Iran's proximate goal is to drive all U.S. troops out of Iraq, it is likely to continue to support non-governmental militant elements in Iraq whether or not U.S. troops remain in the country. At the same time, Iran will certainly maintain its close relationship with Iraqi politicians.

**“War is merely the continuation of policy  
by other means.”**

*“On War”*

Carl von Clausewitz

## Chapter 1

### Iranian Intervention in Iraq Before 2003

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#### **Iranian Strategy: Ideology and Interest**

The revolutionary ideology that fueled the 1979 Iranian revolution continues to inform Iran’s current senior leadership. Inspired by the specific brand of Islamism articulated by the revolution’s de-facto leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, the clerical leaders of Iran continue to stress the importance of Khomeini’s ideas. Important among these are the notions of anti-imperialism and *velayat-e faqih*, the guardianship of the jurist, which is the basis of Iran’s theocratic government.

The Iranian notion of anti-imperialism is often enunciated as anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism. Khomeini (and other revolutionary ideologues) contextualized Iran’s struggle as the same fight that was being waged by other nations in the third world. They considered the Iranian struggle to be a conflict between a nation of the indigenous oppressed and foreign oppressors. This translated into a struggle against U.S. policy in Iran and support for the Shah’s regime. To make his argument, Khomeini borrowed from other revolutionary ideologies emanating from the third world, especially leftist-populism. Today, it is this anti-imperialism, fused with Khomeini’s own Islamist doctrine, that form an ideology that is both Islamist and populist, which separates the motivations of Iran and its Shi’a allies from those of the Sunni world.

The second central doctrine of the Khomeinist ideology — *velayat-e faqih* — conceives of an Islamic state led by a top member of the Shi’a clerical class.<sup>2</sup> The concept contradicts centuries of Shi’a tradition, wherein the clergy played a powerful, but apolitical role in society. Nonetheless, Khomeini’s success in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution enabled him and his supporters to enshrine the *velayat-e faqih* as a key component in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. When the Iranian constitution was ratified by popular referendum, Khomeini succeeded to the role of the clerical ruler — *vali-ye faqih* — and became Iran’s “Supreme Leader.” Loyalty to the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine, and Iran’s

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<sup>2</sup> Milani, Mohsen *The Making of Iran’s Islamic Revolution* (Westview Press) 1994

clerical leader, became the touchstone of political viability in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>3</sup>

The two concepts of anti-imperialism and *velayat-e faqih* animated Iran's early external operations.<sup>4</sup> One of the earliest ideas for combating global imperialism was to "export" the Islamic revolution that had been so successful in Iran. The idea was popular with the more radical members of the post-revolutionary regime, but was largely abandoned by Khomeini after Saddam Hussein invaded southwestern Iran in September 1980. The "Imposed War" (as Iran calls it) drastically shifted Iran's domestic and foreign priorities. Suddenly, Iran needed to mobilize its resources to push back Iraq's forces and could not afford to support substantial operations abroad. The ensuing trench warfare—which lasted eight years—strengthened the post-revolutionary regime domestically, but limited its influence outside of Iran's borders.

Despite the war, Iran did not completely forsake its plans to export the revolution. Instead, Iran took advantage of regional conflicts, such as the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the 1970s, many Iranian revolutionaries trained at Fatah and Amal camps in Lebanon to learn guerilla tactics. Iran was able to establish strong support among the Shi'a community that was radicalized in the wake of the Israeli invasion. Using the IRGC and mid-level clerical leaders, Iran was able to organize a Shi'a Lebanese militia and imbue it with Khomeinist ideology. This militia, which eventually became Hizballah, embraced nearly all of Khomeini's ideological doctrine, including *velayat-e faqih*. Theoretically, at least, this meant that Hizballah members acknowledged Ayatollah Khomeini (and his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei) as their Supreme Leader.

### **IRGC and the Qods Force**

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was established in the early days of the Iranian revolution of 1979. Khomeini himself ordered the group organized under the auspices of the clerical Revolutionary Council. The early IRGC was essentially an umbrella organization for various armed groups and organizations that supported Khomeini and the pro-clerical Islamist camp during the revolution.

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<sup>3</sup> Wells, Matthew C. "Thermidor in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Rise of Muhammad Khatami" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 1999) pp. 27-39

<sup>4</sup> Arjomand, Said Amir "Iran's Islamic Revolution in Comparative Perspective" *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Apr., 1986) pp. 383-414

The pro-Khomeini Mujahidin of the Islamic Revolution (MIR) was the most significant organization that constituted the early IRGC leadership. The MIR was itself an umbrella organization composed of seven regional guerilla groups within Iran. These groups were all started by former members of the Islamo-Marxist Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization who left the MKO because of ideological disputes linked to the group's embrace of Marxist ideology. The seven groups formed the MIR in the early days of the revolution with the express purpose of preventing the anti-clerical MKO from having any influence in the post-revolutionary regime.

Many MIR members, including Mohsen Rezai, were brought into the IRGC by the pro-Khomeini Revolutionary Council to organize and lead the fledgling ideological army.<sup>5</sup> Although MIR members only made up one part of the early IRGC cadre, their faction became dominant when Rezai took command in 1981.<sup>6</sup> The early IRGC was tasked with both "protecting the revolution" at home and "exporting" it abroad.<sup>7</sup>

Although the MIR faction was passionate about the need to export the revolution outside of Iran's borders, they were more passionate about their support for Khomeini. So, when Khomeini focused his attention on defeating Iraq, the MIR faction of the IRGC turned away from its operations in Lebanon and toward Iraq.

When the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1989, the IRGC again took a more active role outside Iran's borders. Through SCIRI/Badr and Lebanese Hizballah, the IRGC already had access to extensive support networks in both Iraq and Lebanon, and it hoped to develop new networks elsewhere. To this end, in 1990, the IRGC transferred all of its extra-territorial activities to a new branch called the Qods (Jerusalem) Force, led by Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi.<sup>8</sup> The Qods Force continued to support groups associated with the Palestinian struggle, but it also expanded into new areas, particularly in the former Soviet Bloc and the Balkans.

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<sup>5</sup> Cody, Edward "Iran Makes Gains in War with Iraq" *The New York Times* January 31, 1982. A1

<sup>6</sup> Branigin, William "Iranian Clerics Take Control of Revolution's Institutions" *The New York Times* June 16, 1980

<sup>7</sup> Branigin, William "Khomeini Militia Vows to Spread Iran's Revolution" *The Washington Post* May 6, 1979 A1

<sup>8</sup> Harmony Document ISGZ-2005-001122-19954; The Qods Force's name refers to its stated purpose, which is to liberate Jerusalem.



In 1998, Ahmed Vahidi was replaced by Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani. Suleimani has a long history of militancy, and is accused of being complicit in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish Community Center in Argentina.<sup>9</sup> Today, he presides over a complex organization with both paramilitary, diplomatic, and intelligence gathering branches. The Qods Force is not restrained geographically; it operates in Iraq, Lebanon, Central Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The Qods Force's extremely broad mandate means it operates largely parallel to Iran's normal foreign policy-making bureaucracy, operating under Supreme Leader al-Khamenei's direct supervision.

The IRGC-QF has established regional commands for the entire world, but the first four are dedicated to the areas immediately surrounding Iran.<sup>10</sup> The following description of the Qods Force's structure is taken from an Iraqi intelligence document:<sup>11</sup>

1. First Corps, also known as the "Ramazan Headquarters," is dedicated to Iraq. In the mid-1990s Iraqi intelligence reports suggested the Ramazan Headquarters operated three camps along the Iraqi border: in the South near Ahvaz, in the Center near Kermanshah, and in the North, the al-Nasr camp, which was led by Mahmoud Farhadi.<sup>12</sup> In September 2007, Farhadi was captured by U.S. forces while posing as a trade representative in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>13</sup> He is almost certainly one of the highest ranking Qods Force members captured by U.S. forces in Iraq.
2. Second Corps, Nabi al-Akram Command Center, is based in Zahedan and is responsible for Pakistan and Iran's border provinces.
3. Third Corps, Al-Hamzah Command Center, is focused on Turkey and Iran's complex relationship with Kurdish militant groups.

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<sup>9</sup> See Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center "Using the Qods Force of the Revolutionary Guard as the Main Tool to Export the Revolution Beyond the Borders of Iran" April 2, 2007

<sup>10</sup> Harmony Document ISGZ-2005-001122-19954

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

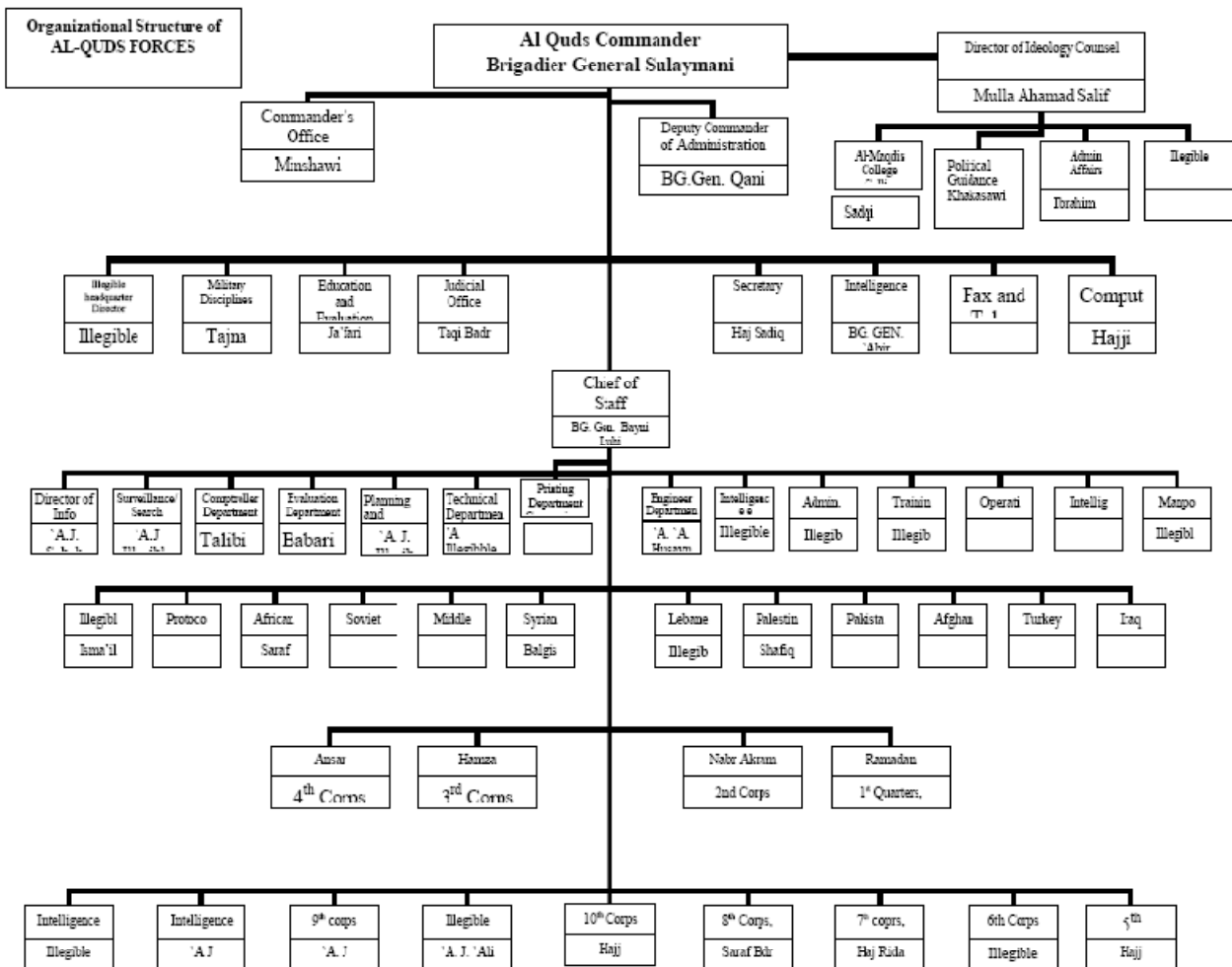
<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Von Zielbauer, Paul "US Calls Iranian Official Part of Elite Force" *The New York Times* October 8, 2007

- Fourth Corps, al-Ansar Command Center, is based in Mashhad and is responsible for projecting Iranian influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Figure 1 is a translated chart produced in an Iraqi intelligence report on the Iranian Qods Force in 2000.

*Figure 1: Iraqi Intelligence Schematic of Qods Force Organization circa 2000<sup>14</sup>*



One of the Qods Force's primary intelligence targets was the MKO, which supported and fought alongside Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war, and

<sup>14</sup> Harmony Document ISGZ-2005-001122-19954 The embedded chart is taken directly from the English translation. See Harmony Document ISGZ-2005-001122-19954 for the original text.

maintained an operational military wing in Iraq. Since 2003, the group has remained, with U.S. acquiescence, holed up at a camp inside of Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

### **Iranian Surrogates in Iraq**

Despite its moralistic rhetoric against MKO “traitors,” Iran sponsored its own cadre of Iraqi refugees to fight against Saddam’s regime during the Iran-Iraq war. Most of the fighting took place in or near Shi’a-dominated regions of Iraq, so both Iraqi soldiers and defectors tended to be Shi’a. Millions of Iraqis were displaced by the war, and up to one million sought refuge in Iran.<sup>16</sup> Defectors and refugees were given special treatment and encouraged to support toppling Saddam’s regime.

At the time, Iraqi Shi’a were split into two main camps: those who followed the top Iraqi Shi’a cleric Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr and those who followed Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim. The two Ayatollahs led the Shi’a Islamist movement in Iraq before the war with Iran, and most of their followers supported the Iranian revolution. Saddam feared a Khomeinist-style uprising in his own population, and in 1980, assassinated Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr as part of his larger campaign to crush any hint of a Shi’a revolt. Ayatollah al-Hakim subsequently fled to Iran in order to avoid the same fate, and he settled down to lead the Iraqi refugee movement from his new home.

When war broke out between Iraq and Iran, al-Hakim’s supporters began to organize on both sides of the border. Iran and the IRGC helped the group establish a new political party and a corresponding militia: the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Badr Brigade. Al-Hakim abandoned al-Sadr’s traditional approach to Shi’a doctrine and subscribed to Khomeini’s

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<sup>15</sup> Note that much of the material about the Qods Force comes from Iranian dissident organizations, almost all of which are linked directly or indirectly to the MKO—which is listed as a terrorist organization by the US, EU, and Canada. See US Department of State Fact Sheet April 8, 2008 available at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/April/20080410111249xjsnommis0.111355.html>. Without any corroborating evidence, information obtained or produced by the MKO is problematic, and is likely a mix of truth, speculation, and falsehood. Analysts, from government, academia, and the media, are rightly skeptical of such material. This report does source some material that appears to have been “obtained” first by the MKO and then passed to the Iraqi government. Readers are encouraged to treat this material with appropriate skepticism; the authors have tried to put the information in proper context and, where possible, corroborate the information with other sources.

<sup>16</sup> Ehteshami, Anoushiravan “Iran-Iraq Relations After Saddam” *The Washington Quarterly* Autumn 2003

doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. Like Hizballah, both SCIRI and Badr accepted Khomeini, and his successor Ayatollah Khamenei, as their Supreme Leader. Until 2007, when SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and seemed to endorse Ayatollah al-Sistani, SCIRI/Badr and Lebanese Hizballah were the only two significant organizations to accept this doctrine. The ties between SCIRI/Badr and the Iranian regime were very deep. The Badr Brigade operated as a component unit of the IRGC and the Qods Force, and acted under the command of Qods Force officers.

Meanwhile, many Iraqi Shi'a still looked to al-Sadr as their spiritual leader, despite his assassination. These Iraqis generally joined the Islamic Dawah Party, which had been founded two decades earlier to catalyze public opinion for an Islamic State in Iraq. The Dawah cadres, unlike their comrades who formed SCIRI, were more divided on Khomeinist ideology. The late al-Sadr had not subscribed to *velayat-e faqih*, which made it difficult for his followers to do so. Although the Dawah Party was supported by the Iranian regime, and its militia was partially funded by the IRGC, there was a split between Dawah's leaders on doctrinal issues. Dawah's clerical leaders and their supporters (including current Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki), for the most part supported Khomeini's central doctrine, whereas Dawah's professional leaders (such as former Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafaari) largely did not.

Iran maintained its support for both SCIRI/Badr and Dawah's political and military activities long after the Iran-Iraq war ended. Dawah's most infamous attack was the 1983 bombing of the U.S. and French Embassies in Kuwait, attacks that had compelling ties to Iran and Lebanese Hizballah.<sup>17</sup> The bomb-maker, Mustafa Youssef Badreddin, was the brother-in-law of Hizballah's master terrorist Imad Mugniyeh.<sup>18</sup> Despite Dawah's high-profile strike in Kuwait, the Badr Corps was the most important Iranian-backed Iraqi militant organization in the 1990s. The militia organized structured military units in Iran that played a critical role in the 1991 uprisings following Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War.<sup>19</sup> Captured Iraqi intelligence documents provide a wealth of information about the structure of Badr Corps, including its organization around the time of the U.S. invasion in 2003. This data is critical because the smuggling networks used in the 1990s are funneling weapons and people into Iraq today.

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<sup>17</sup> Abdul-Zahra, Qassim "US Probes Embassy Bombing in Kuwait" *Associated Press* February 6, 2007

<sup>18</sup> Murphy, Caryle "Bombs, Hostages: A Family Link" *The Washington Post* July 24, 1990

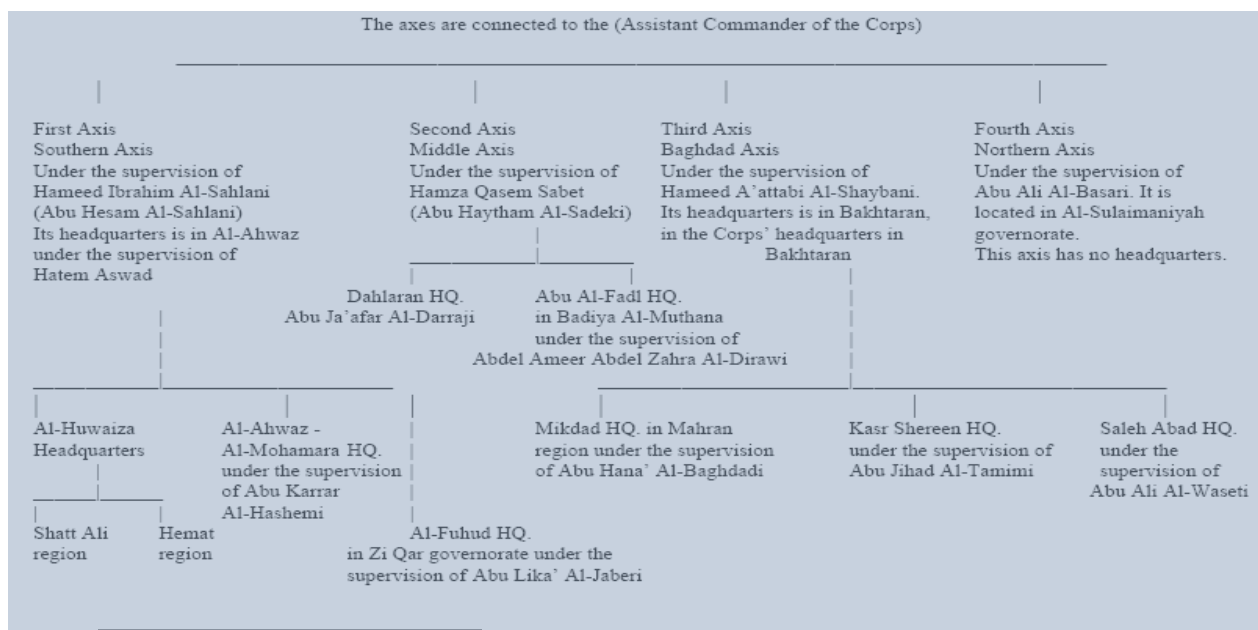
<sup>19</sup> Nasr, Vali "When the Shi'as Rise" *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2006; Tyler, Patrick E. "After the War; Iran-Iraq Tension is Worrying US" *The New York Times* April 26, 1991

## Iranian-Sponsored Militancy in Iraq

The Badr Corps was a fully functional militia by the early 1990s with an extensive network inside Iraq, backed by the Qods Force's Ramadan Headquarters.<sup>20</sup> The Qods Force operated several training camps at the time, including the "Imam Ali" camp in Tehran to train for "operations outside its borders." According to Iraqi intelligence reports, the IRGC-QF provided the Badr Corps approximately \$20 million per year until at least 2001.<sup>21</sup>

By 1999, the Badr Corps had established four "axes" inside Iraq to coordinate operations against the Iraqi regime and the MKO.<sup>22</sup> The axes were organized geographically, and were tasked with recruiting dissidents, disseminating propaganda, conducting sabotage, and procuring weapons. According to Iraqi intelligence documents from the late 1990s, Badr's Axis 3, in the Baghdad area, was led by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, who in 2005 would lead one of the most important IED smuggling networks in Iraq. According to *Time Magazine*, Sheibani's group was the first to bring Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFP) into Iraq from Iran.<sup>23</sup> Figure 2 is the translation of an Iraqi intelligence schematic of the Badr Corps structure inside Iraq:

*Figure 2: Diagram of Badr Corps circa 1999<sup>24</sup>*



<sup>20</sup> Harmony Document ODP1-2005-008247\_TRANS

<sup>21</sup> Harmony Document ISGQ-2005-00038283

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> Ware, Michael "Inside Iran's Secret War for Iraq" *Time* August 15, 2005

<sup>24</sup> Harmony Document ISGQ-2005-00038283 The schematic is recreated in the document itself.

The Badr Corps would often establish offices in businesses, hospitals, and non-governmental organizations operating in Iraq. One document describes Badr Corps members meeting in offices run by the Iranian Red Crescent society and in a hospital in Sulaymaniyah.<sup>25</sup> An undated Iraqi intelligence report from the Saddam era describes why these enterprises were useful for the Badr Corps:<sup>26</sup>

1. Secure and support the Badr Corps, and the different groups belonging to the Al-Qods Force, such as the movement of Hizballah, 15 Sha'aban, Sayid al-Shuhada' Movement, and Tharallah [God's Vengeance].
2. Distribute food and products among the citizens in order to win popular support.
3. Establish cover companies to transport elements of the Al-Qods Force into Iraq.
4. Coordination and supervision of economic and social organizations belonging to the Iranian regime in Iraq.<sup>27</sup>

Such tactics are not surprising for Iranian supported groups; both HAMAS and Lebanese Hizballah operate legitimate businesses, both to provide cover for their illicit operations and to provide services that build political support for the movement.

Throughout the 1990's, Iraqi intelligence was extremely concerned about Iranian-supported sabotage in Baghdad and elsewhere. The Iraqi reports often cite specific intelligence about a pending threat. Although it is possible that Iraqi intelligence officers overstated Badr Corps' capabilities, the Corps' history in 1991 and Iranian backing suggests that at least some of the reports reflect actual events. Some of their tactics mirror those used by Shi'a militias against coalition forces after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, including the use of uniforms to confuse guards and timers to launch mortars and artillery.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Harmony Document ODP1-2005-00009023

<sup>26</sup> Harmony Document MNCI-2005-001140

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> Harmony Document ISGQ-2003-00052520; Harmony Document ISGQ-2003-00032998

Politically and militarily, the Badr Corps was composed of several factions that often disagreed with one another. By 2000, according to Iraqi intelligence papers, the Badr Corps had multiple competing ideological trends, separated by disputes over the same Shi'a clerical positions that had divided Iraqi Shi'a since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>29</sup> One Iraqi document describes the internecine violence between Badr Corps factions:

[C]ontinuous rivalry between the supporters of (Mohammed Sadiq) al-Sadr and al-Khaw'i (Abdel Majid al-Khoei) on one hand... and the supporters of (Abu Baqir) al-Hakim on the other hand. This rivalry reached the degree of clashes with machine guns between the supporters of both trends... As to the followers of al-Sadr, they ask for an Iraqi rule and consider al-Sadr more entitled to the command because he is more knowledgeable and gives better advisory opinions during Friday prayer.<sup>30</sup>

Original followers of Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr—who had been assassinated by Saddam in 1980—tended to support his brother, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who remained in Iraq. Badr Corps members that had lived in or had closer connections to Iran often supported Ayatollah Abu Baqir al-Hakim. Among Shi'a who remained in Iraq, however, al-Hakim and the SCIRI Party were viewed with great suspicion because of their close ties to the Iranian regime and adoption of the Khomeinist doctrine *velayat-e faqih*. Unsurprisingly, it was the clerics that remained inside Iraq who tended to garner more popular support among that group, in part because they were seen as sharing the suffering of lay Shi'a oppressed by Saddam.<sup>31</sup>

The competition between Sadrists and Abu Baqir al-Hakim complicated Shi'a opposition to Saddam during his reign. Internal Badr Corps politics from the 1990s are still defining current Shi'a infighting in Iraq. For example, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's son, Moqtada al-Sadr, is involved in a violent rivalry with Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, who took over SCIRI when his elder brother Abu Baqir was assassinated. And in 2003, al-Sadr's followers brutally murdered another major cleric from the early era, Abdel Majid al-Khoei.

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<sup>29</sup> Harmony Document ISGP-2003-00023756. Observers should be careful about drawing too many conclusions about groups using the Hizballah moniker. Many organizations in the Shi'a world admire Lebanese Hizballah's fight against Israel—similar names do not necessarily imply operational links.

<sup>30</sup> Harmony Document ISGP-2003-00023756

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

Despite the conflict within the Badr Corps, the organization had the forethought to anticipate and prepare for life after Saddam Hussein. An Iraqi intelligence report from October 2002 described the Badr Corps' considerations regarding the prospect of a U.S. attack to overthrow Saddam's government:

The Corps held a meeting for its cadres on 12/12/2001, in which was discussed the possibility of a US attack against Iraq leading to the overthrow of the regime (but they were disappointed). The agents discussed two possibilities. The first one is the open dispatch of military formations organized in the form of convoys inside Iraq. In the second possibility, the US would exert a pressure on Iran, putting it in an embarrassing situation. Therefore, they would enter secretly in the form of groups.<sup>32</sup>

When the U.S. did finally enter Iraq in March 2003, the Iraqi expatriates that "entered secretly in the form of groups" arrived with different ideas about how to influence Iraq's future. Today, some of Iraq's most wanted Shi'a insurgents share Badr Corps lineage with Iraqi politicians operating openly in Baghdad. For example, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Jamal Ja'far Muhammad 'Ali) was a member of the Dawah cell that perpetrated the 1983 Kuwaiti embassy bombing, was an elected member of the Iraqi parliament in 2005, and is one of the most wanted men in Iraq. After the Kuwait bombing, Muhandis rose through the ranks to lead the Badr Corps, where he worked with Ayatollah Baqir al-Hakim and the Qods Force to challenge Saddam's regime.<sup>33</sup> According to Iraqi documents, Muhandis' Chief of Staff at the time was Hadi al-Ameri, the present leader of the Badr Organization, and a leading Iraqi parliamentarian.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, the Commander of Badr Corps Axis 3 in the 1990's and major smuggler of Iranian EFPs into Iraq actually lived in the same IRGC compound with Muhandis.<sup>35</sup>

There is evidence that Muhandis resigned from the Badr Corps in 2002 after becoming upset that SCIRI members were holding talks with the United States.<sup>36</sup> Despite that political disagreement, Muhandis was elected to the Iraqi Council of Representatives in Iraq in December 2005. By the time CNN's Michael Ware

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<sup>32</sup> Harmony Document ISGQ-2005-00038283

<sup>33</sup> Ware, Michael "US Military: Iraq Lawmaker is US Embassy Bomber" CNN February 22, 2007 [www.cnn.com/2007/world/meast/02/05/iraq.lawmaker/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2007/world/meast/02/05/iraq.lawmaker/index.html); Harmony Document ISGZ-2005-001122-19954

<sup>34</sup> Harmony Document ISGQ-2005-00038283

<sup>35</sup> Harmony Document ISGP-2003-00023756; Harmony Document ISGZ-2005-001122-19954

<sup>36</sup> Harmony Document CMPC-2003-000562



broke the story about the Iraqi parliamentarian's incriminating history, Muhandis had fled to Tehran.<sup>37</sup> Muhandis's animosity toward the United States, personal connections, experience running underground networks in Iraq, and suspected support of anti-coalition violence make him a very dangerous man.

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<sup>37</sup> Ware, Michael "US Military: Iraq Lawmaker is US Embassy Bomber" CNN February 22, 2007 [www.cnn.com/2007/world/meast/02/05/iraq.lawmaker/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2007/world/meast/02/05/iraq.lawmaker/index.html)

**“There are strategic attacks that have led directly to peace, but these are the minority. Most of them only lead up to the point where their remaining strength is just enough to maintain a defense and wait for peace. Beyond that point the scale turns and the reaction follows with a force that is usually much stronger than that of the original attack.”**

*“On War”*

Carl von Clausewitz

## **Chapter 2**

### **Iran’s Political Strategy in Iraq**

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Since 2003 Iran has supported multiple allies in Iraq, including political allies like ISCI/Badr and militant allies like Moqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi and the Special Group Criminals. Although it supported multiple groups, Iran’s actions over the past five years indicate it has prioritized its political allies and their efforts to seize power through the Iraqi political process. Most of Iran’s actions have been designed to shape the general progression of the Iraqi political system rather than produce specific outcomes. Indeed, Iran has benefited greatly from inherently Iraqi political processes over which it has very little influence. Nonetheless, Iran has occasionally inserted itself directly in the Iraqi political process, most often when violence has threatened to derail the political process that has served to bring its political allies to power.

Immediately following the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion Iraq, Iran tried to avoid direct confrontation with U.S. forces, and felt that democratic elections in Iraq would be effective means by which it could emplace its allies—SCIRI and, to a lesser extent, the Dawah Party—in leading positions within the Iraqi government. Saddam’s government tracked internal SCIRI/Badr deliberations over how to approach the U.S. invasion, noting that Supreme Leader Khamenei himself approved of the conciliation strategy, but that some Badr personnel were so upset by the prospect of working with the U.S. that they left the organization.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its cooperative posture, Iran was clearly preparing the necessary networks and relationships for violent activities in Iraq. It ushered thousands of Badr Corps members back into Iraq, seized an early opportunity to influence Moqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi militia, and may have even funneled a few Lebanese Hizballah members into the country to provide expertise and training

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<sup>1</sup> Harmony Document CMPC-2003-000562

to its new would-be surrogates.<sup>2</sup> One Iraqi General explained Iranian strategy as follows: “Iranians are frightened by the U.S. – and frightened nations act badly.”<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, in the run-up to major political milestones, such as elections, Iranian-linked militias have tended to reduce their violent activities, sometimes in the face of overt Iranian pressure. The recent decline in violence from Shi’a militias in Iraq should be seen in this light. No doubt Iran laments the loss of militia capability when fighters are rounded up by Iraqi and U.S. forces, but it is likely focused on the task of ensuring that the U.S.-Iraq SFA and SOFA agreements curtail the U.S.’ ability to maintain troops and operational flexibility in Iraq.

### **Conciliation Not Confrontation**

Although Iran publicly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it welcomed the opportunity for its allies to work within the new U.S.-backed Iraqi political structure. Many Iranian-backed groups reframed themselves to prepare for a more political future. The Badr Corps tried to deemphasize its military nature by renaming itself the Badr Organization and publicly refocusing on social and political outreach.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion, Shi’a politics in Iraq were dominated by three groups, SCIRI, Dawah, and Moqtada al-Sadr’s movement, which was bifurcated between its political wing—the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS)—and its militia—Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM). SCIRI clearly had the closest ideological and political ties to Iran, but it also cultivated good relations with the United States, even attending dissident conferences in London prior to the invasion. SCIRI’s soft-spoken approach worked wonders with coalition forces after the invasion, as

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<sup>2</sup> Harmony Document ISGP-2003-00027262; Risen, James “A Region Inflamed: The Hand of Tehran; Hizballah, in Iraq, Refrains From Attacks on Americans” *The New York Times* November 24, 2003

<sup>3</sup> July 3, 2008 author interview with Major General Michael Oates, Commanding General of 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division and Multi-National Division- Central, whose area of responsible includes a large sector of Iraq’s border with Iran.

<sup>4</sup> A document reputed to be written by the Badr Corps shortly after the invasion urged followers to, “Cooperate with the coalition foreign forces and supply them with information about all issues... Offer help and support to the foreign forces in order to accomplish our targets of striking (Sunnis)...Kneel, become obedient, beg and pretend that you are oppressed by them.” Harmony Document ISGQ-2004-02311818. Because of the document’s overt messaging and public distribution shortly after the US invasion, many observers considered the document to be fabricated by the Badr Corps’ enemies.

popular attention tended to focus on JAM's militant activities rather than SCIRI's historical, political, ideological, and financial links to Iran.<sup>5</sup>

Although SCIRI was a well-organized political machine, the Sadrist movement had several political advantages over its rival, including vocal opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq, a nationalist platform, and a reputation as being independent of Iran, which helped the group attract support among Iraqis. Many Iraqis resented the time that SCIRI and Dawah exiles had spent outside of Iraq, while others were attracted by Moqtada al-Sadr's anti-American rhetoric, or remained loyal to the Sadr family legacy. The assassinations of Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr in 1980 and Abu Muhammad al-Sadr in 1999 defined notions of identity for many Iraqi Shi'a. Likewise, most of al-Sadr's top lieutenants were former students of his father. Al-Sadr's lineage, coupled with his visceral opposition to U.S. occupation and Iranian influence, satisfied Iraqis concerned about foreign influence of any kind. SCIRI was better funded, better organized, and had more religious legitimacy than the Sadrist movement, but Moqtada al-Sadr tapped into the deep-seated anger of impoverished people that had never had the opportunity to govern themselves.

Al-Sadr took full advantage of SCIRI's weakness in the months running up to the U.S. invasion, setting the stage for the political fight that would come. For instance, on January 22, 2003 al-Sadr warned the crowd at the Great Mosque in Kufa about Iraqis that had not lived under Saddam and to defend Iraq until his death. It was the message that earned al-Sadr massive support from Iraq's impoverished Shi'a in the years since:

Let it be known to all that I will not succumb to any party who has broken with the Iraqi people and who is not experiencing their suffering. The Iraqi people will remain my sole advisor, Islam my religion, Iraq my homeland, and my protectors "the two Sadr's" (may God hallow their gracious spirits). Even if I retire from public life for legitimate reasons, my heart will remain with you, and I will remain willing to sacrifice my body and soul for your sakes. I will never abandon you, in good times or in bad, for, if I have registered opposition, it has been in an attempt to carry out my father's counsel (may God hallow his secret). Even if it has been abrogated in one way or another, I have cleared my own conscience before God, the descendents of the Prophet, and my father, and I will

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<sup>5</sup> Taremi, Kamran "Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Occupied Iraq, 2003-05" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XII, No. 4, Winter 2005

devote myself entirely to other important matters, even though this might expose me to the danger of being murdered or arrested.<sup>6</sup>

Although al-Sadr's sermon was inherently religious, he was also a strong voice for Iraqi nationalism, which voiced suspicion of both the U.S. and Iran. The sentiment resonated with many Iraqi Shi'a. Despite the fact that co-religionists in Iraq and Iran do share a kinship, different cultures and languages, separate histories, and the legacy of the brutal Iran-Iraq war engender deep mistrust. Years after al-Sadr's January 2003 speech, a captured Iraqi militant explained this nationalist distrust that many al-Sadr supporters felt toward SCIRI/Badr and Iran. The following quote is from a U.S. interrogation report *paraphrasing* the Iraqi militant's description of events:

Badr Organization wants to give Iraq to Iran. The biggest reason Muqtada al-Sadr has problems working with the Government of Iraq is because approximately 60 percent of the Iraqi Government are members of Badr Organization. Detainee's father was a POW for approximately eight years during the Iran-Iraq war and was tortured by members of the Badr Organization. Badr Organization members say they are Muslims, but Muslims would not give their country away. Anyone who has a mind and watches the news can see clearly the Badr Organization [is] trying to give Iraq to Iran.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his popular appeal, al-Sadr's religious naiveté was a serious hindrance. He was unqualified to issue fatwas, and could not compete with senior religious jurists like Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim—leader of SCIRI—or Abdel Majid al-Khoei, who was brought back into Najaf from London by U.S. Special Forces.<sup>8</sup> Al-Sadr's need to rectify this imbalance offered Iran its first opportunity to co-opt al-Sadr and his unexpectedly strong popular movement.

On April 7, 2003, with U.S. troops on Baghdad's outskirts, Kadhem al-Husseini al-Haeri, a senior Iranian cleric with strong links to the IRGC, named al-Sadr his

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Sadr, Moqtada Speech. January 22, 2003

<sup>7</sup> See IR 022. This report and many of the following reports from detainees are paraphrases from the actual interrogations. They are paraphrased to provide summaries and do not significantly change the meaning of any of the statements by detainees. Whenever possible, context for the interrogation is provided. Sometimes perspective in these summaries shifts from first to third person because they are summaries. It is our understanding that this is a transcription issue and that all of the information including in this IR and others was explained by the detainee.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Craig S. "A Nation at War: Najaf; A Long-Simmering Power Struggle Preceded Killings at an Iraqi Holy Shrine" *The New York Times* April 13, 2003

deputy in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Al-Haeri's burgeoning relationship with al-Sadr offered Iran a way to influence Iraq's most populist, nationalist, and militant Shi'a leader.<sup>10</sup> The union made sense; al-Haeri had been a student of Moqtada's uncle, Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, before he was assassinated. Likewise, Moqtada's father, Abu Muhammad al-Sadr, had named al-Haeri his theological successor before being killed by Saddam Hussein's agents.<sup>11</sup> One day after naming Moqtada al-Sadr his representative, al-Haeri urged Iraqi Shi'a to "fill the power vacuum in the administration of Iraqi cities."<sup>12</sup> Al-Sadr immediately began taking control of key administrative offices, particularly in the infamous Baghdad slum that came to be called Sadr City.<sup>13</sup> One month after the relationship was established, al-Sadr was invited to visit Tehran for the first time.<sup>14</sup> Al-Sadr's relationship with al-Haeri does not indicate that he was controlled by Iran, but it was a clear indication that al-Sadr was willing to compromise his nationalist impulses to obtain from Iran the means to actualize his political aspirations.

By spring 2004, when al-Sadr directed violent uprisings around Najaf and Karbala, Iran had reportedly supplied up to \$80 million to al-Sadr and was establishing camps along the Iran-Iraq border to provide basic military training to JAM members.<sup>15</sup> In al-Sadr, Iran had found a collaborator whose militancy would weaken its rivals and create havoc for the U.S. occupation at the same time. Perhaps most importantly, Iran had achieved these objectives while SCIRI and Badr had maintained their reputation with the U.S. as forces of stability.

Al-Sadr's movement was based in Najaf, home to Iraq's most important Shi'a shrine and Iraq's most senior Shi'a cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Al-Sistani is a Shi'a traditionalist who has long opposed clerics overtly participating in politics. He therefore eschewed both Khomeini's *velayet-e faqih* doctrine and the outspoken militancy of Moqtada al-Sadr. As al-Sadr attempted to inspire an

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<sup>9</sup> Fathi, Nazila "Ex-Mentor of Rebel Iraqi Cleric Breaks from His Protégé" *The New York Times* September 5, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Craig "Aftereffects: Iran's Influence; Cleric in Iran Says Shi'as Must Act" *The New York Times* April 26, 2003

<sup>11</sup> Wong, Edward and Nazila Fathi "The Reach of War: Looming Presence; Iran is in Strong Position to Steer Iraq's Political Future" *The New York Times* July 3, 2004

<sup>12</sup> Smith. April 26, 2003

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, Dan "Sadr the Agitator: Like Father, Like Son" *The Christian Science Monitor* April 27, 2004

<sup>14</sup> Taremi. pp 37

<sup>15</sup> Zadah, Ali Nuri "Iranian Figure Says Revolutionary Guard Trains Moqtada al-Sadr's Supporters on Fighting Techniques" *Asharq al-Awsat* April 9, 2004

uprising, al-Sistani's comparatively cautious approach to Iraqi politics soothed the frustrations of many Iraqi Shi'a.

Al-Sistani was an outspoken proponent of Iraq's electoral process, which reinforced the Iranian political strategy despite the fact that al-Sistani was probably not collaborating directly with Iran. To the contrary, he was viewed by many as a potential threat to the Iranian regime.<sup>16</sup> Al-Sistani is indisputably the most senior Shi'a cleric in the world; if he were to become an outspoken opponent of the Iranian regime, he could undermine the very doctrinal foundation of the Iranian revolution. It is unlikely that al-Sistani would openly confront Iran, not least because he has important considerations in Iran, particularly at the Qom theological seminary. If he outwardly criticizes Iran, he risks his substantial operations in the Qom seminary.

### **Two Murders**

From the United States' perspective, both SCIRI and the Dawah Party have been agents of stability in Iraq, at least when compared to al-Sadr. Despite their political links to Iran, both parties have cooperated with the U.S. and generally supported the U.S. plan for Iraqi elections. For the United States, the desire for stability in Iraq has made SCIRI and Dawah's approach even more appealing.

Al-Sadr's aggressive behavior also highlighted the importance of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose immense religious authority demanded that even the upstart al-Sadr defer to him on some questions. Al-Sadr's public deference to al-Sistani did not reflect a broad appreciation for his clerical leaders. Al-Sadr's challenge to the clerical establishment was illustrated by the April 2003 murder of Ayatollah al-Khoei, an esteemed cleric who spent his exile in London and returned to Najaf escorted by U.S. Special Forces.<sup>17</sup> It is likely that U.S. commanders hoped that al-Khoei would facilitate productive relations between U.S. forces and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. However, days after arriving in Najaf, al-Khoei was brutally killed by a mob in front of the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf. Although the Iranian media immediately blamed the murder on Sunnis, widespread suspicion fell on al-Sadr and his followers, who had pledged to oppose anyone that worked with Coalition Forces.<sup>18</sup> This suspicion was fueled by the fact that the mob-killing in the heart of Najaf had all the characteristics of a Sadrist demonstration.

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<sup>16</sup> Zadah. April 9, 2004

<sup>17</sup> Smith, Craig. April 13, 2003

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

Official Iranian media quoted SCIRI condemning al-Khoei's murder as "an inhuman way of imposing one's own opinion and beliefs on others."<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Iran's Iraqi friends were rid of a potential threat. Al-Sadr was rid of another cleric that outranked him and SCIRI/Badr did not have to worry about a senior cleric willing to cooperate with the U.S. Thus, while there is no evidence that Iran had anything to do with al-Khoei's murder, the incident underscored the value to Iran of having different kinds of agents inside Iraq—those that violently challenge the occupation and the political system, and those that seek power through that system. With one hand, Iran could stoke a crisis, while using the other to resolve it and bolster the political viability and legitimacy of its political allies. The capacity to affect and benefit from Iraq's internal political dynamics—both creating tensions and intervening to alleviate them—remains an important way that Iran can exert its influence in Iraq.

On August 29, 2003, five months after al-Khoei's murder, a car bomb ripped through a crowd in Najaf, killing more than 100 people, including SCIRI's longtime religious and political leader, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim. The killing dramatically altered Shi'a politics in Iraq. Al-Hakim led the best organized Shi'a political party, had strong religious credentials, and had deep ties with Iran. His elimination meant that SCIRI was at least temporarily directionless. In Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali al-Khamenei declared three days of mourning and blamed the United States for the attack.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, U.S. and Iraqi investigators immediately began rounding up suspects, many of whom were linked to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's group, Tawhid wa'l Jihad. Tawhid wa'l Jihad eventually revealed that Zarqawi's father-in-law had been the suicide bomber that killed al-Hakim and that a Zarqawi acolyte named Thamer Mubarak, who also planned Zarqawi's bomb attack on the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, planned the al-Hakim's assassination.<sup>21</sup>

Al-Hakim's murder disrupted SCIRI's rise to power, and created even more space for a challenger like Moqtada al-Sadr. Despite lacking the religious authority of his older brother, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim succeeded his old brother Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim as SCIRI's leader. The leadership change did not weaken SCIRI's ties to Iran. Abd al-Aziz had been active in the Badr Corps since

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<sup>19</sup> "Iraq's SCIRI Condemns al-Khoei's Assassination" *IRNA* April 12, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran. August 29, 2003

<sup>21</sup> Documentary on Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi *Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation* November 27, 2004; Biographies of Eminent Martyrs—Part Four. November 22, 2005



the mid-1980s and was well-steeped in SCIRI's ideology and its long-term relationship with Iran.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Najaf Crisis**

In the spring of 2004, after a Sadrist newspaper was closed in Baghdad, Moqtada al-Sadr's JAM staged a series of violent uprisings centered on the holy city of Najaf.<sup>23</sup> Weeks of heavy fighting between JAM militiamen, U.S. troops and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) followed. The crisis waned after several weeks, but exploded again in August before degenerating into a stalemate when al-Sadr and several hundred supporters retreated into the Imam Ali Mosque. U.S. troops were unwilling to attack the mosque itself for fear of inciting wider rebellion, and Iraqi commanders were worried that troops would desert en masse if ordered to assault such a revered site.

At the time, Iran, SCIRI, and Dawah were promoting General Assembly elections in January 2005 that would likely bring SCIRI and Dawah to power. A delay in the elections, Iran felt, would allow the U.S. to consolidate its influence in Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Although Iran was likely pleased by the anti-American uprising, had the Sadrist violence in Najaf lasted until late 2004, it might have delayed the General Assembly elections. This calculation is likely why Iran increased its pressure on al-Sadr to cut a deal and end the violence in August 2004. Iranian diplomats arrived in Baghdad to help negotiate a solution to the crisis, and Iran's President Mohammad Khatami publically criticized al-Sadr's uprising as a threat to Shi'a people and shrines in Najaf.<sup>25</sup> Most significantly, al-Sadr's Iranian clerical mentor, Kadhem al-Husseini al-Haeri, renounced al-Sadr, and said al-Sadr no longer represented him in Iraq. The change was in line with Iran's desire to end the crisis and "clearly done with the consent and support of the Iranian leaders."<sup>26</sup>

Despite the Iranian pressure, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani held the real power in Najaf. Ultimately, he negotiated free passage for al-Sadr to leave his sanctuary in the Imam Ali Shrine so long as he abandoned violence and entered the political

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<sup>22</sup> Visser, Reidar "Shi'a Militancy in Iraq: Patterns and Ideological Roots" in Assaf Moghadam ed. CTC Report (forthcoming)

<sup>23</sup> Al-Obeidi, Abdul Hussein Shiite Shrine Damaged in Najaf Fighting *Associated Press* May 25, 2004

<sup>24</sup> Taremi. pp 37

<sup>25</sup> Burns, John and Nazila Fathi and Steven R. Weisman "The Struggle for Iraq: Mediation; Iranians in Iraq to Help in Talks on Rebel Cleric" *The New York Times* April 15, 2004

<sup>26</sup> Fathi, Nazila. September 5, 2004; Taremi. pp 38

process. At the same time, al-Sistani insisted that the General Assembly election must occur as a precondition to selecting a constitutional drafting committee, a decision designed to ensure that Iraqis, rather than the U.S., controlled the shape of the Iraqi constitution.<sup>27</sup> Al-Sistani's insistence on General Assembly elections dovetailed very closely with SCIRI's interests and virtually ensured that Iran's political ally would play a central role in drafting the Iraqi constitution. Unlike al-Sadr, SCIRI did not have a vast popular movement that could generate power simply by demonstrating in the streets. SCIRI was, however, very well organized, and expected to do well in the tightly controlled electoral process. Al-Sadr's organization was structured to fight street battles, not for get-out-the-vote efforts.

Ultimately, the Najaf crisis served Iran's political goals, despite the fact that Iran was unable to directly control the primary actors in the crisis. Most importantly, the Najaf confrontations reemphasized the centrality of Iraq's electoral process to the constitutional drafting committee, which put Iran's closest political allies in a position to shape Iraq's future over the long-term. Iran's goals were not antithetical to the United States' at the time. The U.S. was also pushing for elections, though U.S. planners were concerned about the timing, especially because of increasing violence across much of the country. Iran's calculation was entirely rational; its allies were the best organized parties among Iraq's most populous sectarian bloc. Elections, not firefights, were the easiest path to influence.

The Najaf crisis also illustrated the weaknesses of Moqtada al-Sadr. Although a useful tool, al-Sadr was a wildcard. Al-Sadr had independent popular support, did not take instruction well, and was prone to excessively escalating crises. Al-Sadr knew how to energize a crisis, but not how to end one. For Iran, that made him a useful but dangerous surrogate. Whereas Iran's strategy was nuanced and careful not to provoke U.S. antagonism during a period of heightened tensions, al-Sadr was a blunt instrument.

The Najaf crisis also expedited concerns within the Sadrist movement over Moqtada al-Sadr's leadership. One of the most important rising leaders was Qais Khazali, al-Sadr's official spokesman during the Najaf uprisings and one of al-Sadr's father's star pupils. During the Najaf crisis, rumors circulated that al-Sadr and Khazali feuded often over strategy, disagreements that were likely just as

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<sup>27</sup> Baldauf, Scott "Sistani Aide: Najaf Peace Deal Reached" *The Christian Science Monitor* August 27, 2004

personal as they were professional.<sup>28</sup> Although Khazali remained loyal to al-Sadr during the crisis, he and his brother Laith Khazali went on to become two of the most important leaders of the Special Group Criminals (SGCs), a loose network of Iranian trained and supplied militants responsible for some of the worst violence in 2007 and 2008. When the Khazali brothers were captured by U.S. forces in 2007, al-Sadr claimed, somewhat suspiciously, that he had completely ended his relationship with the men in 2004 after Qais Khazali issued unauthorized instructions to JAM fighters during the Najaf uprisings.

In 2004, budding leaders like Qais Khazali and a plethora of JAM splinter movements presented Iran choices other than al-Sadr. The groups were often little more than neighborhood militias; many lacked a cohesive ideology. From Iran's perspective, however, these prospective weaknesses may have been attractive. Iran was not looking for a militia capable of taking over the Iraqi government, but rather an ally capable of knocking the government, and its American suitor, off its bearings. Al-Sadr's unreliable showing in Najaf had demonstrated the risks of supporting ambitious and unreliable militia leaders. The new JAM splinter movements offered Iran the ability to disrupt Iraq with fewer political complications.

The episode in Najaf also demonstrated the utility of Iran's dual-track strategy—the crisis initiated by al-Sadr embarrassed the U.S., and the resolution of that crisis bolstered SCIRI politically. The crisis also underscored the danger of entrusting violent confrontations to inexperienced, volatile surrogates, but ultimately the episode served Iran's core goals by reemphasizing the importance of Iraq's political process and ensuring SCIRI/Badr and Dawah were in strong positions to compete. Both parties stayed in the good graces of the U.S. by remaining largely on the sidelines of the fight in Najaf and focusing on the January 2005 General Assembly elections.

Finally, the Najaf battles illustrated the primacy of Iran's political strategy over its support for militias. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran has provided military aid to various surrogates in Iraq, but its fundamental long-term strategy is built around its allies assuming power through the formal political process. When the 2004 Najaf crisis reached the point where a U.S. attack on al-Sadr might throw Iraq into complete chaos, Iran intervened and took strong steps to ensure the continued viability of the electoral political process.

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<sup>28</sup> "Holy Al-Najaf: Ahmad al-Shaybani Denies Assassination of Qays al-Khaz'ali" *Al-Najaf News* August 4, 2004

## Strategic Reversal

The decision by SCIRI and Dawah to avoid violent confrontation with the United States paid off after the January 30, 2005 General Assembly elections. The two parties won major contingents of the 275-member General Assembly and Ibrahim al-Jafaari, a Dawah member, was sworn in as Prime Minister. By contrast, Moqtada al-Sadr's new political party won just 23 seats, although the party was guaranteed several cabinet-level positions.<sup>29</sup>

One reason SCIRI/Badr and Dawah were able to capitalize so successfully on the elections is that voters select a political slate to determine the number of seats it controls, but the party apparatus determines which of its members actually accede to parliament.<sup>30</sup> This method increases the power of party leaders and limits the political accountability of individual representatives to their Iraqi constituents, which makes them more susceptible to outside influence.

By the time the new Iraqi government was approved in April 2005, it was clear that violence and instability in Iraq would not be resolved in the near-term. Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) had declared its presence in October 2004, and subsequently engaged in a brutal campaign against the Iraqi government, Iraqi Shi'a, and Coalition Forces. Sectarian murders, ethnic cleansing, and torture were increasingly common, and popular support for Shi'a militias to exact retribution against Sunnis was increasing. Al-Sadr's JAM was also increasingly violent in the summer of 2005, which was likely an attempt to demonstrate that it could not be ignored just because of its weak showing in the election.

Iraq's political structure that emphasized party leadership clearly benefitted Iran. But SCIRI's success winning seats raised the possibility that an electorally empowered SCIRI might be able to operate more independently of Tehran. As Anoushiravan Ehteshami wrote in mid-2003, "As the SCIRI gets embedded in Iraq itself... Tehran's grip over it is bound to loosen, particularly because SCIRI's leadership will have to strike compromises with an emerging Iraqi leadership if it is to remain a force in the post-Saddam power structure."<sup>31</sup> Although SCIRI was able to take a leading role in Iraqi politics, it cannot dominate them independently. Compromise is still the price of leadership.

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<sup>29</sup> Worth, Robert F. "Iraq's Assembly Accepts Cabinet Despite Tension" *The New York Times* April 28, 2005

<sup>30</sup> "Iraqi Elections: Human Rights Concerns" *Human Rights Watch*  
<http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2005/01/21/iraq10058.htm>

<sup>31</sup> Ehteshami. pp 126

Thus, Iran faces a fundamental Catch-22: it wants allies in positions of power, but the more political responsibility its allies obtain, the more they are accountable to Iraqis and less dependent on Iran.

Nonetheless, the U.S. and Iranian strategic positions in Iraq were reversing in 2005. The U.S. had entered Iraq hoping to use it as a platform for extending democracy around the Middle East, while Iran was mostly on the defensive, aiming primarily to prevent a U.S. attack on Iran. By 2005, however, American policymakers were scaling back their hopes for a democratic tidal wave in the Middle East, and instead were aiming for the lesser goal of delivering stability and security to Iraq. Iran could now begin to hope that Baghdad's new government would be very friendly and that the U.S. would be forced to leave Iraq humiliated.

### **Backup Plan?**

Because of Iran's dual-strategy of supporting political and militia allies, it was prepared for a less favorable outcome if its friends did not fare well in the January 2005 election. It is difficult to determine, however, how detailed Iran's preparations with militia groups actually were. It is clear that Iran was sponsoring some Iraqi militias, but some of the data asserting Iran's militant influence in Iraq is suspect. For example, a letter reportedly from an official in the Office of Iran's Supreme Leader to the Commander of the IRGC directed him to keep Qods Force operatives in Iraq underground until after the January 2005 elections so they would be prepared to initiate a coup if necessary. Specifically, the letter stated:

Qods Force personnel which have been established in Iraq will not carry out any operations whatsoever which might identify themselves until the elections, and that these actions be entrusted to other supporters of the Islamic Revolution. Let that force prepare itself for coup d'état operations and carry out the necessary planning, so that if the elections are against the policy of Islam, they can enter the scene in a serious way.<sup>32</sup>

A translator's comment on the document suggests it was leaked by internal opponents to the Iranian regime, probably the MKO. Information from the MKO is sometimes accurate, but it is difficult to trust data released by a partisan organization deeply invested in the content of the information it is revealing. Despite some overstated or even fabricated claims, the basic assertion that Iran

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<sup>32</sup> Harmony Document RLSP-2005-000618

was supporting numerous Iraqi militias is accurate and appears in both declassified and open sources.

The most important smuggling network to Iran's military efforts in Iraq may have been run by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani. In August 2005, a *Time* magazine article claimed that al-Sheibani—former commander of Badr Corps Axis 3—had begun smuggling a “new breed” of IEDs across the border into Iraq as early as January 2005.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Sheibani and his Badr Corps allies may have been using EFPs in Iraq as early as 2001, two years *before* the U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>34</sup> An Iraqi intelligence document dated July 11, 2001 describes a shipment of Iranian weapons that were delivered to Badr Corps personnel in Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Baghdad governorates, areas that seem to correspond to Badr Corps' Axis 3. In addition to traditional weaponry such as 107mm and 122mm rockets, the memo describes new “conically shaped bombs filled with TNT, weighing 5-6 kg and using a locally made metal base.”<sup>35</sup> The description of these “conically shaped bombs” matches the description of the highly lethal EFPs allegedly imported from Iran beginning in 2005.<sup>36</sup>

Michael Ware described Sheibani's network as 280 individuals divided into 17 teams that trained in Baghdad's Sadr City, Lebanon and “another country,” almost certainly a gentle way of saying Iran.<sup>37</sup> The attacks became worrisome enough that the United States formally protested to Iran on July 19, 2005, accusing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of funneling these weapons and the components to construct them into Iraq.<sup>38</sup>

The Sheibani Network is important because of its ties into multiple—and sometimes competing—Iraqi factions, including JAM and Badr. Nonetheless, the group rarely perpetrates violent attacks directly. By focusing on logistics, the Sheibani Network (and others like it) can regulate the flow of advanced

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<sup>33</sup> *Id.*; Ware, Michael “Inside Iran's Secret War for Iraq” *Time* August 15, 2005

<sup>34</sup> Harmony Document ISGQ-2005-00038283

<sup>35</sup> Harmony Document ISGQ-2005-00037289

<sup>36</sup> Made from advanced explosives and round, curved copper plates, the EFPs smuggled by Sheibani and others are capable of sending a molten slug of metal directly through even heavily armored vehicles. As the war wore on, EFPs became the bane of coalition forces throughout Iraq. Buried, or otherwise concealed, the weapons are very difficult to identify and largely indefensible if triggered.

<sup>37</sup> Ware. August 15, 2005. Ware worked from confidential documents provided by intelligence sources.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon, Michael and Scott Shane “US Long Worried that Iran Supplied Arms in Iraq” *The New York Times* March 27, 2007

weaponry into Iraq without getting its hands dirty with the low-level operators that perform much of the direct action against Iraqi and coalition forces. Such networks do not explicitly direct attacks, but they shape the overall pace and level of violence.

Another key element of Iran's strategy was to provide weapons in a "non-attributable" manner.<sup>39</sup> Maintaining plausible deniability for attacks in Iraq was—and still is—critical for Iran because of its tenuous relationship with the United States and the rest of the international community. Unlike in the Levant, where Iranian support for Hizballah and HAMAS actions against Israel bolsters Iran's image in the Mideast, Iranian assistance to Shi'a militias in Iraq heightens fears among Sunni-Arab countries that Iran has hostile intentions towards Iraq, and Iraqi Sunnis in particular. Clear and irrefutable evidence of Iranian support to militant groups might have alienated SCIRI and Dawah leaders eager to demonstrate their ability to govern Iraq and wary of erratic leaders like Moqtada al-Sadr.

With the exception of the overtly militant JAM, most Iranian-sponsored groups made their mark on Iraqi society in a non-violent manner. In August, 2004, Iran pledged \$300 million for construction projects in Iraq; much of this money went to purchase hotels, restaurants and other service-oriented businesses that profited from pilgrimages to Iraq's primary shrine cities, Najaf and Karbala.<sup>40</sup> Sheikh al-Haeri, in addition to giving Moqtada al-Sadr religious legitimacy, provided money to support his new social movement.<sup>41</sup> The financial support offered Iranian surrogates means besides violence to influence the Iraqi population.

JAM and the SGCs were not the only groups preparing for violence in Iraq. The Badr Organization's policy of cooperation with Coalition Forces was not universally accepted. Some Badr members were reportedly so upset with Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim's political machinations that they left Iraq and returned to Iran, presumably to prepare for the sort of militant operations that Hakim and mainstream SCIRI were avoiding.<sup>42</sup> In late 2004, Iraq's national intelligence chief accused some Badr members of assassinating 10 of his agents.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> Taremi. pp 39

<sup>41</sup> Pound. November 14, 2004

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

## Drafting the Iraqi Constitution

Despite the early signs of Iranian lethal aid to militias in Iraq, the most important developments during 2005 were on the political front. After the January 2005 elections that brought SCIRI and Dawah into central positions in the government, a draft Iraqi constitution was set to be completed by mid-August and submitted for referendum in October. The referendum was followed by a new General Assembly election in December. The constitutional drafting committee was dominated by the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), originally a collaboration of SCIRI and Dawah.<sup>44</sup> Sunnis, having boycotted the January General Assembly election, were effectively shut out of the constitution drafting process.

Al-Sadr did not have a particularly strong position either. The UIA held a majority of the seats on the constitutional drafting committee and did not need his support. Al-Sadr's political strengths were his popularity and his militia. Al-Sadr was not going to let anyone forget that if he was ignored his militia could dramatically disrupt the constitutional referendum in October. As he had in 2004, al-Sadr ratcheted up tension in the spring and summer of 2005, ushering his troops into street battles with SCIRI/Badr personnel in Najaf and elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> Al-Sadr's message was clear: he might not have much pull at the negotiating table, but an agreement in Baghdad would have little practical meaning without his acquiescence.

The UIA wanted to enshrine the principle of Shi'a autonomy in the new Iraqi constitution, much as Iraqi Kurds were self-governing in northern Iraq.<sup>46</sup> Sunnis feared the move was the first step toward the dissolution of Iraq, but SCIRI and Dawah politicians—who feared a return of Sunni authoritarianism—felt it was a means to ensure that Shi'a leaders would direct governance in majority Shi'a provinces. Although there were many differences over details, the Shi'a coalition had an ally in the Kurds, who demanded virtual autonomy in Northern Iraq. Al-Sadr, an ardent Iraqi nationalist, opposed regional autonomy, which effectively allied him with Iraq's Sunni minority. Since the UIA controlled a majority of seats on the constitutional drafting committee (28 of 55) their views largely held sway, despite U.S. protests to consider Sadrist and Sunni concerns about federalization.

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<sup>44</sup> "Q&A: Drafting Iraq's Constitution" *The New York Times* May 12, 2005

<sup>45</sup> Semple, Kirk "Shi'a Cleric's Soldiers Battle Rivals in Najaf and Basra" *The New York Times* August 25, 2005

<sup>46</sup> Filkins, Dexter and Steven Weisman "The Struggle for Iraq: The Constitution; Iraqi Talks Move Ahead on Some Issues" *The New York Times* August 21, 2005



The Iraqi constitution that was ratified on October 15, 2005 reflects some of these compromises. It does not explicitly call for Shi'a autonomy, but it does enable provinces to hold referendums to declare their autonomy, individually or in collaboration with other provinces. SCIRI and Dawah wanted Shi'a autonomy, but they would have to face down popular support for al-Sadr in another set of elections to get it.

Despite not directly authorizing Shi'a autonomy, the new constitution devolved a tremendous amount of governing authority to the provinces, prompting one commentator to write:

[T]he Constitution encourages the transformation of governorates and local administrations into powerful, nearly sovereign regions... this guarantees that the more Iraqi provinces opt for regional status, and get it, the more the federal state will shrivel up and die... it is in the interest of every populist demagogue to press for regional status, because it is at that level that the lawmaking that truly affects day-to-day life will take place...<sup>47</sup>

Iran did not drive the Iraqi constitutional drafting process, but its goals were largely served by the outcome. A decentralized, federal Iraq is less capable of threatening Iran in the future and more easily undermined from within. Just as important, most of Iran's interests in Iraq are in the south, home to most of Iraq's Shi'a population.<sup>48</sup> The prospect of a largely self-regulating, if not completely autonomous, southern region offers Iran the opportunity to exert a large amount of influence in the region without bothering with Sunni and nationalist opposition in Baghdad. Iraqi nationalism is still a concern, but Iran is free to cut deals with and exert pressure on local and regional politicians, away from the media glare and international supervision in Baghdad. Ultimately, the Iraqi constitution offered Iran new venues to influence the parts of Iraq it valued most.

### **Moqtada, the Politician**

After the Iraqi constitution was ratified in October 2005, Iraqi politicians looked forward to a new General Assembly election in December. Battered by sectarian violence and offered a historic opportunity to assert Shi'a authority in Iraq, the Sadrist OMS agreed to align their candidates with SCIRI and Dawah under the

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<sup>47</sup> Makiya, Kanan "Present at the Disintegration" *The New York Times* December 11, 2005

<sup>48</sup> Nasr, Vali "When the Shi'as Rise" *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2006

broad, sectarian UIA slate.<sup>49</sup> The agreement united the Shi'a parties for electoral purposes, but the parties remained split by questions of federalism and, just as importantly, how hard to push the United States to leave Iraq. SCIRI and Dawah politicians, who did not have a fervent popular movement to fall back on—and depended on the U.S.-backed electoral system for power—were far more willing to tolerate the U.S. presence in the short-run. Al-Sadr meanwhile remained a vociferous Iraqi nationalist; he opposed the federalization of Iraq and cooperated with Sunni political groups opposed to the U.S. presence in Iraq.<sup>50</sup> He still mistrusted SCIRI and Dawah politicians because of their close ties to Iran and focus on safeguarding Shi'a interests in Southern Iraq. Furthermore, OMS demonstrators continued to demand an immediate U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Despite these divisions, Iran supported the UIA parties, comfortable that a fractured Shi'a Islamist coalition was better than allowing Sunni political power.

In fact, Iran may have assisted too much. Just days before the election, Iraqi border police interdicted a tanker truck from Iran filled with thousands of forged ballots.<sup>51</sup> The specter of electoral fraud resurrected concerns from the constitutional referendum over localities where as many as 99% of the ballots cast supported the new constitution.<sup>52</sup> It is unlikely that tampering changed the outcome of either election, but the cross-border effort reinforces the central role that influencing Iraq's political process plays in Iran's strategic objectives in Iraq.

Al-Sadr's cooperation in the UIA forced him to skirt a very fine line. The UIA's victory in the December 2005 elections did not satisfy his core supporters who had joined the Sadrist movement because of its violent opposition to U.S. occupation. Al-Sadr was now part of a political coalition built to control a U.S.-backed political system. The collaboration gave al-Sadr the ability to address issues like Iraqi federalism in a substantive way, but distanced him from some of his grassroots supporters. Still, his strategy was not without successes; in early 2006 al-Sadr asserted his newfound power to ensure that Nuri al-Maliki of the Dawah Party would be Iraq's new Prime Minister.<sup>53</sup> Apparently, al-Sadr thought

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<sup>49</sup> Wong, Edward "Iraqi Parties Rush to Meet Deadline for Election Registration" *The New York Times* October 25, 2008

<sup>50</sup> Worth, Robert F. and Sabrina Tavernise "Radical Rising as a Kingmaker in Iraqi Politics" *The New York Times* February 16, 2006

<sup>51</sup> Filkins, Dexter "Police Seize Forged Ballots Headed to Iraq from Iran" *The New York Times* December 14, 2005

<sup>52</sup> Filkins, Dexter and Robert F. Worth "Monitors in Iraq Review Votes Where 'Yes' Ballots Hit 90%" *The New York Times* October 18, 2005

<sup>53</sup> NY Times Biography of Nuri al-Maliki July 23, 2007

that al-Maliki would be more cooperative than the previous Prime Minister, Ibrahim al-Jafaari, or the SCIRI candidate, Adel Abd al-Mahdi. Al-Sadr's newfound political clout was not enough to satisfy all of his supporters, however. As one commentator put it, "the more settled (al-Sadr) becomes in the establishment, the looser his grip is over his fighters on the streets and those increasingly infiltrating the security forces."<sup>54</sup>

### **Samarra and Civil War**

In February 2006, al-Qa`ida in Iraq destroyed the famous golden dome of the Askariya Mosque in Samarra. Outraged by an attack on one of the holiest sites in Iraq, Shi'a marched in the streets while organized militia groups, neighborhood gangs, and individuals exacted revenge on their Sunni neighbors. Although sectarian violence had existed for years in Iraq, the bombing provoked the full-blown sectarian war that Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi had been trying to spark since early 2004.

During the wave of sectarian violence, extra-judicial killings were commonplace and bodies were left to rot in the streets, in mass graves outside Baghdad, or dropped off in front of hospitals, schools, and police stations. Self-defense, revenge, and pure anger—rather than complex political calculation—drove much of the violence. Both Badr and JAM participated in the violence, killing political enemies and hapless bystanders alike. Many Badr members in the Iraqi Security Forces even wore their uniforms while slaughtering Sunnis.<sup>55</sup> But the spasm of violence unleashed an anger among many Shi'a that neither JAM nor the Badr Organization could control completely.

A new category of loosely organized Shi'a militias known as "Death Squads" emerged as the most feared groups in Iraq. Some of these groups were simply groups of young Shi'a participating in semi-organized violence against Sunnis. But some of the Death Squads had evolved out of the JAM splinter groups that began leaving the formal Sadrist movement in mid-2004. The most infamous Death Squad leader was Abu Dura, who was known as "the Shi'a Zarqawi." During the 2004 Najaf uprisings, Abu Dura had fought for al-Sadr, but he grew disillusioned with al-Sadr's leadership and by 2006 was running operations in and around Sadr City on his own.<sup>56</sup> Abu Dura gained a brutal reputation for

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<sup>54</sup> Tavernise, Sabrina "Influence Rises but Base Frays for Iraqi Cleric" *The New York Times* November 13, 2006

<sup>55</sup> Visser, Reidar "Shi'a Militancy in Iraq: Patterns and Ideological Roots" in Assaf Moghadam ed. CTC Report (forthcoming)

<sup>56</sup> Swain, Jon "Is this Iraq's Most Prolific Mass Killer?" *The Sunday Times* January 21, 2007

killing victims with power tools, but was immensely popular in Sadr City, where he was seen as a Robin Hood figure: a man of the people using whatever means necessary to defend them. Abu Dura's popularity was a function of his ability to protect allies and effectively use violence against enemies, as well as a criminal network that offered supporters financial and status benefits. Unlike al-Sadr, Abu Dura and other Death Squad leaders did not want to join the formal political system and saw no reason to moderate their violence in order to smooth passage into the established political hierarchy.

Conversely, al-Sadr was deepening his connections with the political establishment even as the post-Askariya violence was raging. His efforts to emplace Nuri al-Maliki as Prime Minister occurred just after the Askariya Mosque was bombed. The result was not a coup or disintegration in JAM's leadership, but a fraying of the JAM organization at its vengeful, uneducated base, which had lost faith in the Iraqi government and was often dependent on Death Squad leaders and neighborhood militias for security. JAM had never been a hierarchical organization, neatly controlled from the top down. Local cells acquired weapons and organized attacks independently, which enabled local commanders to pursue their own agenda. For many JAM supporters, revenge, criminality, and visceral anti-occupation sentiment had always motivated action more than grand political arguments. Moqtada al-Sadr symbolized their mission, but he did not control it.

As it became clear that the roaming bands of Shi'a were part of a deeper movement that was not solely a knee-jerk reaction to the Askariya bombing or a function of al-Sadr, U.S. commanders coined a new term for the "Death Squads." They were called Special Group Criminals (SGCs), and recognized as JAM offshoots that had developed a very loose, but discernible command structure. Many of the SGCs looked to Qais Khazali, al-Sadr's former spokesman, for political guidance.

Even with the lack of a formalized command structure, Moqtada al-Sadr sensed the unrest within his organization. In October 2006, he formally expelled 40 JAM commanders from his organization.<sup>57</sup> The move was largely symbolic because al-Sadr could not break those commanders' ties to their cell members, or prevent them from launching attacks independently. But it was al-Sadr's attempt to define what violence should be attributed to him. Since al-Sadr's political power

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<sup>57</sup> Tavernise, Sabrina "Influence Rises but Base Frays for Iraqi Cleric" *The New York Times* November 13, 2006

was ultimately a function of his ability to plausibly threaten violence, and then plausibly claim to be able to end it, rogue commanders operating under the JAM rubric but pursuing their own agenda undermined his credibility and leverage. Al-Sadr did not have a mechanism to ensure his commanders followed instructions, but he could publicly disavow the commanders that were not, and hope that he would no longer be blamed.

Al-Sadr was walking a very fine line. Some viewed his political participation as a betrayal, but he was still at odds with the established Shi'a political elite, who viewed his uneducated followers with disdain. Even as al-Sadr's support among some militiamen was slipping, JAM was fighting on the streets of Najaf with Badr Organization gunmen loyal to SCIRI. Al-Sadr's dilemma was that his militia and popularity among the mass of Iraq's frustrated Shi'a was the basis of his political influence, but he sacrificed some of his influence over that base by working within the political system.

Al-Sadr was not, however, willing to cut JAM loose entirely. Still politically weak, al-Sadr knew the only way to guarantee his political power was to maintain a credible threat to upset the political system itself. Disbanding JAM completely would have been to abandon his leverage. Other Iraqi officials, particularly those from SCIRI, clamored for al-Sadr to dissolve JAM. Although it seems perfectly reasonable for government officials to demand the dissolution of an anti-government militia, SCIRI politicians were no doubt comforted by the fact that their own militia, the Badr Corps, had largely integrated itself into the Iraqi Security Forces. In other words, SCIRI could call for the dissolution of a rival militia, and appear to maintain the moral high ground.

Al-Sadr's perspective on the political process must have demonstrated again to Iran why he was an unreliable surrogate. The JAM militia was a useful mechanism for disrupting the U.S., but al-Sadr's predilection for politics was disconcerting, particularly because he had retained his nationalist, anti-Iranian views. Al-Sadr's independence might lead him to start, or cease, military activities at an inopportune moment for Iran. On the contrary, the SGCs were much more committed to violent confrontation with the Iraqi government and the coalition. They too were nationalists hostile toward Iran, but their disposition toward violence as the only basis for their social power in Iraq—rather than, as with al-Sadr, a means to establish political influence—made them more reliable from Iran's perspective. Thus, even as Iran continued to support JAM it increased support for the SGCs, providing training and weapons, thus increasing its array of options to employ in support of its strategic goals.

### **SCIRI to ISCI, and Sadrist Overstretch**

Moqtada al-Sadr realized too late how precarious his political position actually was. In late 2006 and early 2007, al-Sadr's militia was fighting Sunni insurgents, Coalition Forces, and fellow Shi'a, particularly Badr personnel. Al-Sadr was trying to establish himself as a political figure, but leaned on the disruptive power of JAM to support his political aspirations. Worst, he was losing control over the militia as local commanders defected to the SGC model of self-determined operations and independent logistical connections to Iran.

True to form, SCIRI showed more political sophistication than al-Sadr. In late 2006 Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki began seriously trying to cobble together a political coalition that would marginalize Moqtada al-Sadr.<sup>58</sup> Clashes between JAM and Badr forces—with and without official imprimatur—were increasingly common. SCIRI wanted to force al-Sadr to show his hand: would he be a militia commander or a political leader? The choice was impossible for al-Sadr; by embracing politics completely, he would abandon his operational leverage, but he no longer had the support to challenge the government's authority. SCIRI knew popular opinion for al-Sadr had softened, especially as militia violence turned into little more than criminality. Although the SGCs were responsible for much of the unrest, the SGC's relationship and continued links with mainstream JAM members ensured that al-Sadr would suffer politically from their criminality.

In late November 2006, Prime Minister al-Maliki met President Bush in Amman, Jordan. Days later, SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim visited Washington to meet President Bush and the Iraq Study Group released its report recommending U.S. negotiations with Iraq's neighbors. The political tide was turning on Moqtada al-Sadr, and the U.S. was growing increasingly close to Iran's closest political allies in Iraq. The developments once again highlighted Iran's strategic paradox; its allies must collaborate with the U.S. in order to maintain power in Baghdad, but their collaboration inherently weakens their dependence on Iran. The paradox is one key reason Iran backs multiple political and militia groups in Iraq. SCIRI and Dawah check Sadrist radicalism through their political power, and al-Sadr's populist challenge to the U.S.-supported Iraqi political system ensures SCIRI and Dawah cannot get too cozy with the U.S. Iran clearly cannot

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<sup>58</sup> Wong, Edward "Iraqis Weigh Alliance to Marginalize Sadr and Bolster Maliki" *The International Herald Tribune* December 11, 2006

control all actions of SCIRI, Dawah, or al-Sadr, but it has encouraged and supported the competing groups, and benefits from their conflict.

In May 2007, SCIRI's leaders took a series of symbolic steps to ameliorate the perception that it was linked to Iran. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq renamed itself the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), dropping the word "revolution" that connoted Khomeinist uprising and ideology.<sup>59</sup> The group also changed its doctrinal platform to recognize Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, rather than Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah al-Khamenei, as its primary religious guide. The shifts were widely hailed as SCIRI's first steps toward independence from Iran, but some observers have commented that the group's language was intentionally vague, particularly regarding Ayatollah al-Khamenei's status.<sup>60</sup>

Nonetheless, SCIRI's transformation into ISCI was clearly designed with Iraqi politics in mind. In November 2007, Reuters reported that 600 tribal leaders in southern Iraq, along with over 300,000 Iraqi Shi'a, signed a petition condemning the interference of the Iranian regime in Iraq.<sup>61</sup> One Shi'a religious leader was quoted in this report saying:<sup>62</sup>

The most poisonous dagger stabbed in us, the Iraqi Shiites, is the (Iranian) regime shamefully exploiting the Shiite sect to implement its evil goals... They have targeted our national interests and began planning to divide Iraq and to separate the southern provinces from Iraq.

ISCI's attempt to placate its Iraqi constituents—even if superficial—indicated that the group recognized that its leading position in the government depended on a solid relationship with Iraqis, not Iran. ISCI was clearly trying to position itself as the political slate closest to al-Sistani and win over everyday Iraqis sympathetic to al-Sadr. There is little evidence to show ISCI made substantial progress winning over everyday Iraqis, but there is no doubt that al-Sadr continued to make political missteps. Buffeted by the fraying base of his militia and isolated politically, al-Sadr moved away from both JAM and the Iraqi

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<sup>59</sup> Cave, Damien "Changes by Iraqi Shi'a Party Signal Distancing From Iran" *The New York Times* May 13, 2007

<sup>60</sup> Visser, Reidar "Shi'a Militancy in Iraq: Patterns and Ideological Roots" in Assaf Moghadam ed. CTC Report (forthcoming)

<sup>61</sup> "300,000 Iraqis sign petition condemning Iran" *Reuters* November 22, 2007 available at [http://www.iraqupdates.com/p\\_articles.php/article/24252](http://www.iraqupdates.com/p_articles.php/article/24252)

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

government and tried to return to the social services model that launched his movement in 2003. By August 2007, al-Sadr had pulled out of the government, renounced sectarian violence, and declared a ceasefire to end months of ugly intra-Shi'a violence.<sup>63</sup> Al-Sadr's ceasefire was certainly an indication of weakness, as was his subsequent decision to decamp to Qom, Iran for religious study. He has not returned. Rumors continue to swirl that al-Sadr is being held under house arrest in Qom.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, al-Sadr's quick decision to end the intra-Shi'a violence and head to Iran does seem to indicate that Iran helped broker some kind of agreement for al-Sadr.

The "surge" of U.S. troops in Iraq also shaped the environment in ways that limited violence. In addition to operations focused on eliminating al-Qa`ida in Iraq from Sunni areas of western and northern Iraq, the strategy increased the American presence in Baghdad. This strategy upped the pressure on Shi'a political actors and Iran. An important element of the surge was the decision to reorganize U.S. relations with tribal elements of the Sunni insurgency. The new groups, known as Awakening Councils and the Sons of Iraq, were an important part of the U.S. strategy to destroy AQI. Though useful allies against AQI, the new groups continue to terrify Iraqi Shi'a, many of whom worry that the U.S.-armed and supported groups are a coup waiting to happen.

Iran probably favored the reduction in violence because it reflected al-Sadr's weakened political position, but it also benefitted from political dynamics beyond its control. Out of government and his militia weakened, al-Sadr was increasingly vulnerable to Iranian leverage despite his continued anti-Iranian nationalist rhetoric. More importantly, ISCI increased its influence within the Iraqi government when al-Sadr left the governing coalition.<sup>65</sup> To ensure al-Maliki would remain in power when the Sadrists left the governing coalition, ISCI and Dawah cut a deal with Iraq's Kurdish parties to form a governing majority.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Tavernise, Sabrina "Relations Sour Between Shi'as and Iraqi Militia" *The New York Times* October 12, 2007

<sup>64</sup> Rahimi, Babak "The Mumahidun: Muqtada al-Sadr's New Militia" *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* September 4, 2008

<sup>65</sup> Visser, Reidar "Shi'a Militancy in Iraq: Patterns and Ideological Roots" in Assaf Moghadam ed. CTC Report (forthcoming)

<sup>66</sup> Rubin, Alissa "Cleric Switches Tactics to Meet Changes in Iraq" *The New York Times* July 19, 2007



## Agents in Iraq

Iran's covert influence in the Iraqi government came to the fore in late December 2006. U.S. forces arrested four Iranians in Baghdad who were suspected of being Qods Force officers with extensive ties to the Iraqi government.<sup>67</sup> At least two were in Baghdad at the invitation of Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Several of the arrests were made inside Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim's compound, at the home of Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the Badr Organization and former Deputy to the terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The men had just come from the Buratha Mosque, which is led by Sheikh Jalal al-din al-Saghir, an acolyte of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and an ISCI/Badr politician. The detentions infuriated Iraqi political leaders, who demanded the men be released despite U.S. assertions that they were encouraging violence in Iraq.<sup>68</sup> Under intense pressure from the Iraqi government, the United States transferred several of the Iranians to the Iraqi government, who in turn released them.

The arrests in Baghdad were followed by the arrest of five Iranian nationals in northern Iraq in early January 2007, which also drew a strong rebuke from the Iraqi government.<sup>69</sup> The U.S. was intent on demonstrating Iran's support for militia groups, but Iraqi government officials resisted the U.S. efforts.

Perhaps the most important Iranian captured by U.S. forces in Iraq was Mahmoud Farhadi. Arrested in September 2007, Farhadi was a long-time Qods Force operative that U.S. forces considered "very senior."<sup>70</sup> Captured Iraqi intelligence documents list Farhadi as the director of a Qods Force camp along the Iran-Iraq border.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Glanz, James and Sabrina Tavernise "US Is Holding Iranians Seized in Raids in Iraq" *The New York Times* December 25, 2006

<sup>68</sup> Tavernise, Sabrina "US Says Captured Iranians Can Be Linked to Attacks" *The New York Times* December 27, 2006

<sup>69</sup> "Iran Demands Release of Iranian Arrested in Iraq" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* January 14, 2007; "Detained Iranians Had Insurgent Ties" *The Associated Press* January 14, 2007

<sup>70</sup> Von Zielbauer, Paul "US Calls Iranian Official Part of Elite Force" *The New York Times* October 8, 2007

<sup>71</sup> Harmony Document ISGZ-2005-001122-19954. There is a slight discrepancy, however, between the Iraqi intelligence information released with this report and information released by Multi-National Forces—Iraq. In an October 3, 2007 press conference, Brigadier General Kevin Bergner described Farhadi as the leader of the Zafr command of the Qods Force's Ramadan Headquarters, while the Iraqi documents indicate he actually led the Nasr command, with responsibility for the northern sector of the Iran-Iraq border. See Bergner, Kevin. Press Conference October 3, 2007; ISGZ-2005-001122-19954. It is worth noting that the Iraqi intelligence documents often contradict

The Special Group Criminals were particularly active. Qais Khazali's network was receiving Iranian assistance and training from Lebanese Hezbollah. Khazali's most prominent attack was a daring kidnapping of five American soldiers in Karbala. The attackers used stolen uniforms to infiltrate a coalition base, kidnapped the soldiers, and escaped. American officials claim it was planned with at least tacit cooperation from Ali Musa Daqduq, a Lebanese Hezbollah operative that had traveled from Lebanon to Iran in 2006 and was captured in Iraq alongside Khazali in the spring of 2007.<sup>72</sup> Along with the SGC's increasing use of Iranian-made EFPs, the attack demonstrated that Iran had found a new kind of partner for kinetic strikes against the U.S. in Iraq.

### **SOFA and Provincial Elections**

In the spring of 2008, events turned sharply against al-Sadr. Prime Minister Maliki ordered the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to first retake the southern city of Basra in March. In May and June, they entered Sadr City in Baghdad and the border city of Amara. The combination of JAM, SGCs, local militias, and criminal gangs that had held sway in these areas largely dissipated before Iraqi troops arrived en masse.

Al-Maliki's assertive use of ISF to crush JAM bolstered his reputation with the Iraqi political class and is a clear indication that the ISF is improving. Nevertheless, not all Iraqis viewed the operation in Basra, or the ensuing operations, a non-partisan effort to restore order. Al-Sadr's supporters—and some outside analysts—argued that al-Maliki's move against JAM strongholds was, in fact, a blatantly partisan effort to weaken al-Sadr's ability to compete in the October provincial elections.<sup>73</sup> Not only would such attacks disrupt JAM's military capability, they would prevent it from mobilizing supporters for the provincial elections. There is some truth to these arguments. The Iraqi government's crackdown on Sadrist groups in southern Iraq, together with the targeting of the Sunni Awakening movements in politically sensitive areas inside and north of Baghdad, suggest a coherent effort to suppress viable political opposition in areas where Baghdad's ruling coalition can win votes.

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one another. This is not surprising. There are discrepancies in the Iraqi documents over the number of Iranian commands along their border and the number of training camps, etc.

<sup>72</sup> Partlow, Joshua "Iran's Elite Force is Said to Use Hezbollah as 'Proxy' in Iraq; General Describes Aid to Shiite Militias" *Washington Post* July 3, 2007

<sup>73</sup> Visser, Reidar "Shi'a Militancy in Iraq: Patterns and Ideological Roots" in Assaf Moghadam ed. CTC Report (forthcoming)

Iran did not sit on the sidelines during the Iraqi government's crackdown on al-Sadr in 2008. As in previous bouts of violence, Iran stepped in to mediate among Shi'a parties in Iraq. During the spring violence in Basra a delegation of Hadi al-Ameri of Badr and Ali al-Adeeb of Dawah traveled to Qom to negotiate a ceasefire with al-Sadr. The meeting was allegedly arranged and mediated by Qassem Suleimani, leader of Iran's Qods Force and the man coordinating Iran's intervention in Iraq.<sup>74</sup> The meeting did predate a slowing of the violence in Basra, but the Iraqi government's campaign against Shi'a militias continued, first in Baghdad's Sadr City and then in Amara. Interestingly, both the United States and Iran publicly supported the crackdown. Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, went out of his way to publicly support the operation, while U.S. forces provided substantive support to the Iraqi forces involved.<sup>75</sup>

There was very little organized resistance to the Iraqi government in either Sadr City or Amara, in part because of ceasefire agreements between the Iraqi government and JAM fighters.<sup>76</sup> Iran's support for the intra-Shi'a ceasefire and the Iraqi operations to reassert control in former Sadrism strongholds is only the most recent tactical application of its politics-first strategy. As in 2004 and 2005, Iran has moved to limit violence before a major political benchmark. In 2004 and 2005, those were elections. Today, it is a combination of Iraq's provincial elections and Iraq's SFA/SOFA negotiations with the U.S.

### **Iran's Goals Today**

Since the March meeting in Qom, Iran has pursued a policy with two basic goals, both of which are generally consistent with its Iraq policy for the past five years. First, enable the Dawah/ISCI/Badr led Iraqi government to extend control over geographical regions held by Sadrists, and thereby consolidate their political influence of Iranian-influenced parties. Second, limit the amount of violence between the Iraqi government and JAM and SGC fighters as government forces move into those areas. Both goals have largely been achieved. The government of Iraq now controls Basra, Sadr City, and Amara and Prime Minister Maliki has consolidated control over the government. And the Mahdi Army and SGCs largely avoided hopeless fights against more capable Iraqi and coalition forces.

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<sup>74</sup> Fadel, Leila "Iranian General Played Key Role in Iraq Cease-Fire" *McClatchy Newspapers* March 30, 2008

<sup>75</sup> Glanz, James and Alissa Rubin "United States and Iran Find Unexpected Common Ground in Iraq's Shiite Conflict" *The New York Times* April 21, 2008

<sup>76</sup> Dunn, Katie "Iraqi Army Secures Sadr City" *National Public Radio* May 20, 2008

Iran's recent behavior is consistent with its core Iraq strategy over the past five years. However, the most recent manifestations of that strategy are particularly important because of the SFA/SOFA negotiations between Iraq and the U.S. and the general sense that the U.S. is preparing to withdraw the bulk of its troops from Iraq. The SFA/SOFA negotiations between Iraq and the U.S. offer Iran the best way to evict most U.S. troops from Iraq and limit their flexibility to threaten Iran in the future. Whereas Iran once hoped to embarrass the U.S. as it leaves Iraq, security gains since early 2007 have forced Iran to accept the lesser goal of simply evicting the U.S. from Iraq and limiting its operational reach in the region.

Iran's recent efforts to bolster al-Maliki politically have improved his negotiating position with the U.S. Likewise, Iran still maintains the capacity to increase violence in Iraq in the future because its most important militia proxies remain intact. Al-Maliki's dilemma is that the political system he dominates still relies on U.S. support for stability. Like many of Iraq's more sophisticated politicians, al-Maliki almost certainly wants SFA/SOFA agreements that maintain some U.S. presence in Iraq, not only as an internal stabilizing influence, but as a check against Iran.<sup>77</sup> The government of Iraq, and its partisan leaders, will play the U.S. and Iran against one another in order to pursue its own interests.

Al-Maliki's immediate problem is supporting an SFA/SOFA with the U.S. without ruining his party's electoral prospects in Iraq's provincial elections. Many Iraqis remain adamantly opposed to the U.S. presence in Iraq. SFA/SOFA agreements seen as capitulating to the U.S. would damage the Dawah party's prospects. This is particularly true because al-Maliki—at the urging of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—has pledged to submit any agreement to the Iraqi parliament.<sup>78</sup> Moqtada al-Sadr would have the most to gain politically from SFA/SOFA agreements seen as too accommodating to the U.S. because of his consistent and outspoken Iraqi nationalism and opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq. Conquering Sadrist strongholds has mitigated this risk to al-Maliki because it limits al-Sadr's ability to mobilize politically. Maliki has also banned political parties with militias from participating in the elections, a clear shot at al-Sadr.

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<sup>77</sup> Parker, Ned "Iraq's Nouri Maliki Breaking Free of US" *The Los Angeles Times* September 16, 2008

<sup>78</sup> Chon, Gina "U.S., Iraq Near Pact on Troop Presence" *The Wall Street Journal* October 13, 2008

Nonetheless, al-Sadr remains a more potent political force today than he would have been without the ceasefire negotiated by Iran in March. If al-Sadr had stood toe to toe with Iraqi government forces backed by the U.S., his militia might have been irretrievably crushed. Meanwhile, Al-Sadr is taking steps to remain politically viable. He is downsizing his militia, but professionalizing it to make it more effective and ensure that he has tight control over its behavior.<sup>79</sup>

Iran's support for the ceasefire also demonstrated to Prime Minister al-Maliki that Iran, more than the U.S., is capable of controlling the Shi'a elements of Iraqi society most critical to his base of support. At the same time al-Maliki's political position was strengthened, which improved his ability to negotiate with the U.S. on the SFA/SOFA.<sup>80</sup> Using its influence with multiple groups, Iran is highlighting the carrots and sticks it wields in Iraq.

Al-Sadr's relative quiet from his new home in Qom suggests that Iran closely controls his public statements and thus serves to shape his political maneuvering. All told, al-Sadr's public statements seem designed to ensure he remains a credible enough player on Iraq's political scene to ensure Iraqi politicians cannot acquiesce to U.S. demands, but weak enough that he cannot incite a broad-based uprising that would interrupt Prime Minister al-Maliki's political maneuvering.

The ultimate SFA/SOFA agreement will help determine how Iran conceives of the threat posed by the U.S. presence in Iraq, and thus on its strategy going forward. If the SFA/SOFA provides U.S. forces broad latitude of action in Iraq, Iran's incentive to support violent militia activities against coalition forces will increase. On the other hand, if the SFA/SOFA is more restrictive—limiting the amount and freedom of action of U.S. troops in Iraq—Iran's incentive to promote violent militias will decrease. Such a reduction in violence would undoubtedly be a boon for Iraq, but it might also indicate that Iran has at least partially accomplished its goals in Iraq. If Iran does want to increase violence in the future, it will likely not rely on al-Sadr and his downsized militia. Rather, Iran will increase ties with the SGCs and the elements of JAM not integrated into al-Sadr's new militia. These numerous small cells offer less politically complex means of disrupting Iraqi social and political events.

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<sup>79</sup> Rahimi, Babak "The Mumahidun: Muqtada al-Sadr's New Militia" *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* Volume VI Issue 17 September 4, 2008

<sup>80</sup> *Id.*

Although many Iraqi politicians depend on the U.S.-backed political system, they also know that Iran will be a constant presence. SCIRI politicians Jalal al-Din al-Saghir reflected the sentiment, saying “The Iranians will stay in the place forever till the Judgment Day and the Americans will withdraw. The Americans built their status on their military and their political viewpoints. They didn’t try to find shared lines of interest or common ground... The Iranians dealt with this matter in a more positive way.”<sup>81</sup>

Al-Sadr is being marginalized. His new militia is still capable of causing trouble, but he can no longer credibly threaten to disrupt wide swaths of Iraq, which has been the basis of his political leverage. Despite al-Sadr’s weakness, al-Maliki runs a serious risk if he prevents al-Sadr from participating in the provincial elections. Al-Sadr remains a popular figure in Iraq and flat out excluding him may reduce the election’s domestic and international credibility.

Iran’s position today is strong, but not without challenges. Political parties sponsored by Iran for 20 years are in charge in Baghdad, al-Maliki must negotiate restrictive SFA/SOFA agreements with the U.S. to remain politically viable, the U.S. seems destined to drawdown forces in Iraq, and the offshoots of al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi offer innumerable levers to increase violence in Iraq when it is politically expedient. At the same time, however, Iranian-linked political parties are increasingly responsive to the political needs of their Iraqi constituents, al-Maliki himself has shown signs of frustration with Iranian meddling in Iraq, and Iraqi politicians seem relatively content to maintain some level of U.S. troops in the near-term.

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<sup>81</sup> Parker, Ned “Iraq’s Nouri Maliki Breaking Free of US” *The Los Angeles Times* September 16, 2008

***“The enemy’s expenditure of effort consists in the wastage of his forces—our destruction of them...and far the most important method, judging from the frequency of its use, is to wear down the enemy. That expression is more than a label; it describes the process precisely, and is not so metaphorical as it may seem at first.”***

*“On War”*

Carl von Clausewitz

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Iranian Training for Iraqi Militias**

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Although Iran’s primary strategy for projecting power in Iraq remains centered on the Iraqi political system, Iran has also built a complex system to provide paramilitary training for Iraqi militia groups. These efforts increase the durability of Iran’s influence operations in Iraq and complement its main effort by providing different means to address threats to its interests in Iraq.

Most of the Iranian-sponsored paramilitary training has been directed to JAM and the SGCs, but there is evidence of support to other smaller militia groups as well. The trend toward smaller, less politically active groups will likely increase as JAM downsizes.<sup>1</sup> At the most basic level, Iran’s military aid is a hedge against unforeseen developments in the Iraqi political system, such as the sudden defection of ISCI members or a Sunni coup in Baghdad. Independent militias serve other purposes as well: embarrassing the United States, facilitating Iran’s ability to continually pressure the U.S. while publicly supporting the Government of Iraq, and ensuring that U.S. attention is focused on the militias while Iran’s political allies consolidate power. The militias, even as they were supported but not precisely controlled by Iran, served to sow the seeds of instability and chaos, especially when coalition forces were attempting to facilitate stability.

The IRGC-QF program to train Iraqi militants is quite robust.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with its political efforts, Iran has built an overlapping series of relationships to exert

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<sup>1</sup> The Arabic daily newspaper *Azzam* reported in early July 2008 that Iraqi Minister of Interior Jawad al-Bulani acknowledged evidence obtained through confessions of Special Groups members that indicated close links between Iran and Special Groups operating in Iraq. See <http://www.azzaman.com/index.asp?code=azq01>.

<sup>2</sup> This claim is based on open source press reporting as well as the accounts of multiple Iraqi militants detained since mid-2007 that claim to have participated in Iranian hosted paramilitary training.

influence. A document found during the capture of Qais Khazali and his brother describes a plan to establish three distinct, but overlapping, militant groups.<sup>3</sup> The groups were designed to range in sophistication, from a large, less-trained group to smaller, more elite organizations. The Khazali schematic likely only scratches the surface in describing the variety of Iraqi militant groups. It is clear, however, that in the past year the SGCs have been the most disruptive—emplacing IEDs, rocketing the Green Zone, and attacking Iraqi Security Forces and Coalition troops.

Iraqi militants who have participated in Iranian-sponsored training insist that the instruction is designed primarily to evict coalition forces from Iraq—not to stoke the kind of sectarian warfare that rocked Iraq in 2006 and early 2007. This explanation is consistent with both Iran’s core goals in Iraq and the nationalist sentiments of many of the militia members attending the training. The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing an alleged SGC member’s assessment of Iranian interests:

Iran does not care about the fight between Shi’a and al-Qaeda. Iran just wants to force CF (Coalition Forces) out of Iraq because Iran is afraid CF will use Iraq as a base for an attack in the future. Iran is training people to fight CF, not Al-Qaeda.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, Iran seems to have outsourced some of the actual military instruction provided to Iraqi militants to agents from Lebanese Hizballah. Although there is little available evidence of Lebanese Hizballah activities inside Iraq, there are numerous reports that they are providing IRGC-QF coordinated training in Iran and Lebanon for Iraqi militants.

### **Iraqi Recruitment and Travel to Iran**

Although Iraq’s Shi’a militias often operate independently, hierarchy is an important part of their structure. Iraqis claiming to have trained at camps in Iran describe varying levels of instruction based on expertise and function. The entire training program is extremely well organized, all the way down to the selection of trainees. Most trainees hail from the predominately Shi’a towns of southern Iraq—Najaf, Nasiriyah, Kut, Amara, and Basra—as well as eastern border towns in the Diyala Province and from Shi’a enclaves in Baghdad such as Sadr City.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Harmony Document NMEC-2007-624223

<sup>4</sup> IR002

<sup>5</sup> This assessment is based on background information provided by multiple captured Iraqi militants that received training in Iran.



Trainees are selected based on certain minimal qualifications as well as available resources and specific needs identified by SGC leaders.<sup>6</sup> For example, before going for training, candidates are required to be able to read and write.<sup>7</sup> One captured SGC leader described the attributes he looked for in prospective trainees: “Open Mindedness”; “Physical Stamina”; “Maturity”; “Organizational Skills”; “Responsible”; and individuals “who are not a problem.”<sup>8</sup>

Iraqi militants seem to be well-informed about the training opportunities in Iran even before they are asked to attend. The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing the SGC member’s description of events:

[DETAINEE] was well aware of the fact that SG (Special Group) members sometimes train in Iran prior to [DETAINEE] being told he would attend such training. It is common knowledge that SG members receive training in Iran. Without a doubt, all training received in Iran is intended for use against CF (Coalition Forces).<sup>9</sup>

Captured Iraqi militants in 2007 and 2008 recount taking numerous routes from their homes in Iraq to Iran, including a pathway through the southeastern Iraqi city of Amara.<sup>10</sup> Iraqis bound for training in Iran often converge in Amara and stay at designated JAM and SGC safe houses where they are introduced to the other traveling militants and the guides that will take them across the border. The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing an SGC member’s description of events:

When the training travel was ready, ██████ would call the SG (Special Group) areas and have the trainees travel to Amara. The trainees would usually travel by taxi, a seven to eight passenger vehicle, to the Baghdad garage in Amara. Once in Amara, the trainees would contact ██████ and inform him of their arrival. ██████ would arrange to have someone, usually ██████ meet the trainees and take

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<sup>6</sup> IR 007

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> IR 002. In this quotation and in all other quotations, where “NAME WITHHELD” is listed, the names are provided to the Combating Terrorism Center on an “unclassified but for official use only” basis. They are not listed in this document because there is no particular need for the reader to know the specific name of the detainee and such listing of the specific name could possibly be construed as improperly attempting to publicize or otherwise exploit the capture of a specific detainee.

<sup>10</sup> The Iraqi Army’s 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division moved through and occupied Amara in June 2008 and its effect on cross border smuggling of arms and individuals participating in Iranian training programs has not yet been assessed.

them to an Amara SG safe house. ██████ would meet the trainees at the safe house where he would provide each 100 USD, brief them on their travel and what to be aware of, and verify their passports. The trainees would then wait at the safe house until ██████ told them it was time to depart for Iran. The trainees would again use taxis, usually seven to eight person vehicles, in their travel to the Iranian and Iraqi border.<sup>11</sup>

After passing through the safe houses in Amara, trainees and their guides cross the border in two major ways:<sup>12</sup>

1. Legally—through established border crossing points using Iraqi passports.<sup>13</sup> Intelligence and media reports indicate that many cross near Amara, others cross further south near Basra.
2. Illegally—without clearing Iranian customs. Accounts from a number of militants beginning their travel from Amara describe walking across unchecked by Iranian officials. Others describe taking a boat into Iran via the marshes that straddle the Iran-Iraq.

One SGC member described crossing the border illicitly, but indicated that Iranian soldiers at a checkpoint waved his van through after recognizing the driver. The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing the SGC member's description of events after leaving a safe house in Amara:

[DETAINEE] trip began with a 90 minute bus ride to the marshes on the border where he boarded a row boat for a 15 minute trip on an unmarked route through dense reeds and marsh grasses to the Iranian side of the border. Once across, he made a 10 minute walk up a hill on a dirt and gravel road where he and the other Iraqi's traveling with him boarded a waiting vehicle. The car took him through a nearby Iranian Army checkpoint where it was waived through by Iranian soldiers when they appeared to recognize the driver- no identity documents were examined.<sup>14</sup>

Since the training in Iran is allegedly organized and funded by IRGC-QF, a branch of the Iranian government, it is interesting that the SGCs go to the trouble

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<sup>11</sup> IR 007

<sup>12</sup> Details for both legal and illegal crossing descriptions are compiled from multiple accounts of Iraqi militants that traveled to Iran. See IR019, IR008, IR021, IR020, IR003, and IR016

<sup>13</sup> Documents from multiple Iraqi militants contain passports with entry and exit stamps into and out of Iran.

<sup>14</sup> IR 003

of smuggling their charges across the border. The purpose is probably to avoid detection upon returning to Iraq, as well as to minimize the overall record of suspicious Iraqis inside Iran. It is also possible that many SGCs do not have Iraqi passports and do not want to risk applying for an official document.

Once on the Iranian side of the border, training candidates meet Iranian guides and move over land—generally by taxi or bus—to the western Iranian border towns of Ahvez or Kermanshah where they spend a short period of time at designated safe houses or hotels. From there, the IRGC-QF arranges air travel to Tehran.<sup>15</sup> The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing a former SGC member's description of his group's trip into Iran:

The following morning the group took off in two vehicles, traveling from Amara to Shayikh Sa'ad. The group ate at a restaurant, and the driver called for a vehicle to come and pick up the group for the next leg of the journey. All of them crammed into a Land Cruiser, 12 people, plus the driver and the interpreter. They drove on a dirt road for several hours. They arrived at around sundown at a house in a desolate area. The driver got out and went toward the house. He came back with a man with a black tracksuit. In later conversation, he said he was from Al-Sadr City. The unidentified man said they should wait until it got a little darker. The man from the house had an AK slung on his back and night vision device on a neck strap. The glow when he put the device to his ears was either yellow or red. After a short drive, the group got out and walked through the countryside. They crossed rivers, ran in a flat open country, and went up and down hills for between two and three hours. The man from the house picked up a signal from an automotive light. The group rendezvoused with two four-door pickups. One was white and the other red. The pickups took the Iraqi trainees to a house in Mehran. Along the way to Mehran, they were given chocolate, biscuits, and snacks. In Mehran, the training group went to an apartment. They ate a meal and stayed the night. In the morning, the group was divided and taken to the Kermanshah Airport. Their tickets were waiting and they boarded a flight for Tehran.<sup>16</sup>

Once in Tehran, former SGC members recount staying in apartments on the outskirts of the city. Some portions of the training that do not require training facilities are conducted at these apartments/safe houses.<sup>17</sup> Many Iraqi militants describe traveling two to three hours by bus from Tehran to military style training complexes manned by uniformed Iranian soldiers. Both the testimonies

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<sup>15</sup> IR019, IR008, IR021, IR020, IR003, IR016, and IR018

<sup>16</sup> IR008 and IR001

<sup>17</sup> IR025

of captured Iraqi militants and open sources suggest that the IRGC-QF uses several locations to provide paramilitary training to Iraqis in Iran.<sup>18</sup> Haj Reza, a former general in the IRGC claims that four camps are used, in Ahvaz, Elam, Qom, and Tehran.<sup>19</sup> Iraqi intelligence reports also describe camps in the vicinity of Tehran.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 3 depicts the most cited routes from Iraq to training facilities in Iran according to Iraqi militants that participated in this training since 2006.

*Figure 3: Common Routes Traveled to IRGC-QF Paramilitary Training in Iran*



<sup>18</sup> Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, July 2, 2007. A frequently mentioned training camp is in the vicinity of Jalalibad which is approximately a 3 hour drive south of Tehran. This site is frequently referred to as the Al Shahad training complex by detainees. See IR020, IR023, and IR001

<sup>19</sup> Nuri-Zadeh Ali, "A Former Official of the Revolutionary Guards, Says Hundreds of the Al-Mahdi Army Personnel Received Training in Iran on Missiles and Diving. He told Al-Sarq al-Awsat Tehran used Hizballah to Train Iraqis because of the Language Problem" *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* May 8, 2008

<sup>20</sup> Harmony Document ODP1-2005-008247\_TRANS

A summary of the typical routes militants claim to have taken from their native Iraq into Iran for training and return along with a map is summed up at Figure 4 below:

*Figure 4: Synopsis of Iraqi Militant Routes to Iran for Paramilitary Training*

<p>1. Movement to Point of Embarkation/Safe Houses in Iraq</p>	<p>Prospective participants in Iranian-sponsored training travel independently to designated safe houses to link up with their coordinators, guides and other members traveling in the same training cohort. Many participants described Amara as the most frequent link-up point and safe house location for follow on travel to Iran.</p>
<p>2. Iraqi Safe House – Iranian Border Crossing</p>	<p>Iraqi militants attending training in Iran since 2006 identify several routes and means of travel used to cross the border into Iran. According to the accounts reviewed, many began their journey in a group from Amara. Fighters crossed the border in a number of ways, including driving, walking, and using small boats.</p>
<p>3. Iranian Border— Training Camp</p>	<p>Once across the border, the groups of candidates for paramilitary training are met by facilitators to move to the training camps. Fighters often travel by car or bus to Ahvaz, and in some cases Kermanshah, just inside the Iranian border. From there, a number of militants flew to Tehran where they stayed for several days at an apartment/safe house on the outskirts before taking buses or cars to training camp locations outside of the city.</p>
<p>4. Return from Training to Iraq</p>	<p>Militants returning from IRGC-sponsored paramilitary training in Iran return via similar routes they arrived.</p>

## **The Training Program in Iran**

Qods Force officers and Lebanese Hizballah provide a variety of military training to Iraqi militants, from entry level weapons and tactics to advanced skills, including production and use of EFPs, sniper operations, vehicular ambushes, and kidnapping.<sup>21</sup> According to General Reza, Iran began providing rudimentary instruction for JAM-style militants in 2003, but high-level training did not start until 2007, and the Iranian-run training courses have grown increasingly sophisticated since then.<sup>22</sup> The estimate of the total number of Iraqi militants trained in Iran varies widely with reports of camps closer to the border with Iraq providing very basic military training allegedly to thousands of militants while advanced training conducted at camps deep in to Iranian territory is provided to smaller numbers of militants.<sup>23</sup> Captured Iraqi militants confirm that Iran offers an extensive list of paramilitary training courses, which generally fit into the following broad categories:

### *Basic Paramilitary Skills and Weapons Course*

The basic weapons course is a basic training regimen that stresses weapons familiarization and employment for newly recruited militants. Iraqi militants that attended this training claim it lasts approximately 20 days and includes introductory training on mortars and IEDs in addition to firearms.<sup>24</sup>

### *Advanced Paramilitary Training Courses*

Iraqi militants returning to Iran for advanced training describe the topics covered in this training with reasonable consistency. The emphasis is on conducting advanced operations and tactics, and is more intensive than the basic military training class. These courses seem to be designed for individuals assuming leadership positions within Special Group Criminals. The training's purpose appears to be in developing militant leaders' capacity to plan and prepare for

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<sup>21</sup> Detainee reporting includes complete program of instruction details with a day by day record of the types of training received. See IR001 for an example.

<sup>22</sup> Nuri-Zadeh. May 8, 2008. Reza's description of JAM-associated individuals likely refers to both mainstream JAM and SGC members.

<sup>23</sup> The Associated Press reported in April 2007 that Shiite Mahdi Army leaders claimed as many as 4,000 of their militia members had trained in Iran . See "U.S.: Iran training Iraqi militants in bombings" *USA Today* April 12, 2007 available at [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2007-04-11-iran-iraq-bombs\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2007-04-11-iran-iraq-bombs_N.htm). Recently released accounts of Iraqi militants that received more advanced training in Iran suggests that fewer militants are receiving this advanced training than are receiving basic training at camps closer to the border.

<sup>24</sup> The details of Iraqi militants' descriptions of initial basic training vary somewhat but include similar basic topics. See IR004 for an example.

operations executed by graduates of the Basic/Conventional Weapons Training Course. According to Iraqi militants that have attended these courses, the program of instruction includes training on numerous topics. Frequently mentioned topics in this program of instruction include:<sup>25</sup>

- Logistics and support
- Weapons employment
- Engineering/explosives
- Tactics
- Information Operations

Participants in this course are selected based on aptitude, education, and leadership potential. Most have already been to Iran at least once.<sup>26</sup> The training is quite advanced. The account below is a quote from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing a SGC member's description of training at the paramilitary camp:

A specific target ambush is normally conducted against a convoy of vehicles. A specific ambush will begin with engineers detonating roadside bombs focused on one vehicle of the convoy. The support weapons teams will then attack the other vehicles with mortars and rockets to force them back, while the conventional weapons teams assault the objective with small arms and RPGs. The conventional weapons teams will assault the target vehicle and take whatever equipment is available. If there is a person still alive in the target vehicle, then that person should be kidnapped if the situation permits. The indirect fire teams are responsible for keeping enough pressure on the other vehicles to prevent them from helping the target vehicle. The conventional weapons teams will withdraw with the seized equipment and persons while the indirect fire teams keep the other personnel from responding.<sup>27</sup>

Veterans of this advanced paramilitary training appear equipped to integrate multiple basic individual skills of militants and to synchronize them in sophisticated operations with deadly effect.

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<sup>25</sup> IR011 and IR004

<sup>26</sup> It is plausible that experienced militants with sufficient prior training and experience would be sent to advanced training without any prerequisite basic skills courses. The records reviewed suggest that individuals selected for advanced skills training and leadership roles in Special Groups tend to have prior record of training in Iran.

<sup>27</sup> Harmony Document IR001.

### *Master-trainer Course*

Bringing Iraqis to Iran for basic weapons training is logistically challenging, costly, and potentially exposes the existence of the program. To ameliorate these risks in the future, IRGC/Qods Force has developed a training program to prepare Iraqi trainers to instruct Iraqi militants inside of Iraq<sup>28</sup>. The following is translated from an actual quotation from an SGC member, who was recalling the words of the SGC recruiter that urged him to go to Iran for the third time:

I want to send you over there because you're an educated guy, so we'll send you to Iran... You're gonna have some experiences and with this experience you're gonna pass it to your friends.<sup>29</sup>

This description of a master-trainer program designed to train Iraqis in the skills and techniques needed to provide basic paramilitary training in Iraq is not surprising.<sup>30</sup> Many military training programs, including those run by the United States Special Forces, are designed to create master-trainers that can pass knowledge on to others. The purpose is to maximize the impact of the training while minimizing investment and risk. The technique is particularly useful when the sponsoring state—such as Iran—wants to obscure their role in the training.<sup>31</sup> One Iraqi militant who had attended the training explained this logic in a U.S. intelligence report paraphrased below:

The Iranian instructor told [DETAINEE] and ██████ that they would be in charge of starting a training program inside Iraq. This is necessary because the border will be under heavy scrutiny as CF (Coalition Forces) begins to look more closely at Iran's association with fighters in Iraq. [DETAINEE] and ██████ who were told that they have enough knowledge on all subjects in order to train fighters in Iraq, because Iran does not want this type of attention right now, will conduct the training.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> US Officials refer to this training as “train the trainer.” See Gordon, Michael “Hezbollah Trains Iraqi's in Iran” *The New York Times* May 5, 2008 available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/05/world/middleeast/05iran.html>

<sup>29</sup> This quote was extracted from an unreleased briefing developed by MNF-I. It is consistent with other statements made by the same former Iraqi militant in subsequent statements.

<sup>30</sup> Iranian sponsored “train the trainer” activities were highlighted by the British press in the Fall of 2005 in an article citing British Defence sources claiming “Insurgents are being taught to kill in special camps run by fanatics from the country's (Iran's) Revolutionary Guard... They then slip back over the border to attack our Boys in southern Iraq—and pass on bombing techniques to DOZENS of other extremists. See Newton, Tom “Trained to Kill our Boys” *The Sun* October 12, 2005

<sup>31</sup> IR 005, IR 002, and IR001

<sup>32</sup> IR 002



The master-trainer course graduates expert cadres able to raise, train, and employ a larger force when they return to Iraq. These classes develop a self sustaining capacity inside Iraq to produce effective fighters for Iranian-backed SGCs, while allowing Iran to avoid direct confrontation in Iraq and maintain plausible deniability for its actions.<sup>33</sup> Participants in the master-trainer program have at least completed the basic weapons training course and are on return trips to Iran.<sup>34</sup> Master-trainers are taught instructional techniques, required to give mock classes, and receive feedback from both their instructors and peers.<sup>35</sup> The master-trainers specialize in one of four areas, where they receive specialty training:<sup>36</sup>

- Explosively Formed Penetrators<sup>37</sup>
- Projectile Weapons, *e.g.*, mortars and rockets
- Conventional Weapons<sup>38</sup>
- Tactics and Guerrilla Warfare<sup>39</sup>

Several captured SGC members described a 16-man cohort that attended the master-trainer program in Iran and made several trips in 2006 to late 2007 preparing for this role. Four trainees were allocated into each of the specialty areas.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In 2007, Coalition Forces gained access to information on a cohort of Iraqi militants recruited to undergo a “train the trainer” program of instruction hosted by IRGC Qods Force operatives in Iran. Shortly afterwards, Coalition Forces were able to capture several members of this cohort and question them individually on the nature of the IRGC Qods Force efforts to train Iraqi militant cadres in Iran and send them back to Iraq to as force multipliers that would train exponentially larger numbers of militants to attack the GoI and Coalition Forces.

<sup>34</sup> This conclusion is based on review of a sample of participants in this training – all of whom made at least 3 trips to Iran for paramilitary training.

<sup>35</sup> IR001

<sup>36</sup> The specific areas and weapon systems trained are spelled in detail by recipients of this training . See IR 009

<sup>37</sup> See IR 016 for a detailed description of IRGC-QF training on EFPs.

<sup>38</sup> See IR013 for an example of the training schedule as described by one Iraqi militant that attended a conventional weapons instructor course in Iran.

<sup>39</sup> Specific topic areas taught in this course according to one militant that attended this training include: Booby Traps; POW Abduction; Attacking Coalition Force Bases; and Attacking Convoys. See IR 011

<sup>40</sup> IR 011

### *Other Paramilitary Training Courses in Iran*

Several captured Iraqi militants referred to “Special Forces” training that lasted over thirty days, which is longer than most other paramilitary courses taught at Iranian facilities. The program of instruction includes courses in swimming, diving, driving, and fitness.<sup>41</sup> The curriculum seems to echo claims by Iranian defectors that some Iraqis were learning swimming and watercraft techniques.<sup>42</sup> Other captured Iraqis described a twelve-day training course on the tactics and employment of Iranian made Strella Anti-Aircraft missiles,<sup>43</sup> a course on advanced sniper skills,<sup>44</sup> and administration and management courses, which are offered both in Iran and in Lebanon.<sup>45</sup>

### *Religious Training*

The Iranian training camps aim to indoctrinate as well as instruct. Many Iraqi militants acknowledge mandatory religious education as part of the daily training regimen.<sup>46</sup> This approach, however, is fraught with risk for Iran. Iraqi militants complain that the Iranian sheikhs providing the instruction tend to have a very poor command of Arabic and that the religious training on the whole is uninspiring.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes, the training programs even involve field trips to religious shrines.<sup>48</sup> One Iraqi militant who was training in Iran over Ramadan recounted one such experience. The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing this militant’s description of events:

When it came time for the celebration of Eid the instructors took the group to the Imam Khomeini shrine. [DETAINEE] decided not to go because [DETAINEE] did not want to spend his Eid celebrating at the shrine of the Imam Khomeini. [DETAINEE] follows Sayid Moqtada al-Sadr because Sayid Moqtada has always helped the poor Shi’a like his father Sayid Muhammad. Sayid Moqtada does not put himself above the poor people and is a very simple man... [DETAINEE] got the impression that everyone in Iran was attempting to draw the trainees into following a different leader than Sayid Moqtada al-Sadr.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> IR 004 and IR014

<sup>42</sup> Nuri-Zadeh. May 8, 2008

<sup>43</sup> IR 020 and IR002

<sup>44</sup> IR016

<sup>45</sup> IR020

<sup>46</sup> IR011 and IR013

<sup>47</sup> IR011

<sup>48</sup> IR023

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

The incidents illustrate the tenuous ideological relationship between Iran and its militant surrogates in Iraq. Theirs appears to be a marriage of convenience and little more.

### **Lebanese Hizballah**

Lebanese Hizballah has had links to Iraqi militant groups since the 1980s, when Hizballah personnel worked with Dawah to attack the U.S. embassy in Kuwait.<sup>50</sup> More recently, Lebanese Hizballah's support for Iraqi militants was coordinated by Ali Musa Daqduq, who was captured alongside Qais Khazali by U.S. troops.<sup>51</sup> Daqduq spent years in Iran and, according to Multi-National Forces—Iraq (MNF-I), coordinated training for JAM and SGC.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, MNF-I reports that the Qods Force provided Daqduq up to \$3 million every month.<sup>53</sup> Iran's reliance on Lebanese Hizballah likely reflects weakness as much as operational flexibility. Lebanese Hizballah trainers are proficient in Arabic and, according to some captured Iraqis, have a better rapport with the Iraqi trainees.<sup>54</sup> The same claim was repeated by General Reza, the former IRGC member.<sup>55</sup>

Significantly, not all Lebanese Hizballah training takes place in Iran. In some cases, Iraqi militants traveled to Hizballah's home territory in Lebanon. The accounts of some militants indicate they received training first in Iran, and then traveled onward to Lebanon for additional training. Other accounts suggest some militants received training from Lebanese Hizballah in Lebanon without any training in Iran.

Regardless of whether initial training is scheduled in Iran, the accounts of Iraqi militants claiming to have trained in Lebanon consistently describe their route into Lebanon as beginning with travel to Tehran following the same routes and supported by the same facilitation networks used by militants bound for Iranian training described above. From Tehran, Lebanon bound Iraqi militants fly to Damascus and then take an overland route across the border into Lebanon.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ware, Michael "U.S. Military: Iraqi Lawmaker is U.S. Embassy Bomber" *CNN* February 22, 2007

<sup>51</sup> Najm, Haydar "Security Source: Lebanese Hizballah's Senior Member Pretended to Be Deaf and Mute at Moment of Arrest in Basra. Sources Said Daqduq Operated with a Monthly Budget of up to \$3 Million" *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* July 4, 2007

<sup>52</sup> GEN Kevin Bergner Press Briefing. July 2, 2007

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

<sup>54</sup> IR010

<sup>55</sup> Nuri-Zadeh. May 8, 2008

<sup>56</sup> IR014 and IR003. Using available unclassified information, it is difficult to determine the location of the training camps used by Lebanese Hizballah to train Iraqi militants in Lebanon-or

The following account is composed of excerpts from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing an Iraqi militant's description of his follow on travel to Lebanon for training after completing a course in Iran:

After training concluded in Iran, [DETAINEE] left Iran on a commercial plane and arrived in Damascus, Syria. [DETAINEE] and his fellow students were walking up the Jetway, leaving the plane from Iran. They were greeted halfway up the Jetway by an unidentified male. This individual collected their tickets and baggage tags. [DETAINEE] and his fellow students were led away from the passenger terminal, out a door, onto the airport operations area. There was an airport bus waiting for them. They got onto the airport bus, and were driven to the edge of the airport property. [DETAINEE] knew he was in Damascus when [DETAINEE] saw Syrian license plates that had the words Halab and Damascus on them... [DETAINEE] and his fellow students got onto a 21 passenger bus... The bus left the highway, and drove into a farm area. At this point in time, the group was still in Syria... Approximately one hour after leaving the farm they stopped. [DETAINEE] and his fellow students got out of the GMCs, walked up a hill and located two vehicles waiting for them. [DETAINEE] and his fellow students were instructed to load themselves and their luggage into two vehicles, one of which was a four passenger pick up truck. The drivers did not get out of the vehicles, or address Detainee or his fellow students. The Syrian drivers of the GMCs approached the drivers of the two new vehicles. The Syrian drivers greeted the others by a standard greeting wishing them the peace of God and Imam Hussein. The Lebanese drivers of the new vehicles responded by saying "Keefak," which Detainee knows is greeting commonly used in Lebanon, but rarely used outside of Lebanon.<sup>57</sup>

Iraqi militants that claimed to have attended training in Lebanon describe a three-to-four week course on small unit tactics, special weapons, and other skills designed to prepare the Special Groups' leadership to manage and employ a paramilitary organization. One Iraqi militant described learning to fire advanced anti-armor missiles and a German sniper rifle.<sup>58</sup> Others, recruited to perform management and logistics roles within SGCs, were sent to Lebanon for advanced training and claimed to have received instruction in topics such as personnel supervision and management, project planning, weapons inventory control,

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the route taken to these camps from Damascus. Based on the reports of participants in this training, the camps are likely close to the border of Lebanon and Syria.

<sup>57</sup> IR014

<sup>58</sup> The Lebanese instructors commented to the Iraqi trainees that the training in Lebanon for Hizballah soldiers consisted of more than two years of instruction in their specialties. See IR 020 and IR 006

communications, weapons warehousing, and security.<sup>59</sup> Lebanon was also reportedly used for more extensive intelligence training, specifically for techniques effective in gaining information on Coalition Force activities in Iraq.<sup>60</sup>

Based on the accounts of multiple Iraqi militants that claimed to have been trained by Lebanese Hizballah, the training in Lebanon is considered to be superior to the training conducted in Iran. Part of this assessment appears to be based on the fact that the instructors and students share Arabic as their native language and have an Arab cultural affinity.<sup>61</sup> One Iraqi militant expressed his strong preference for Lebanese Hizballah training over IRGC-QF. The following quote is drawn from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing that militant's preference for Lebanese Hizballah trainers:

Iraqi SG trainees do not like their Iranian trainers. The Iranians do not show the SG trainees any respect and feel they are better than the SG trainees. The SG trainees like and respect the Lebanese Hizballah trainers because the Lebanese trainers speak Arabic and treat the SG trainees with respect.<sup>62</sup>

There is some evidence to support press reports claiming that Lebanese Hizballah does run operations inside Iraq itself.<sup>63</sup> The following quote is drawn from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing the assessment of one Iraqi militant that claimed to have trained in Iran:

██████ is the Lebanese Hizballah trainer in charge of the training camp [Detainee] attended in Iran. ██████ was always calm and collected. ██████ had very distinct cat-like eyes that were either bright green or bright blue. [Detainee] thinks ██████ has operated in Iraq because ██████ always used to talk about how Iraqi food is not good and how the Iraqis do not have good water. ██████ would drop hints like this to let the trainees know that ██████ has worked in Iraq. ██████ was one of the more respectful of the LH trainers, and appeared to demonstrate some knowledge of Iraqi culture. ██████ would say things about Iraq in a way that let the trainees know that ██████ has been to Iraq before. There are two kinds of LH, the kind you see on television, and the secret underground kind. All the trainers

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<sup>59</sup> IR 003, IR 014, and IR 015

<sup>60</sup> IR 020

<sup>61</sup> For example, one detained Iraqi militant claimed to have overheard the Lebanese Hizballah and IRGC instructors talking about the fact that Iraqis train in Lebanon for paramilitary training and that this training is far superior to the training conducted in Iran. IR001 and IR005.

<sup>62</sup> IR012

<sup>63</sup> Hendawi, Hemza and Qassim Abdul-Zarra "Hezbollah said to train Shiite militiamen in Iraq" *Associated Press* July 1, 2008

in Iran were the secret LH. If ██████ was in Iraq it would not be for a trip, ██████ would only go to do secret LH work ██████ spoke Iraqi dialect very well but it was still apparent that ██████ was Lebanese.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the evidence of Lebanese Hizballah trainers inside Iraq, it is dangerous to assume that groups in Iraq operating under the name “Hizballah” are tied to the Lebanese group. Several Iraqi organizations claim the moniker, but it is not clear whether or not they have a true command and control relationship with Lebanese Hizballah, or are just imitators.

### **Conclusions**

Iran’s extensive training programs for Iraqi militants offer Iran a way to influence the rate and scope of violence in Iraq without risking direct involvement. Employing Lebanese Hizballah trainers provides additional insulation and ameliorates the cultural tension between nationalist Iraqi militants and their Iranian sponsors. The tension between Iranian trainers and Iraqi militants partly explains why Iran prioritizes support for its political allies in Iraq. Iran’s militia allies do not trust their Iranian suitors, and it is likely that Iran has very little confidence that the JAM and SGC fighters they train are willing to pursue Iran’s political interests.

This tension offers the Iraqi and U.S. governments an opportunity to divide the militia members from their Iranian partner. By offering militia members legitimate ways to participate in the Iraqi economy and local security forces, it may be possible to drive a wedge between Iran and its insurgent partners in Iraq. Insurgent rehabilitation programs will be a key part of any long-term reconciliation program in Iraq. To be effective, the Iraqi government must organize and maintain such a program. In the short term, however, the Iraqi government will probably not pursue a Shi’a reconciliation program. The Dawah and ISCI political parties that control the Iraqi government will be loath to cooperate with difficult-to-control militia members with ties rival politicians, including Moqtada al-Sadr. Nonetheless, without a procedure for incorporating JAM and SGC members into the legitimate social and economic system, and leaders like Moqtada al-Sadr into the political process, Iraq will remain inherently unstable even if violence subsides.

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<sup>64</sup> See IR005.

**“Thus the expert at getting the enemy to make his move shows himself, and the enemy is certain to follow. He baits the enemy, and the enemy is certain to take it. In so doing, he moves the enemy, and lies in wait for him with his full force.”**

*“The Art of War”*

Sun Tzu

## Chapter 4

### Iranian Lethal Aid in Iraq

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U.S. officials continue to claim that they have compelling evidence directly linking Iran with the provision of weapons and munitions to insurgents in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Iran staunchly denies these claims, and counters that they are desperate attempts by the United States to recast responsibility for failure in Iraq. Both sides are engaged in a public relations war: Iran to prevent the U.S. from catalyzing international condemnation of its meddling in Iraq, the U.S. to convince Arab states and others to respond to Iran’s activities and also to offer skeptical audiences globally an explanation for slow progress in Iraq.

Iran does acknowledge that Iranian weapons have been discovered in Iraq, but claims they are either left over from the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war or were purchased on the open market. Iran also stresses that many countries produce weapons and munitions similar to those made in Iran—*e.g.*, the ubiquitous 107mm rocket—and claims that such ordnance found in Iraq is often mistakenly or purposely assessed to be Iranian. The Tehran-based Fars News Agency published an article in late May 2008 titled, “U.S. Unable to Prove Allegations against Iran,” that illustrates Iran’s basic argument:

The US military command in Iraq continues to talk about an alleged pipeline of Iranian weapons to Iraqi Shi’as opposing the US occupation, implying that they have become dependent on Iran for indirect-fire weapons and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). But US officials have failed thus far to provide evidence that would support the claim, and a long-delayed US military report on Iranian arms is unlikely to offer any data on what proportion of the weapons in the hands of Shi’a fighters are from Iran and what proportion comes from purchases on the

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<sup>1</sup> Rubin, Alissa “Iran Halts Talks With US on Iraq” *The New York Times* May 6, 2008. See Kagan, Kimberly “Iran’s Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government” published by The Institute for the Study of War and [www.weeklystandard.com](http://www.weeklystandard.com) for a comprehensive assessment using publicly available information linking Iran with the provision of lethal aid to militants in Iraq through 2007.

open market... Bergner's [Brigadier General Bergner, MNF-I Spokesman] refusal to address that question reflects a fundamental problem with the US claims about Iranian weapons in Iraq: there are indeed no Iranian rockets and mortars, and RPGs in the Mahdi Army's arsenal of stand-off weapons.<sup>2</sup>

Claims of Iran's malign influence in Iraq are echoed by other Coalition Force members. In late April 2008, following a sharp increase in violence attributed to Iranian backed Shi'a militias, British Defense Secretary Browne explained to lawmakers in London, "There is evidence to suggest a significant proportion of the equipment and the armaments being used by insurgents used in Iraq is of Iranian origin or has been transited through Iran."<sup>3</sup> However, such accusations are met with similar dismissals as those coming from U.S. officials. Almost immediately after Browne's remark, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini responded, "Lambasting such undocumented and fabricated allegations which are to create negative impacts are to serve the policies of the occupying forces."<sup>4</sup>

The Iraqi government – generally reluctant to publicly confront its Persian neighbor – has also voiced its concern over Iran's nefarious destabilizing activities within its borders. Significantly, Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited Tehran and President Ahmedinejad in June 2008. He is believed to have personally presented evidence of Iranian support to rogue Shi'a militias and demanded that Tehran cease such egregious violations of Iraqi sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

Iran has been successful parrying these accusations, especially those coming from U.S. officials. In the wake of the United States' false claims about Iraqi WMD, many in the media and international community are understandably suspicious of U.S. claims about Iranian weapons arriving in Iraq. Proof of such activities is further complicated by Iran's extensive influence at the local government and ministerial level in the southeastern border provinces where much of the aid arrives. Despite Iranian protests, however, there is clear evidence of Iranian support to Iraqi militias, including many weapons

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<sup>2</sup> See "US Unable To Prove Allegations Against Iran" *Tehran Fars News Agency* May 25, 2008

<sup>3</sup> "UK says 'significant proportion' of Iraqi insurgent weapons come from Iran" *Associated Press* April 28, 2008

<sup>4</sup> *Tehran Times* April 29, 2008

<sup>5</sup> This visit was widely reported in the media. See Kramer, Andrew "Iraqi Prime Minister May Discuss Allegations in Iran Visit" *The New York Times* June 10, 2008 available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/03/world/middleeast/03iraq.html>



manufactured after the Iran-Iraq war, some of which were produced after the 2003 invasion.<sup>6</sup>

Iranian lethal aid to militias in Iraq is not surprising. Though often characterized as the behavior of an irrational or aggressive regime, Iran's program to support Iraqi militants is a product of realpolitik rather than Islamist ideology. From Iran's perspective, the U.S. presence in Iraq is inherently threatening. Iran's support for Iraqi militias is entirely rational considering its strategic position, relationship with the U.S., and history. Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, U.S. planners should have predicted and planned for the range of activities Iran conducts today.

Conceding the rationality of Iran's strategy and behavior in Iraq does not mean those activities should be acceptable to Iraqi or U.S. policymakers. Indeed, Iran's meddling in Iraq poses a real threat to the national security of both countries and must be countered forcefully and, in some cases, violently. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the cold-hearted realism at the center of Iran's present Iraq strategy because it suggests that a combination of well-placed sticks and creative carrots are capable of changing Iranian behavior.

Targeting the IRGC-QF linked logistical networks funneling weapons into Iraq is particularly important. The most famous, and perhaps the most important, is led by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, the former Badr Corps commander in Baghdad. But there are others, including a largely criminal network run by Ahmad Sajad al-Gharawi in Maysan Province.<sup>7</sup> The most important indicators of Iranian support involve the infamous and highly lethal Explosively Formed Penetrators, which have been employed in increasing numbers in Iraq since they were first observed in 2004. Other particularly compelling evidence of Iranian support is found in the indirect fire and IED attacks on Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces using rockets, mortars, and explosives believed to have come across the border from Iran.

### **Smoking Guns or Smoke and Mirrors?**

The complexity of international arms markets and the legacy of warfare between Iran and Iraq complicate efforts to assess the scope of Iranian lethal aid in Iraq.

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<sup>6</sup> Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Effects, MNF-I provided many details of Iran's lethal aid in regular press briefings such as the one he provided to the press on September 13, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, Michael and Scott Shane "US Long Worried That Iran Supplied Arms in Iraq" *The New York Times* March 27, 2007

Many of the Iranian weapons scattered across Iraq do appear to have been left in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Caches recovered by Coalition Forces in Iraq include older weathered munitions that likely have been in the ground for some time.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, some reports erroneously attribute munitions similar to those produced in Iran as Iranian, while other Iranian munitions found in Iraq were likely purchased on the open market.<sup>10</sup>

Imprecise reporting and claims that are not clearly substantiated about Iranian weapons backfire against U.S. forces and make Iran's public denials seem more compelling. For example, Coalition Force officials and numerous accounts in the media report that Iran purchases arms from China and smuggles them to Shi'a militias in Iraq for use against Coalition Forces.<sup>11</sup> But since many Chinese manufactured weapons closely resemble models made in other countries, it is difficult to determine the source of the weapons.<sup>12</sup> Such problems make identifying the exact number of Iranian weapons in Iraq very difficult. To

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<sup>8</sup> Based on author review of photos accompanying multiple Coalition Force cache reports and expert assessments provided by MNF-I Explosives Ordnance Disposal personnel.

<sup>9</sup> Photos accompanying multiple cache reports include rusty munitions and unserviceable weapons all of which appear to be left over from conflict long passed.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A for a compilation and assessment of caches recovered by Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces containing suspected Iranian weapons and munitions. Iran openly markets its arms and munitions. See <http://www.diomil.ir/> for the Defense Industries of Iran website. This site even offers to allow purchases of lethal munitions by credit card! Significantly, many of the photos of Iranian munitions such as mortar rounds and rockets provided on this open site closely match photos of munitions recovered in Iraq.

<sup>11</sup> MNF-I spokesman Admiral Mark Fox press briefing July 22, 2007. See also Tkacik, John "China's Secret Arms Dealings" *The Weekly Standard* August 8, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in 2005 Iran purchased 800 Steyr .50 caliber HS sniper rifles from Steyr Mannlicher GmbH, an Austrian precision weapons company. According to Austrian officials, the weapons were originally purchased for use by the National Iranian Police Organization, ostensibly to support counter narcotics smuggling operations. In February 2007, press accounts claimed that Coalition Forces recovered over one hundred sniper rifles in Iraq and were initially reported to have been traced to this same Iranian purchase. US officials subsequently denied finding Austrian made sniper rifles in Iraq. Interestingly, a number of accounts from Iraqi militants that trained in Iran in 2007 acknowledge receiving familiarization training on a rifle that closely resembled the Steyr .50 caliber HS sniper rifle – the same model legally purchased by Iran in 2005. Steyr Mannlicher company notes that the patent on this sniper rifle had expired-thus it is a possibility that the rifles of alleged Austrian origin were in fact made elsewhere and potentially China. See Harding, Thomas "Iraqi Insurgents Using Austrian Sniper Rifles in Iraq" *Telegraph Newspaper* February 14, 2007 available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1542559/Iraqi-insurgents-using-Austrian-rifles-from-Iran.html>. See also Brummet, Chris "Pace Questions whether Iran Arming Iraq" *The Washington Post* February 13, 2007. See IR 013 for Iraqi militants' accounts claiming to have trained on the Steyr at paramilitary camps in Iran.

strengthen their credibility, U.S. officials should remain silent on issues of Iranian weapons in Iraq unless they can provide clear evidence substantiating their claims.

*Alleged Iranian Weapons Caches*

According to Coalition and Iraqi Security Force reporting, a total of 20,067 caches containing a combination of weapons, explosives, and/or munitions were recovered in Iraq between January 2004 and June 2008.<sup>13</sup> Beginning with reports from July 2006, MNF-I flagged caches with suspected evidence of Iranian weapons and munitions. The number of Iranian-linked weapons in each cache range from a single item to much larger collections with enough weapons and ordnance to supply multiple major operations. The MNF-I reporting indicates that nearly 200 caches with weapons and/or munitions suspected to have originated in Iran were discovered in Iraq between July 2006 and May 2008.<sup>14</sup> This number increased markedly over those two years, going up from nine caches in the six month period between July 2006 and December 2006 to 98 reported caches from January to May 2008.

**Figure 5: Iranian Weapons Caches Reported July 2006- May 2008<sup>15</sup>**

Event	July-Dec 2006	Jan-Jun 2007	July-Dec 2007	Jan-May 2008	July06-May08
Cache	9	43	47	98	197

*Coalition Efforts to Confirm Origin of Iranian Weapons/Munitions*

Due in part to the increasing concern over suspected Iranian provision of lethal aid, in January 2008 MNF-I stepped up its efforts to confirm the accuracy of

<sup>13</sup> This data is extracted from Unclassified information in the SIGACTS 3 Database maintained by MNF-I and compiled in support of the Empirical Studies of Conflict (ESOC) project co-hosted by the US Military Academy and Princeton University.

<sup>14</sup> This number is compiled from Unclassified fields extracted from data maintained by MNF-I. This data also includes indirect fire attacks and IED attacks believed to involve Iranian munitions. It is likely that additional incidents with possible Iranian connections occurred that were not reported and that a number of the events involve vintage Iranian weapons, weapons similar to Iranian models, or those purchased on the open market. The list does not include some types of weapons and munitions including most EFPs. Additionally, Coalition Forces have not focused on data collection related to Iranian influence in Iraq until recently; thus, there are bound to be reporting inaccuracies.

<sup>15</sup> This unclassified information is consolidated from Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces reporting and provided to author by MNF-I's Iranian weapons task force.

Coalition Force reports of Iranian weapons and munitions found in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Explosives Ordnance Disposal personnel from MNF-I's Iranian weapons task force—highly trained experts particularly skilled at determining the origins of weapons and ordnance—began physically assessing caches with contents of suspected Iranian origin. After January 2008, all caches were evaluated by experts from the task force to assess the source and production date of the materials found and, in particular, whether or not the cache contained Iranian munitions produced after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the findings of this expert assessment, MNF-I reported that Iranian munitions were recovered in 166 incidents between 1 January and 23 May 2008.<sup>18</sup> Of these incidents, 85 were determined to include weapons and/or ordnance produced in 2003 or later and 28 incidents had sufficient evidence to determine they were manufactured before 2003. The remaining 53 recorded incidents were deemed not to have sufficient information to determine when the weapons and munitions were produced.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> July 3-5, 2008 author interviews with munitions experts from MNFI's Iranian weapons task force, Baghdad Iraq.

<sup>17</sup> MNFI's Iranian weapons task force's methodology for categorizing caches identified contents that were produced before 2003 and after. Importantly, the task force pointed out during an author visit to the Headquarters on 3 July 2008 that weapons provided by Iran to militants in Iraq after the 2003 invasion could still have an earlier manufacture date and could even be weapons and munitions made in countries other than Iran.

<sup>18</sup> MNFI's Iranian weapons task force's munitions experts broke these incidents down further to include the categories of "caches"—which are weapons and munitions being intentionally stored in Iraq and "Enemy Remnants of War" (ERW)—which are weapons and munitions that are not believed to be left behind intentionally in Iraq. Author interview with task force personnel 3-5 July 2008.

<sup>19</sup> These cache and Enemy Remnants of War incidents were still determined to have some evidence of Iranian weapons and/or munitions despite the lack of sufficient information to determine the manufacture dates.

An example of reporting from this database of Iranian-linked caches found in Iraq between January and May 2008 is included below:

Date	Region	Contents
5 May 2008	Southeast	2x Iranian PG-7-AT, 5x Iranian PG-7-AT-1, 2x Iranian 120mm mortar, Lot 1/2008, 2x Iranian 81mm mortar, Lot 2/2008, 3x Iranian 107mm rocket, and 102x Iranian C-4, 2x 8" directional frag, 1x 24" incomplete EFP, 11x EFP arrays encased in foam, 3x improvised claymores, 1x fuel canister encased in foam, 10x 4" copper EFP, 3x 6" steel EFP, 48x 6" copper EFP, 9x 8" copper EFP, 3x 8" Steel EFP, 23x 10" copper EFP, 3x 10" steel EFP, 4x 12" copper EFP, 30x 14" copper EFP, 3x PIR lenses, 8x EFP telemetry devices, 6x camera flash slave unit, 2x firing pack, 1x time regulator, 10x timing connectors, 1x DTMF 20B board, 1x washing machine timer, 3x power distribution unit, 2x 12v motorcycle battery, 3x Snya box, 1x US-military RF tracking tag - 5357804

The complete data collected on the 166 incidents where Iranian weapons/munitions discovered in Iraq between January and May 2008 is available as Appendix C.

#### *Explosively Formed Penetrators*

The most lethal Iranian supplied weapons are the Explosively Formed Penetrators, rounded copper and steel IEDs.<sup>20</sup> The key component of most EFPs are the precision made copper disks that form a molten slug when detonated that can slice through even the most hardened armored vehicles. EFP incidents are widely considered the most undeniable and overt manifestations of Iranian influence. The technology required to manufacture the copper warheads for these deadly weapons is believed to be Iranian, and not available in Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

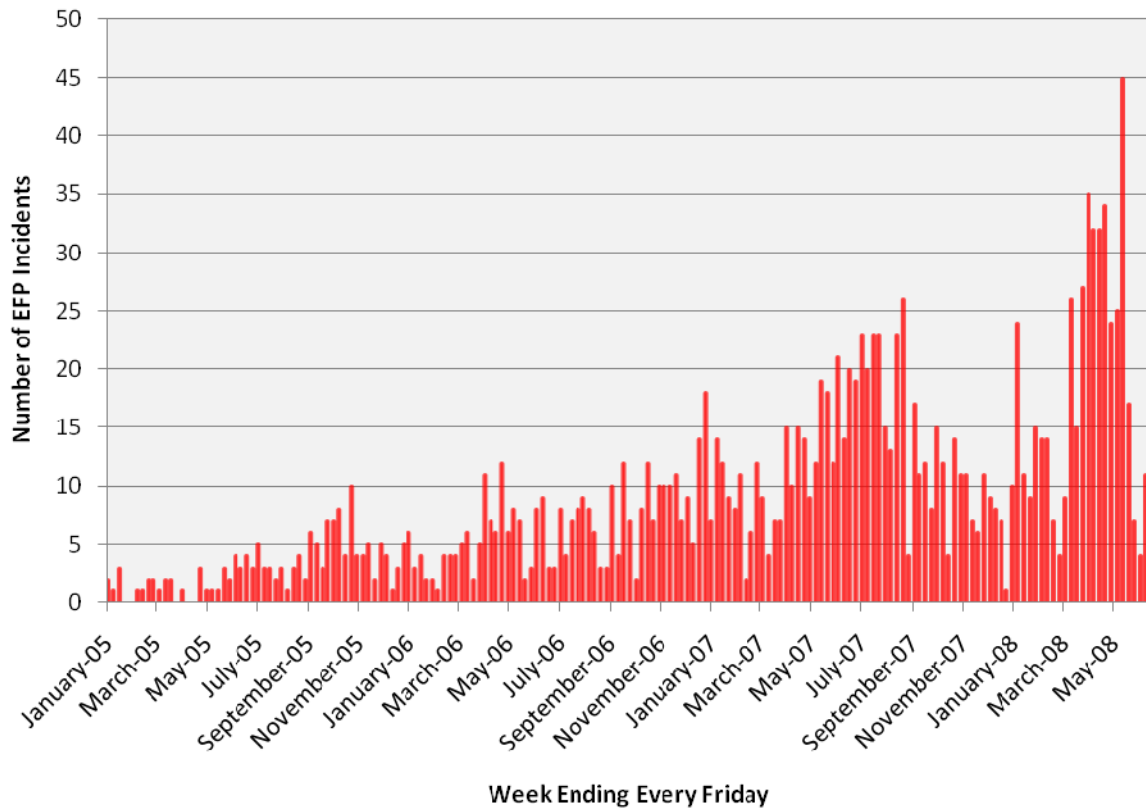
<sup>20</sup> See Gordon, Michael R. "The Deadliest Bomb in Iraq is made in Iran, US Says" *The New York Times* February 10, 2007

<sup>21</sup> Anecdotal evidence indicates broad concern that Iran's surrogate militias may succeed in developing an EFP production capacity within Iraq using Iranian made presses for the critical copper disk components of the EFP. This would be consistent with Iran's concerted efforts to maintain plausible deniability for its role in sponsoring attacks in Iraq.

According to Iraqi intelligence documents, Iranian-backed militias have been using rounded IEDs inside Iraq since at least 2001. Indeed, the networks used to smuggle Iranian EFPs into Iraq today were probably largely in place long before the U.S. invasion. One of the most important EFP smugglers today, Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, was a core Badr Corps member in the 1990s, working to attack and weaken Saddam Hussein’s regime. Today, EFPs have become the weapon of choice of Iranian supplied militants in Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 6 provides the number of EFP attacks and attempted attacks recorded each month from January 2005 through June 2008.<sup>23</sup>

*Figure 6: EFP Incidents January 2005- May 2008*



Attacks vary by week but show a significant upward trend over time. Many of the spikes depicted in Figure 6 correspond to significant political/security related

<sup>22</sup> The total number of Coalition Force casualties attributed to EFP attacks is not publicly releasable.

<sup>23</sup> These EFP incidents include those that detonated as well as those found and cleared. They do not reflect currently classified information on casualties attributed to these attacks. These figures are aggregated from Coalition Force reporting and compiled by Colonel Lee Ewing Commander’s Initiatives Group at MNF-I.

events. For example, the increase in EFP attacks in the fall of 2005 occurred during the run up to the December 15 parliamentary elections. The upward trend of EFP attacks beginning in early 2007 and extending through late summer corresponds to the arrival of the additional U.S. combat brigades making up the “surge” of forces in Iraq. The number of EFP attacks—like other insurgent attacks—dropped precipitously in mid-2008, shortly after a spike that coincided with the U.S. and Iraqi push into Sadr City.

The large majority of EFP attacks/attempts occur in Baghdad. Indeed, 67 percent of the 623 EFP incidents recorded in 2007 were clustered within Iraq’s capital city. Figure 7 shows the number of EFP incidents by province in 2007.<sup>24</sup>

*Figure 7: EFP Incidents in 2007<sup>25</sup>*

PROVINCE	# EFP Incidents 2007	% of Total Incidents
Baghdad	417	66.9%
Babil	53	8.5%
Basra	50	8.0%
Qadisiyah	38	6.1%
Dhi Qar	29	4.7%
Diyala	9	1.4%
Wasit	7	1.1%
Ta'mim	7	1.1%
Maysan	4	0.6%
Karbala	3	0.5%
Ninawa	2	0.3%
Sal al Din	2	0.3%
Muthanna	2	0.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100%</b>

In the first four months of 2008, EFP incidents were clustered almost exclusively in Baghdad, which saw almost 90 percent (202 out of 228) of the total reported EFP incidents.<sup>26</sup> The concentration of EFPs in Baghdad is not surprising. EFPs

<sup>24</sup> These figures include both EFP attacks executed as well as EFPs found and cleared by Coalition and/or Iraqi forces prior to being employed.

<sup>25</sup> The unclassified information indicating the place and location that an EFP related incident occurred is extracted from Iraqi and Coalition reporting in MNF-I SIGACTS III and provided by Colonel Lee Ewing, MNF-I Commander’s Initiatives Group.

<sup>26</sup> MNF-I reporting provided by Colonel Lee Ewing.

are used primarily against U.S. forces, in part because U.S. forces use more heavily armored vehicles which require a more advanced weapon to destroy. Iraq's Shi'a militias are concentrated in Baghdad and in Iraq's southern provinces, where there are fewer U.S. forces. Baghdad, therefore, is the venue where Shi'a militias are likely to have the strong logistical infrastructure and access to U.S. troops they would need to make use of EFPs. As U.S. troops move further south and east, EFP attacks will likely proliferate geographically, if not in overall number.

Nonetheless, U.S. and other Coalition Forces are not the only victims of EFP attacks. Militias have used EFPs for a number of high profile attacks and assassinations on Iraqi officials and Iraqi Security Forces, including the August 20, 2007 assassination of Governor Muhannad al-Hassani; the October 4, 2007 assassination of Mayor Abbas Kafaji of Iskandariyah; and the December 9, 2007 assassination of Iraqi LTG Qais Hamza Aboud al Mamuri.<sup>27</sup>

#### *JAM and SGC Accounts of Iranian Lethal Aid*

After being captured, JAM militiamen, SGC fighters, and other militants have described the nature and scope of Iranian weapons smuggling into Iraq. The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing a captured SGC member's description of his interaction with weapons smugglers bringing Iranian-supplied weapons into Iraq:

The SG (Special Groups) weapons smugglers often spoke of receiving EFP shipments from Iran through Basra, Amara, and Diwaniyah. The weapons are being smuggled from Iran into Iraq by trucks hauling sheep, cigarettes, and cement... The weapons smuggled into Iraq through Basra, Amara, and Diwaniyah are taken to Sadr City and distributed to SG in outlying provinces from Sadr City.<sup>28</sup>

Another detained Iraqi militant familiar with weapons smuggling activities, described an area in the marshes next to the Iraqi border town of Qal 'at Sali, southeast of Amara, as a primary thoroughfare for Iranian weapons and other contraband. The following quote is from a U.S. intelligence report paraphrasing the militant's description of events:

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<sup>27</sup> This list is not exhaustive and was compiled from press reports. Notwithstanding high profile assassinations of Iraqi officials, EFP attacks are almost always used against CF targets. Evidence of this is seen in the lack of attacks on Iraqi Army units moving in to Sadr City in May 2008 as well as in Amara in June 2008.

<sup>28</sup> This is a summary account from a US Intelligence Report. See IR026.



This area (marshes vicinity Qal 'at Sali) is used heavily by small boats carrying weapons from IR (Iran). The boat handler's [sic] most likely use the same drivers each trip and make arrangements prior to leaving IR (Iran). Drugs and contraband are smuggled into IZ (Iraq) by the same routes. The area is dangerous and everyone carries weapons even while fishing. The boats carrying weapons are covered with reeds and are easily hidden. The boats can be unloaded anywhere along the shoreline, and the weapons are placed in the beds of pickup trucks, which are then covered with bundles of reeds. Most smugglers use local dirt roads to avoid CF (Coalition Force) checkpoints.<sup>29</sup>

The marshy areas on Iraq's southeastern border described in the above account and allegedly used to smuggle lethal aid from Iran is mentioned frequently by Iraqi militants when asked how weapons, munitions, and other lethal aid are brought into Iraq from Iran. Other militants' accounts describe overland border crossings as especially porous and with officials on both sides susceptible to the inherent corruption associated with illicit smuggling activities.

### **Conclusions**

General David Petraeus, former Commanding General of MNF-I, emphasized to U.S. lawmakers in his April 2008 Senate testimony that malign Iranian influence is the most significant long-term threat to the security of Iraq.<sup>30</sup> And such influence is unlikely to stop any time soon. The decline of EFP incidents after May 2008 highlights a general decline in violence, but it is very unlikely that Iran has abandoned its program to fund and support Iraqi militias. Rather, the decline is probably associated with a concerted effort to minimize violence during the SFA/SOFA negotiations. The Iraqi government has taken a firmer stand against Iranian meddling in 2008 than in previous years, but even a concerted Iraqi government effort will not staunch a dedicated program to smuggle weapons across the border. It is important to remember that Iran was able to effectively sponsor Iraqi militants even during the authoritarian Saddam era

Iranian support to Iraqi militants will continue even if Iran is able to achieve its core political goals via the Iraqi political system. Funneling weapons across the border will remain a useful hedge against unforeseen political developments in Iraq. Indeed, supporting Iraqi militias should be considered a core element of

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<sup>29</sup> IR 027.

<sup>30</sup> General Petraeus' Senate Testimony April 8, 2008 available at <http://www.senate.gov/~foreign/testimony/2008/PetraeusTestimony080408p.pdf>

Iranian grand strategy. Essentially, Iran has engaged in similar behavior since the 1979 revolution. There was no reason to believe that Iran would have stopped with the arrival of U.S. forces in Iraq—and no reason to believe it will stop if they leave.

The challenge for the Iraqi government is both a function of supply and demand. Obviously building a comfortable, cooperative relationship with its Eastern neighbor is important to limiting nefarious Iranian meddling, but so must be integrating potential militants into Iraq's legitimate political and economic systems.

**“So to win a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the highest excellence; the highest excellence is to subdue the enemy’s army without fighting at all.”**

*“The Art of War”*

Sun Tzu

## Chapter 5

### Findings and Recommendations

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#### KEY FINDINGS

**Iran’s primary mode of influence in Iraq is to maintain strong ties to friendly Iraqi political parties.** It is entirely possible that in five years Iran will have more influence in Baghdad than the United States. The core members of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Badr Organization, and the Dawah Party were organized, supported, and trained by Iran during their twenty years in exile. Iranian ties to these leaders are political, religious, and personal. Many of the Iraqi members of these organizations called Iran home for two decades, speak Farsi, and embrace Persian culture. Nonetheless, despite continued financial support from Iran, neither ISCI/Badr nor Dawah is an Iranian proxy. Many ISCI/Badr and Dawah leaders retain a strong nationalistic and personal connection to their Iraqi homeland. Iran fears their Iraqi allies’ growing relationships with the United States and, more importantly, their electoral-driven need to appeal to Iraqi nationalism. Despite these fears, Iran has repeatedly supported the electoral process in Iraq as a means to emplace its allies in positions of power, and has pressured its anti-government allies—including Moqtada al-Sadr—to cease militant activities that would fundamentally disrupt the political process.

**Iran has achieved many of its core goals in Iraq.** Iran has achieved its most important strategic successes in Iraq without violence. In the January 2005 General Assembly elections, SCIRI/Badr won control of nine of the eleven Shi’a dominated provinces. The Iraqi constitution approved later that year weakened the central Iraqi government in favor of Iraq’s provinces. Now, the government of Iraq is actively dismantling al-Sadr’s militia, which limits the electoral viability of Iraq’s most nationalist Shi’a political party. By doing so, Iran and its Iraqi political allies have effectively circumscribed Iraq’s central government in ways that will enable Iran to exert considerable pressure and authority over Iraq’s southern provinces.

**Iran provides training and weapons to various Iraqi militias, including Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and the Special Group Criminals (SGCs).** Like the United States, Iran did not fully anticipate the role that nationalist—anti-American and anti-Iranian—militias like JAM and the SGCs would play in post-invasion Iraq. Nonetheless, Iran uses the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Qods Force to provide extensive training programs for Iraqi militants inside Iran. Both JAM and SGC members have deep reservations about working with Iran, but they accept Iranian support because they are adamantly opposed to the U.S. presence in Iraq, power-hungry, and sometimes criminal. For Iran's part, its support for the militias serves as a hedge against the central Iraqi government growing too powerful or too close to the U.S. Iran enjoys being able to pressure the United States militarily while simultaneously empowering its political surrogates, ISCI/Badr and parts of the Dawah Party, to work with the U.S. through the Iraqi government.

**Iran's training program for Iraqi Shi'a militias is robust.** Iraqi militants captured by the United States describe a complex Iranian program equipped to illicitly move, train, and arm Iraqis. Classes range from basic weapons courses and paramilitary training to courses designed to create Iraqi master-trainers that can continue military education and training inside Iraq. Iran employs Lebanese Hizballah agents as trainers inside Iran and sponsors Iraqi militants' travel to train with Hizballah in Lebanon. Many Iraqi militants prefer the Lebanese Hizballah trainers to Iranians because they speak fluent Arabic, are deemed more polite than Iranians, and are often considered better instructors. Militants that had attended Iranian sponsored training conducted by Hizballah in Lebanon considered it to be more advanced training than the Iran-based classes.

**Iran's strategy and violent activities in Iraq today are derivative of Iranian covert activities in Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s.** Iran has looked to export the ideals of the Iranian Revolution since 1979. Those efforts were thwarted in the 1980s primarily by Saddam Hussein, whose 1980 invasion of Iran required the regime's full attention. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iran sponsored numerous Iraqi opposition movements, the most important of which was the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, which subsequently became the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)) and its militia, the Badr Corps. The Badr Corps launched guerilla attacks against Iraqi forces and the Mojehadin-e-Khalq (MKO), an anti-Iranian terrorist group sheltered in Iraq.

**There are deep, personal ties between Iranian-linked militants in Iraq and Iraqi politicians.** Several senior figures in the Badr Corps from the 1990s,

including Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, are central figures in the logistical networks funneling highly lethal EFPs and other Iranian weapons to Iraqi militia groups. Al-Muhandis is also wanted for bombing the U.S. embassy in Kuwait in 1983. Many members of the Iraqi parliament were deeply integrated into the Badr Corps in the 1980s and 1990s, including Hadi al-Ameri, head of the Badr Organization today and the former Chief of Staff for Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

**Iran wants to force U.S. troops out of Iraq, but so long as Americans remain, Iran will use direct access to U.S. forces to attempt to deter a strike against its nuclear facilities.** The U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan leaves Iran feeling cornered. Forcing U.S. troops out of Iraq will relieve some of that pressure and open the door to increased Iranian influence in Iraq. If unable to evict U.S. troops from Iraq, Iran will likely leverage its ability to inflict casualties on American forces and use this credible threat to deter any possible U.S. strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. By demonstrating its ability to kill U.S. troops and undermine Iraqi civil society, Iran will try to show it can strike back if its nuclear sites are threatened.

**Iraqi politicians will not ratify a Strategic Framework Agreement or Status of Forces Agreement with the United States before the Iraqi provincial elections.** No elected Iraqi official wants to publicly support a continued U.S. presence in Iraq. Although many Iraqi politicians depend on the U.S.-backed system for power, and many Iraqis trust U.S. troops more than their own government, overt and public support for continued U.S. presence is politically untenable. U.S. officials should expect that Iraqi politicians will try to postpone any final SFA/SOFA agreement until after provincial elections.

**Iran will try to retain a non-governmental militant capability in Iraq, no matter how friendly the Iraqi government becomes.** Iran sees no contradiction in working with both the Iraqi government and continuing to sponsor violent militias capable of inflicting violence inside Iraq's borders. Actual violence perpetrated by Iran's surrogate militants will subside as U.S. forces leave; nevertheless, Iran will still strive to maintain a responsive capacity to "dial up" violence levels as conditions demand. Iran worries about the possibility of a Sunni uprising or power grab, will want to pressure any U.S. troops that remain in Iraq, and will seek to maintain covert networks for conveying goods and personnel across Iraq. These networks will likely be built from existing SGC networks, which tend to be more criminal in nature than JAM, which has a more

ardently nationalist ideology. Iran will likely provide these personnel with advanced military training, ideological courses, and high financial compensation.

**Resurgent Iraqi nationalism will challenge Iranian influence efforts.** Iranian influence is strongest when Iraqi Shi'a can rally around a common enemy or shared grievance—formerly the oppression of Saddam's Bathist regime and now the occupation of Iraq by U.S. forces. However, Iranian support will lose its base of appeal without a common foe. The accounts of Iraqi militants that have been trained, equipped, and armed by the IRGC-QF and their surrogates are rife with passages describing altercations and tensions with their Iranian sponsors. These underscore many of the tensions that exist between JAM, SGC, and their Iranian cadres. Although Iraqi Shi'a militants and their Iranian sponsors have a shared religion and common interest in ending the occupation of Iraq by American and Coalition Forces, their historical animosities, exacerbated by cultural and ethno-linguistic cleavages, belie a tension that will challenge any long-term relationship between Iran and its Iraqi Shi'a counterparts. This dynamic is likely to become more dysfunctional with the strengthening of the Iraqi central government and the reduction of U.S. troops in Iraq.

**Iranian influence in Iraq is inevitable and, in many cases, constructive.** Iranian influence in Iraq will persist as long as these countries share a border. This influence will be productive so long as it is channeled into a force for stability and economic growth. Tourism, religious visits, and other cross-border relations bring needed revenue, and even the presence of Iraqi politicians with strong links to Iran does not necessarily undercut Iraqi sovereignty or security. These politicians will serve an important moderating function when the inevitable disputes between Iran and Iraq arise.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Attack Iran's strategy with a strategy.** Whether designed as such or not, Iran's lethal aid for JAM and SGC has obscured its political support for ISCI/Badr and its effort to extend influence in Iraq's southern provinces by weakening the Iraqi central government through the political system. Military gains against JAM and the SGC are important successes, but these triumphs will be pyrrhic if not coupled with a focused strategy to constrain Iranian influence in the Iraqi political system. Defeating Iranian-backed militias while conceding creeping Iranian influence over the Iraqi government may actually reduce violence in Iraq, but this strategy does not serve U.S. or Iraqi long-term interests. The U.S. needs a comprehensive strategy to counter all aspects of negative Iranian influence. At

its heart, this strategy requires clearly delineating which forms of Iranian influence are unacceptable, which are tolerable, and which should actually be encouraged.

**Exploit common ground with Iran through diplomacy.** The United States and Iran are not engaged in a zero-sum game in Iraq. Both countries want greater stability and democracy, as well as a reduction of U.S. troops. Neither Washington nor Tehran wants a hostile relationship that could lead to unnecessary conflict. There are serious disagreements over the quality of the emerging democratic government in Iraq, as well as the pace of U.S. troop withdrawals. In part because of the latent threat of the U.S. military, Iran will likely view it in its interest to engage the U.S. as well. Clearly, Iran crosses a red line by providing support to Iraqi militias targeting U.S. troops. Nonetheless, the conflict is compounded by misunderstanding and excess fear on both sides. The overlapping interests provide space for compromises in which all sides' interests are better met than with the *status quo*. Establishing better communications channels and mechanisms to exercise prudent diplomatic measures are key to more accurate assessments of interests and intentions on both sides.

**Circumvent Iran's hardliners. Negotiate with its pragmatists.** The Iranian state is not uniform. Although IRGC-QF clearly works with the acquiescence of Iran's Supreme Leader, there are influential politicians in Iran that have a more pragmatic outlook on the United States. Many of these leaders are wary of the U.S., but open to peaceful interaction. The U.S. should seek opportunities to communicate with such leaders via Track 2 dialogue and other unofficial means where compromises and concessions can be discussed and allow those Iranian pragmatists to demonstrate the potential viability of peaceful interaction.

**Offer Moqtada al-Sadr and his followers incentives to participate in the Iraqi political process.** Moqtada al-Sadr is volatile, but for millions of Iraqis, he is the bulwark of nationalism. The United States should crackdown on JAM violence, but offer incentives to promote al-Sadr's participation in the Iraqi government; his presence serves as a counterweight to ISCI, BADR and other Iranian-backed groups that favor a hyper-federalized Iraqi state.

**Encourage Prime Minister Maliki's increasingly nationalist views.** Because Prime Minister al-Maliki comes from a pro-Iranian wing of the Dawah Party, it is likely that at least some of his crackdown on JAM and the SGCs is an effort to improve his party's electoral prospects in the October provincial elections and weaken al-Sadr. Nonetheless, al-Maliki's willingness to challenge Iran with

evidence of its logistical support for anti-government militias illustrates growing independence from Iran. The U.S. should support the Prime Minister, particularly against the political machinations of ISCI/Badr, which has deeper ties to Iran.

**Weaken Iranian influence over ISCI/Badr.** Neither the United States nor Iraqi nationalists have effectively responded to Iranian infiltration of the Iraqi government through ISCI/Badr. A very limited number of ISCI/Badr members may need to be removed from government for serving as agents of a foreign government, but a more effective long-term strategy is to force ISCI/Badr members to be directly accountable to discrete constituents. The Iraqi constitution emphasizes political parties rather than independent legislators. Legislation to maximize transparency in government and public financing of political parties would enable and compel ISCI/Badr politicians to be more independent of their Iranian suitor.

**Prioritize targeting IRGC-QF operatives and logisticians in Iraq.** JAM and SGC militiamen are a mortal danger to Coalition and Iraqi security forces in Iraq, but ultimately policing these rogue militias must be the responsibility of the Iraqi government. U.S. forces will better leverage their capabilities if they prioritize identifying and targeting Iranian agents that facilitate these militias with training and weapons.

**Aggressively support a program to employ low-level JAM and SGC in Iraq's Security Forces.** In limited cases, the Iraqi government should officially authorize former JAM and SGC members to support Iraqi Security Forces, in a program aimed at achieving similar successes against Iranian backed militants that the Sons of Iraq program achieved against AQI. This will require developing prudent amnesty criteria commensurate with the program provided to former Sunni militants in exchange for cooperation and shifting loyalties. The Iraqi government should also embed professional cadres from the Iraqi Army in any units composed of former JAM/SGC members for command, control, and monitoring.

**Engage Iran with multiple instruments of national power.** Iran uses multiple aspects of national power in Iraq; the U.S. should use multiple forms to counter the negative portions of that influence. Reliance on military power alone is insufficient to effectively counter Iran's political and economic strategies. In fact, employing military power may actually backfire and enhance Iranian influence in regions suspicious of the overt influence of outsiders. Economic and



diplomatic tools are critical to build stable, transparent institutions in Iraq capable of supporting a strong, independent Iraq.

**Decouple the most contentious issues with regard to Iran.** The U.S. should take advantage of emerging windows of opportunity—likely after the next American election regardless of the outcome—to pursue a multi-pronged strategy with feasible and incremental objectives as part of the overarching U.S. strategy. In particular, the U.S. must decouple efforts aimed at addressing Iran’s malign activities in Iraq from other contentious issues, including Iran’s nuclear program, support for terrorism, and lack of support for the Israeli peace process. Making progress on any of these issues is desirable and should not be constrained by a requirement to make progress on all simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the U.S. should avoid cornering Iran without providing constructive options and incentives to make progress, lest the two countries become engaged in a high stakes game of chicken whose dangerous outcome is in neither state’s interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Takeyh develops this point eloquently in his insightful book, *Hidden Iran*.

## Acronym List

CENTCOM	Central Command
EFP	Explosively Formed Penetrator
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
JAM	Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army)
MKO	Mujahdin-e Khalq Organization
MNF-I	Multi National Forces—Iraq
OMS	Office of the Martyr Sadr
QF	Qods Force
SCIRI	Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SGC	Special Group Criminals
SFA	Strategic Framework Agreement
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement