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A free Iran will help build freedom in Iraq

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The recent wave of attacks in Iraq has drawn attention to the involvement of foreign governments in that country. By far, Iran tops the list.

The question of who is behind the attacks notwithstanding, what is of paramount importance is to recognize what is the most dominant force laying the social, religious and political grounds for such attacks in Iraq. Who is the prime beneficiary of these attacks and continued chaos in Iraq?

According to Iranian government sources, Tehran has smuggled large amounts of weaponry into Iraq in the past two months, including mortars, anti-aircraft missiles, 106 mm guns, 107 mm multiple rocket launchers, RPG-7s and machine guns, largely hidden in agricultural fields and villages.

For months, the notorious al-Quds (Jerusalem) Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards has been working to spread its influence in the Shiite-dominated southern regions of Iraq with the ultimate goal of erecting a sister Islamic republic there.

After major military operations ended in Iraq, many Iraqi expatriates, groomed, trained and funded by the mullahs for years, were dispatched to the country to gain control of key local and government positions. They now dominate a major portion of southern Iraq, including Samawah, Meissan, Nasiriyah, Basra, Wasset, Karbala and Najaf provinces, according to sources with access to the Iranian government.

At least 2,000 Iranian and Iraqi clerics entered Iraq from Qom and Mashad in Iran. Truckloads of books, CDs and cassette tapes promoting Tehran's fundamentalist version of Islam accompanied them.

In late August, sources said, the commanders of the al-Quds Force and Iraqi surrogate groups met in Tehran and the oil-rich Iranian city of Ahwaz to work on a plan of action in Iraq, the sources said.

Part of the plan called for setting up cells in mosques and recruitment from all regions. Tehran pledged to provide logistic support.

In that meeting, the al-Quds Force commander, Brig. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, said that more instability, insecurity and U.S. casualties would benefit the Iranian regime.

The force also set up medical centers in various cities, including Najaf, Baghdad, Hillah, Basra and Al Amarah, to garner support among the local population, much the same way the Revolutionary Guards did in Lebanon's Bekka Valley.

Against this backdrop, as long as fundamentalists control the reins of power in Iran, their sphere of influence will inevitably spill into Iraq. In many ways, Tehran is the heartland of fundamentalism and terrorism, much as Moscow was for communism. With the mullahs out of power, fundamentalist thinking would wither away under the power of democracy and secularism.

The United States and the international community must be firm against Tehran and support the call by Iranians and the opposition movement for a referendum for regime change in Iran.

Giving in to Tehran's demands, including the bombing of Iranian opposition camps, did not deter the clerics' postwar meddling in Iraq. Accommodating them now would only invite further intervention, bringing Tehran a step closer to its dream of establishing an Islamic empire.

Democracy in Iran is a prelude to democracy in Iraq, not vice versa.

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