

The Alleged Destabilizing Iranian Role in Iraq

By Ehsan Ahrari | July 7, 2006

In late June, the Commander of the U.S. forces in Iraq, General George Casey, upped the rhetoric against Iran accusing the regime of causing instability in Iraq. There is nothing new in this charge, since U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad made similar charges about three months ago. The current significance of this accusation is its timing, and its linkage with the ongoing nuclear research-related conflict between Washington and Tehran. Iran is presently considering its response to the comprehensive proposal made by the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany regarding its uranium enrichment program. Casey's words are clearly measured to increase pressure upon Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime.

The unstated aspect of Casey's allegations is that they might be used in the future by the Bush administration to take action—such as imposition of unilateral economic sanctions or even limited military action—against Iran's nuclear facilities, if Iran were to reject the five plus one offer.

General Casey has described Iran's role as one of the most important factors in creating the current complex security situation in Iraq. He stated that Iran's special forces are involved in providing weapons training, including that of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to Shia extremists.

In an interview with *The Washington Post* last March, Khalilzad was also quite expansive in his criticism of Iran. He charged that country's security services—most notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—are training, financing, and supplying the Shia al-Mahdi Army as well as Sunni Arab Ansar al-Sunna.

The noteworthy aspect of the alleged involvement of the IRGC is that it is not part of Iran's regular armed forces, and is regarded as the protector of the Iranian constitution, its Islamic system and the Military of Intelligence, and Security. In that capacity, what worries the American officials in

Iraq is that the most radical organ of the Iranian government is linked with some of the most radical entities within Iraq.

If the accusations of the U.S. officials are indeed correct, Iran is manifesting a high degree of pragmatism, which is proving to be very deadly and destabilizing. The al-Mahdi Army is generally accused of causing most of the sectarian-driven “cleansing” of numerous Iraqi neighborhoods. However, Ansar al-Sunna is a Sunni Salafi organization that believes that jihad is the religious obligation of all Muslims when the “infidel” enemy attacks the land of Islam. As such, it is an anti-Shia entity.

Of course, Iran has persistently denied any involvement in Iraq aimed at destabilizing it. Iran has maintained that the U.S. officials are using its alleged involvement in destabilizing Iraq as a pretext for not conducting high-level negotiations that would cover a wide range of issues, including its uranium enrichment program.

There is little doubt that Iran is indeed involved in influencing the internal political dynamics of Iraq. As its neighbor, there is no way Iran is expected to



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sit still, leaving the U.S. forces complete autonomy to restructure the political power structure in Iraq.

From the Iranian perspectives, the very survival and durability of its Islamic regime revolves around two key points. Within the country, security-related decisions will play a major role in its prolonged survival. From outside, the willingness of the United States not to threaten Iran is equally important. Of these two elements, Iran knows that it can fully control what it can and should do to guarantee its own security. However, it remains highly uncertain and equally apprehensive of the U.S. designs vis-à-vis its government.

Consequently, the Iranian government is keeping all of the cards on the table, including an ace—its uranium enrichment program. But it's also holding another valuable face card—its influence on the political dynamics of Iraq. Like its uranium enrichment program, Iran's involvement in Iraq is also open for diplomatic negotiations and compromises with the United States. How far Iran will go in destabilizing (or not destabilizing) Iraq has a lot to do with how much cooperation it is likely to extract from the United States.

The Bush administration fully understands the nuances of Iranian diplomatic maneuvers. But America has gotten out of the habit of political give and take from the actors that it has injudiciously depicted as “evil” forces, leaving it with few options. That is one reason it is having problems negotiating with Iran (as well as with North Korea).

In the coming weeks, when U.S. and Iran start to negotiate on Iraq and other heady issues of mutual concern, there is considerable hope that they will come to some meaningful conclusions.

If there is a U.S.-Iran rapprochement in the next few weeks-to-months, Iran is likely to be more cautious about not destabilizing Iraq. However, before taking any palpable measures in that direction, Iran will make sure that the United States is also equally sincere in not jeopardizing Iran's vital interests, including the future of its Islamic government, a complicated dance for sure.

Ehsan Ahrari is the CEO of Strategic Paradigms, an Alexandria, Virginia-based defense consultancy and is an analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus. His website is at: <http://www.ehsanahrari.com>.

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Ehsan Ahrari, “The Alleged Destabilizing Iranian Role in Iraq,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 6, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3342>

Production Information:

Writer: Ehsan Ahrari

Editor: Erik Leaver, IPS

Layout: Erik Leaver, IPS

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