

Neoconservatives Try to Suggest that Sadr Uprising is “Made in Teheran”

By Jim Lobe | April 9, 2004

Despite the growing number of reports that depict the past week's uprising by the radical Shia cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, and his Mahdi Army as a spontaneous and indigenous revolt, some influential U.S. neoconservatives are insisting that Iran is behind it. They are calling on the Bush administration to warn Teheran to cease its alleged backing for al-Sadr and other Shia militias or face retaliation, ranging from an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities to covert action designed to overthrow the government.

But independent experts on both Iran and Iraq say that, while Iran has no doubt provided various forms of assistance to Shia factions in Iraq since Hussein's ouster one year ago, its relations with Sadr have long been rocky and that it has opposed radical actions that could destabilize the situation. “Those elements closest to Iran among the Shiite clerics (in Iraq) have been the most moderate through all of this,” according to Shaul Bakhash, an Iran expert at George Mason University. Indeed, many regional specialists agree that Iran has a strategic interest in avoiding any train of events that risks plunging Iraq into chaos or civil war and partition.

Neoconservatives centered in Vice President Dick Cheney's office and among the civilian leadership in the Pentagon have strongly opposed any détente with Iran and have frequently blamed it for problems it has encountered in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Neoconservatives outside the administration, such as former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle and his colleagues at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Michael Ledeen and Reuel Marc Gerecht, called even before the Iraq war for Washington to support indigenous efforts to oust the “mullahcracy” in Teheran, which is seen as an arch-enemy of both the U.S. and Israel.

Raising Tensions with Iran

Some neoconservatives have seized on Sadr's uprising as a new opportunity both to raise tensions against Iran and to divert attention from their own bungling of relations with the Shia community in Iraq.

Top U.S. officials both in the U.S. and in Iraq have not yet named Iran as the hidden hand behind Sadr, although a senior reporter at the right-wing *Washington Times*, Rowan Scarborough, quoted unnamed “military sources” April 7th as telling him that Sadr “is being aided directly by Iran's Revolutionary Guard ... and by Hezbollah, an Iranian-created terrorist group based in Lebanon.” Unnamed “Pentagon officials” gave a similar account to the *New York Times*, although the *Times* reporter, James Risen, stressed that CIA officials disagreed with that analysis, adding: “Some

intelligence officials believe that the Pentagon has been eager to link Hezbollah to the violence in Iraq to link the Iranian regime more closely to anti-American terrorism.”

The Iran hand was first raised in connection with Sadr's revolt by Michael Rubin, who just returned from a stint as a “governance team adviser” for the CPA in Iraq to his previous position as a resident fellow at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI). In a column published in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 4th, he complained that Washington and the CPA had failed to provide liberal and democratic Iraqi leaders with anything like the kind of support that Iran was supplying to radical Shia leaders and their “gangs.”

On a visit to the Shia-dominated south, according to Rubin, he found that Iranians were pouring money and arms to key Islamist parties, including the Da'wa, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and Sadr himself whose rise over the past year, according to Rubin, is explained by the “ample funding he receives through Iran-based cleric Ayatollah Kazem al Haeri, a close associate of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini.”

Similarly, another senior CPA adviser, Larry Diamond, a neoconservative who specializes in democratization at the California-based Hoover Institution, told IPS this week that Sadr's Mahdi Army, as well as other Shia militias, are being armed and financed by Iran with the aim of imposing “another Iranian-style theocracy.”

“Iran is embarked on a concerned, clever, lavishly resourced campaign to defeat any effort for any genuine pluralist democracy in Iraq,” said Diamond. “The longer we wait to confront the thug, the more troops he'll have in his army, the more arms he'll have and financial support, virtually all coming from Iran, the more he will intimidate and kill sincere democratic actors in the country, and the more impossible our task at building democracy will become.” He added, “I think we should tell the Iranian regime that if they don't cease and desist, we will play the same game, that we will destabilize them.”

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On Tuesday, April 6th, the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page took up the same theme, noting that Sadr has talked “openly of creating an Iranian-style Islamic Republic in Iraq (and) has visited Tehran since the fall of Saddam. . . . (H)is Mahdi militia is almost certainly financed and trained by Iranians,” the editorial went on, adding, “Revolutionary Guards may be instigating some of the current unrest.”

“As for Teheran, we would hope the Sadr uprising puts to rest the illusion that the mullahs (in Teheran) can be appeased. As Bernard Lewis teaches, Middle Eastern leaders interpret American restraint as weakness. Iran’s mullahs fear a Muslim democracy in Iraq because it is a direct threat to their own rule. If warnings to Teheran from Washington don’t impress them, perhaps some cruise missiles aimed at the Bushehr nuclear site will concentrate their minds,” the *Journal* suggested.

On Wednesday, *New York Times* columnist William Safire asserted the existence of an axis involving Sadr, Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, as well. “We should break the Iranian-Hezbollah-Sadr connection in ways that our special forces know how to do,” he wrote. “Plenty of Iraqi Shiites, who are Arab, distrust the Persian ayatollahs in Iran and can provide actionable intelligence about a Syrian transmission belt” that presumably is used to infiltrate Hezbollah members into Iraq to link up with the Sadr’s partisans.

A Predictable Conflagration

This line of reasoning, however, appears particularly curious to Bakhsh who notes that the Sadr family, including Moqtada himself, is precisely the kind Iraqi Shiite who would be deeply suspicious of Teheran. “Sadr’s father was a strong Iraqi nationalist, like Moqtada himself,” he said. “He often used to question why there were in Iraq ayatollahs who spoke Arabic with a Persian accent.”

Like other experts, Bakhsh believes that Iran has indeed been heavily involved with the Iraqi Shia community, but sees the leadership providing far more support to SCIRI and its Badr brigades than to Sadr, who, from Teheran’s point of view, is seen as untrustworthy.

Bakhsh also questions the neoconservative assumption that Iran wants to destabilize Iraq at this point. “Obviously the Iranians are not unhappy to see the Americans discomfited in Iraq, but I don’t think it’s the policy of the Iranian government to destabilize Iraq right along its own border,” he said.

Middle East historian Juan Cole of the University of Michigan also questions the notion of a link between Iran and Sadr in the current uprising. While Sadr’s views on

theocratic government are consistent with those of Iranian hardliners, according to Cole, his outspoken Iraqi nationalism poses a major challenge to Khomeini’s claim to authority over all Shiite religious communities, including those outside Iran. Contrary to the *Journal's* assumptions, according to Cole, Sadr did not receive much encouragement from the Iranian leaders with whom he met in Teheran. “The message he got . . . was that he should stop being so divisive and should cooperate more with the other Shiite leaders.”

Geoffrey Kemp, an Iran specialist at the Nixon Center and Middle East adviser on Ronald Reagan’s National Security Council staff, says he has little doubt that the Iranians have influence with several different Shiite groups and that there may even be “rogue elements” inside Iran who back Sadr. But he agrees that Teheran’s strongest ties are with SCIRI and the Badr Brigades, who were trained by the Revolutionary Guard inside Iran during Saddam Hussein’s rule. “Iran has a huge strategic stake in what happens in Iraq, but I don’t think it is trying to provoke a direct confrontation (with the U.S.) at this time,” he said. “The situation is far too complex to make simplistic statements about what Iran is or is not doing,” Kemp said, “But to suggest that this is an Iranian-inspired insurrection is a stretch.”

“The neoconservatives are all so heavily invested in the success of Iraq that, instead of blaming the Pentagon for some extraordinary blunders, they want to blame everyone else—the State Department, the Iranians, the Syrians for the mess that was partly of their own making,” according to Kemp.

Cole, in fact, has raised questions about how some of those blunders—including the CPA’s decision to close Sadr’s newspaper—came to be committed, suggesting that some neoconservatives in the CPA may themselves have been pushing for a crisis for “all sorts of ulterior motives,” such as moving Iraq closer to partition—a move that would also lead to the destabilization of Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Cole noted that Sadr’s expression of solidarity with Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas whose spiritual and political leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, was assassinated in an Israeli rocket attack late last month, may have moved the CPA to provoke a confrontation. The following day, Sadr’s top aide and 13 of his followers were suddenly arrested on a six-month-old warrant, touching off the insurrection. “Who provoked (the arrests) and why?” asked Cole, who adds that the conflagration that followed was entirely predictable.

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