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Iranian mischief undercuts Iraqi hopes

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WASHINGTON - The recent wave of attacks in Iraq, including the deadly bombing in Nasiriyah, 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?

On Aug. 24, the top U.S. administrator in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, told CNN: "The Iranian Revolutionary Guards are present in Iraq, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence is present here and we think that Iraqis do not appreciate interference in their affairs." A month later, he said, "Iranian intelligence agents have been aiding groups that have carried out violent attacks in different parts of 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, 106mm guns, 107mm multiple rocket launchers, RPG-7s and machine guns, largely hidden in agricultural fields and villages. The weapons were smuggled in trucks carrying fruit and vegetables, buses and utility vehicles to evade border inspections.

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.

"Najaf residents talk of Iranians who take up long stays in the city's hotels," the Reuters news agency reported Sept. 7. "They suspect they are secret service agents sent to keep a

close eye on developments on the ground." Even in Baghdad, a majority of the government agencies are run by Shiites, many loyal to Tehran, sources within Iranian agencies dealing with Iraqi affairs said.

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 August 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.

Mr. Bremer told a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing in September that 62 captured Iranians were the second largest group of detained saboteurs. "Elements of the Iranian government are causing mischief in Iraq, interfering in affairs through their intelligence services and through the Revolutionary Guards. This is not helpful."

Against this backdrop, as long as the fundamentalists control the reins of power in Iran, their sphere of influence would 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 be a recipe for disaster, for it 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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