

IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

by Dimitri DELALIEU, Associate researcher, ESISC

Resumé

The second Gulf War rid Iran of its arch-enemy and allowed it to recover the capacity to act in Iraq in a way no other country in the region could. During the first three weeks of the conflict Iran officially proclaimed itself "neutral" but the situation changed rapidly, with the infiltration of Iranian agents into Iraq and Iraqi opposition representatives crossing into Iran. Iran was frequently warned off by the United States, which in 2002 had listed it on its "axis of evil" and accused it of influencing the situation in Iraq, but the Mullahs' regime seemed unconcerned.

While Iran continues to prevaricate on the question of the resumption of negotiations on nuclear matters with the EU, the long list of grievances against Tehran (violation of human rights, logistic and ideological support for Hezbollah, the development of WMDs¹ and especially the nuclear issue, and State support for terrorism) grows even longer.

The use in Iraq of sophisticated explosive devices of Iranian origin in attacks on British troops was strongly condemned by London, re-opening the debate on Iran's influence in Iraq. In answer to these accusations, the Iranian president in turn accused the British of terrorist acts in the south-east of Iran.

1. Iraq, a secular objective for Iran

As Mahammad Reza Djalli explains, "the intertwining of the destinies of Iran and Iraq can be explained by the confluence of a number of geographical, historical, religious and political factors"². For several centuries, domination of the Shiite religious sites in Iraq has been a major aim for both nations. The sites attract millions of pilgrims every year, and many Iranians have emigrated to Iraq. Tensions between the two countries came to a head around the frontier between the old Ottoman

¹ Weapons of Mass Destruction

² Mohammad-Reza Djalli, *L'après-Saddam : espérances et incertitudes iraniennes*, in *Politique étrangère* 3-4/2003, p. 568.

empire and the Persian empire, a line 1500 km long that today marks the result of the balance of power between Iran and Iraq.

Since 1932, date of Iraq's independence, the two countries have practically never had cordial relations. However, the situation only deteriorated after the fall of the Shah and the arrival of the Mullahs in power in 1979. In 1980 Saddam Hussein, pushed or supported by France and the US, started an eight-year fratricidal war against Iran that would lead to hundreds of thousands dead at crippling cost. Iran had abandoned its nuclear programme at the start of the Islamic revolution, but fired it up again at the beginning of the 1990s with the collaboration of Russia, and it has become now more than ever an absolute priority for the Islamic republic.

In 2001 the deployment of American troops in Afghanistan marked a new stage for Iran which, hostile to the Taliban and supporting the Northern Alliance, adopted a pragmatic position during the conflict, passing strategic information on members of Al Qaeda on to the Americans and supporting the transitional Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. This collaboration, however, was destined to be short-lived, as faced with Iran's nuclear ambitions, George W. Bush declared in January 2002 that Iran made up part of the "Axis of Evil".

As war in Iraq became imminent, Iran officially condemned the American intervention and criticised Washington's "colonialist ambitions". A good part of the Iranian elite saw the American action as an opportunity to get rid of the old enemy: Saddam Hussein. The Iranian leaders gave permission for Iraqi opposition groups based in Iran to meet with American agents in order to help prepare the war and reconstruction in Iraq.

2. Iranian interactions in Iraq

To understand the question of interference by Iran in Iraq we have to look at the interaction of the multitude of Iranian decision centres (the president, the supreme guide, the ayatollahs, the Revolutionary Guard etc) – a series of actors who do not always have the same political agenda and who can at times cancel each other out. Since the beginning of the second Gulf war, Iran's influence in Iraq has been incontestable on a number of fronts. And to judge from numerous military reports from the Americans and British, and from testimony from Iraqi and Iranian agents, that influence was minutely planned long before the American invasion.

- **On an ideological and religious level**

Shia is undoubtedly the natural level for action in Iran and Iraq, with some 60% of the population of Iraq being Shiite. This 'special relationship' – which has grown stringer in the last two decades – is at its peak today. The highly influential ayatollah Al Sistani, who was born in Iran and lived there for several years, is only one example of the permanent collusion between Iran and a good part of the Shiite religious leaders in the region of Basra. Juliana Daoud Yusuf, editor in chief of the Basra daily paper al-Manar explains: "We see interference by Iran in all sorts of matters: the closure of night clubs, the disappearance of stores selling alcohol [...]. They are profiting from the absence of government, and they're doing it in a very

planned-out way"³. The religious representatives then move on to permanent policing of morality, regarding make-up, clothing styles, restrictions on the rights of women etc. Around the holy places, there is strong Shiite propaganda in the form of Iranian flags flying over the mosques, the distribution of Iranian religious symbols like books and CDs, as well as the promotion of the Farsi language.

- **Iranian infiltration**

Tens of thousands of Iranians live in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, and hundreds of thousands more make the pilgrimage every year to the Iraqi holy places. Whether for pilgrims, intelligence agents or Iranian terrorists, the permeable Iran-Iraq border allows all sorts of infiltration. Once set up in Iraq, these "Iranian agents" – who already have a major pool of potential collaborators in the shape of those of "double-nationality" as well as Iraqi Shiites – then go ahead with the recruitment of Iraqi auxiliaries, by the use of force if need be, to consolidate their domination. The Iraqi police is powerless before influence on this scale, and has often no option but to wait and see what happens.

The revolutionary guard or Guardians of the Revolution (Pasdaran-e-Inqilab) acquired its major role on the Iraqi political scene in the immediate aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, through propaganda actions as well as violence on the ground. Shortly before the American invasion of March 2003 the revolutionary guard was repositioned to reinforce the border with Iraq and occupy the vacuum left by the collapse of the regime. Working under diplomatic or humanitarian cover (NGOs, the Red Crescent etc) the guard can provide military training and logistical support to Hezbollah and to the Iraqi insurgents.

In recent times, this collaboration has taken the form of the supply of military equipment and communications to Shiite terrorist groups like that of Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani. He is entirely a creation of the revolutionary guard, sits at the head of a network of insurgents and has in recent months carried out a number of serious attacks using weapons hitherto not available to the insurgents.

American intelligence sources report that the revolutionary guard is also implicated in the organisation of death squads charged with eliminating former Baathists and ex-agents of the Iran section of Saddam's secret services. 300,000 men strong and independent of the regular Iranian army, the guard has its own resources for action, and also plays a major role in the trafficking of various sorts of contraband (drugs, stolen artworks) between Iraq and the Gulf states.

In Iraq, Hezbollah is contributing via terrorist operations at the behest of Iran to the neutralisation of coalition initiatives to create a movement in Iraq opposing Iran. In parallel, Moqtada al-Sadr declared last year that his movement had allied itself with the "representatives of Iranian power".

The Iraqi interior minister confirmed the threat of Hezbollah in February, when he announced that 18 members of the organisation had been detained in Iraq. His

³ Tod Robberson, *Iranian influence raises anxiety in southern Iraq*, The Dallas Morning News, 3 August 2005.

colleague at Defence recently announced that Hezbollah had sent spies and had even succeeded in infiltrating the new Iraqi government.

But the pro-Iranian terrorist movement is not content with violent actions alone. In line with the tactic used in South Lebanon it seduces and recruits from a population at bay by charity works, and incites attacks via the TV channel al-Manar. Finally, as we will see later, Hezbollah's implication in recent anti-British operations has been shown by London.

- **On an economic level**

Iraq has become a major market for Iranian products, and Iran recently increased its exports of electricity by 50%. But Iran has also acted as a provider of funds to Iraq as a means of increasing its influence, by promising \$ 1 billion for the reconstruction of schools, hospitals and libraries. In Basra, Iran intends to invest in establishing a rail link to increase exports to the region. Finally, Iran has already negotiated the construction of pipelines and agreements on the export of Iraqi oil through Iranian ports.

- **On a political level**

In some ways Iran is able to lean on prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari – who spent ten years in exile in Iran – as well as Kurdish president Jalal Talabani, who received logistic and financial support while he was running half of the semi-autonomous Kurdish province in the north of Iraq. Despite the fact that democratic elections are hardly the expertise of Iran, they will nevertheless ensure the Mullahs a strong Shiite representation in Iraq (guarantee of political stability and religious influence to Iran). Mainly through the medium of Ayatollah al-Sistani, Iran has influenced not only the agenda but also the implementation of the latest legislative elections in Iraq.

As far as Iran's position on the referendum on the Iraqi constitution is concerned, the spokesman for the foreign affairs minister said on 4 October, "We hope the vote goes well and turn-out will be strong [...] the Islamic republic of Iran will respect the choice of the Iraqi people"⁴. But these statements have to be seen beside those by Saudi foreign affairs minister Saud al-Faisal, that the influence of Iran on Iraq could lead to a civil war between Sunni and Shiite factions. The Saudi minister recently criticised "the arrival of men, capital and arms" in Iraq from Iran, as well as "the interference of the Tehran authorities in the political life" of its neighbour. "If these interventions turn out to be true, especially along the border provinces with Iran, the situation would be extremely serious"⁵. In fact, the mainly Sunni Saudi Arabia, together with other Arab countries like Jordan, are particularly concerned at the growing Iranian influence on Iraq, and the consequences a Shiite dominance over the Sunni minority in Iraq could have. Just before the elections of last January, King Abdallah II announced that one million Iranians had crossed the border to vote⁶.

⁴ IranMania News, 4 October 2005.

⁵ RFI, 6 October 2005.

⁶ Wright, Robin and Baker, Peter: "Iraq, Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran; Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State", Washington Post, 8 December 2004.

In June, the Iranian defence minister told a delegation of Iraqi leaders on a visit to Tehran of Iranian priorities: "The Iraqi government and people should not allow foreign powers to consolidate their presence in the region and thereby reinforce the security of Israel," he said⁷. He also let it be understood, in reference to the fear of Iran being encircled by American forces, that the use of American bases could not be "solely for the purposes of the battle against a minor revolt like that of al-Qaeda"⁸.

3. Escalation?

In August, US ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad said Iran had brought enormous quantities of arms and explosives into Iraq clandestinely. His allegations were picked up several days later by defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who described the arms contraband as "a problem for the coalition forces [...] a problem for the international community and finally [...] a problem for Iran"⁹. At the time, the commander of British troops in Iraq said there was no proof the arms came from Iran, adding that there was "a lot of speculation" and "few facts" on Iran's implication in the insurgency. His remarks were taken up by the Iraqi interior minister Bayan Jabr who considered the suspicions greatly exaggerated. However in April 2003 terrorist reports seized by British and American intelligence established the link between attacks on British forces and elements of the revolutionary guard.

Several weeks later, British prime minister Tony Blair went back on previous statements, "What is clear is that new explosive devices are being used not only against British troops but elsewhere in Iraq, whose characteristics point to either Iranian elements or Hezbollah"¹⁰. A high-ranking British official had a few days earlier been more categorical, stating that the Iranian revolutionary guard had supplied the technology – infra-red detonators and armour-piercing explosives – to the rebels, and especially to the Mehdi Army controlled by Moqtada al-Sadr.

After a double attack that killed six and wounded more than 100 at Ahvaz (in Khuzistan province in South-West Iran) and after another similar attack was narrowly avoided, the Iranian interior minister accused Britain of being behind the attacks: "There are sign of British involvement in these incidents, and our suspicions are serious," he said¹¹.

There is no doubt that Iran is trying to make the task of the Americans and British more complicated by orchestrating the chaos in Iraq. Until recently the Iranians operated officially in Iraq by means of their allies (the SCIRI¹², and the Dawa party) but recent events, which might even have been orchestrated by the Iranians themselves, have had the aim of increasing the pressure on Britain in the hope of obtaining more room for maneuver within negotiations on the nuclear issue. Elsewhere, clearly, Iranian strategy in Iraq has the aim of preventing the encirclement of the country by American forces.

⁷ Michael Knights, *The Three-Way Game: Iran, Iraq, and the United States*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 July 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Anna Badkhen, *The Iranian Factor in Iraq insurgency*, in www.sfgate.com, 21 August 2005.

¹⁰ Agence France Presse, 6 October 2005.

¹¹ AFP, 18 October 2005.

¹² Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

4. The nuclear issue

Iran, which signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in 1968, and in November 2004 -- under pressure from France, Germany and the United Kingdom – promised to stop its uranium enrichment activities, has restarted its nuclear programme. Not only at Busheh (the main power station under the control of the IAEA¹³) but also at sites hitherto kept secret and under the control of the army. Tehran has always claimed its uranium enrichment has a civilian purpose but, as stated by Anthony H. Cordesman¹⁴, a series of factors have pushed Iran into developing a nuclear programme for military ends. Among them:

- The example of other countries: India, Pakistan, North Korea
- The problems of modernising conventional forces
- The potential nuclear threat represented by Israel
- Nuclear arms bring military supremacy and prestige, and could turn Iran into a regional superpower.

The latest presidential elections in Iran which brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power speeded things along. As well as the revival of nuclear activities, Iranian defence minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar announced on 29 September that Tehran had volunteers ready to take part in suicide operations: "The Iranian nation has the forces ready for martyrdom in the Basij¹⁵ [...] A nation blessed with the spirit of devotion, sacrifice and martyrdom has no need of atomic weapons and can use its devoted forces to resist the enemy and neutralise any threat"¹⁶.

Iran plays easily on the weakness of the European Union – its tendency to seek dialogue – to gain time. The management of the Iran dossier is characterised by undisguised differences in point of view within Europe, while Russia and China refuse to support any move to bring the Iranian nuclear question before the UN Security Council. It is unlikely that the governing council of the IAEA, satisfied by the latest information given by Tehran on its nuclear programme, will bring the issue to the Security Council at its next meeting in November. It remains to be seen if Europe's apparent negligence and the credit given by the IAEA to Iran will turn against them in the near future.

5. A future target for the United States?

The United States' list of grievances with Iraq could, taken out of context, apply equally to Iran. Last February, the American journalist Seymour Hersh claimed in an article that after Iraq, the war against terrorism would be carried out against Iran. The US president in July 2004 authorised secret missions into Iran to obtain information on nuclear, chemical and ballistic sites, based on suspicions coming out of Israel, long convinced of the threat nuclear arms would represent in the hands of

¹³ International Atomic Energy Authority.

¹⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Developing Military Capabilities*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 14 December 2004.

¹⁵ The Basij is an extremist militia loyal to the supreme guide and affiliated to the revolutionary guard.

¹⁶ Iran Focus, 29 September 2005.

the Mullahs. On 2 October, the speaker of the Iranian parliament Gholam-Ali Hadad Adel, on a visit to Damascus, warned Israel against any attack on Iran's nuclear installations: "If Israel were stupidly to attack our nuclear installations as they did in Iraq [the nuclear station at Osirak in 1981] we can promise to teach them a lesson they will never forget." he said¹⁷.

American and Israeli strategists have worked out different scenarios for a "preventive" attack on Iranian installations. In 2004, the delivery of American satellite-guided BLU-109 bombs (bunker-busters) to Israel coincided with the threat of the revival of the Iranian nuclear programme. Given the situation at present in Iraq, the US has no interest in striking Iran directly. Nevertheless, the option of a preventive strike through the intermediary of Israel could be envisaged. But while there is little question of either the capacity or the will of Israel for such a strike, the fact remains that Iran has nearly 300 nuclear sites in operation.

So how to be sure of hitting the right ones? In addition, many of them are located in urban areas of dense population, making such an operation questionable on humanitarian grounds and risking triggering an Iranian response whose amplitude might be incalculable, as suggested recently by the Iranian defence minister: "None of our enemies knows for sure how powerful our military capacity is, nor of our ability to implement unprecedented strategies. We have been able rapidly to produce equipment which gives us the greatest dissuasive power," he said¹⁸.

¹⁷ AFP, 2 October 2005.

¹⁸ Tehran Times, 18 January 2005.

Conclusion

Iran may overtly support the maintenance of dialogue among the communities in Iraq, and has until now adopted a more defensive than offensive approach. However through its support for Shiite terror groups, religious propaganda and domination of the oil-producing regions, Tehran has exacerbated tension between Shiites and Sunni.

Since the start of the war, the main threat to coalition troops has come from attacks by Sunni insurgents. A new threat could come from Iran, or at least from sympathisers who now have a foothold and network in Iraq. The result of a constitutional referendum has reinforced the hold of the Shiites, and could reinforce an Iranian domination that now seems incontrovertible.

So now, what future is there for Iraq? A Western diplomat said ironically, "We have to remember that everything we say to the Iraqi government ends up being told in Tehran"¹⁹. Aside from that influence, it is the whole American strategy that is being called into question, along with the stability of the entire region.

¹⁹ Michael Ware, *Time Magazine investigation; Inside Iran's Secret War for Iraq in Iran Focus*, 22 August 2005.