

Time for a Diplomatic Surge

Analysis By Carah Ong

In the wake of the congressional hearings earlier this month featuring Gen. David Petraeus and Amb. Ryan Crocker, during which al Qaeda was hardly mentioned, it seems clear that Washington has focused its attention on a new nemesis: Iran. The Bush administration and various pro-war pundits have intensified ongoing efforts to tie Iran to violence in Iraq in order to justify maintaining a U.S. military presence in the country, create a scapegoat for U.S. failures there, and to convince the Iraqi government that Iran is a security threat. This surge of accusations against Iran coincides with a diminishing emphasis on al Qaeda's role in Iraq.

Yet the treatment of Iran as an inherent danger to Iraq is in part an affectation; when it comes to Iraq, the interests of Washington and Tehran actually overlap significantly. Despite this, U.S. efforts toward diplomacy with Iran have been minimal. For starters, the Bush administration has dismissed out of hand overtures from Iran, including one following the invasion of Iraq that would have put everything on the negotiating table, including Iran's nuclear program, recognition of the state of Israel, and stopping support for Hezbollah and Hamas. The Bush administration has maintained that Iran must suspend its nuclear enrichment activities before it will engage in talks with Tehran. This precondition has also been included in joint proposals to Iran offered by the European Union, Russia, and China that involved the United States. But when it comes to authentic diplomacy, preconditions are only a recipe for failure. Furthermore, none of the proposals offered to Iran have included U.S.-backed security assurances that it will not be attacked. Instead, U.S. policy on Iran has been marked by counterproductive threats of military attack, regime change, isolation, and sanctions.

In their testimony, both Petraeus and Crocker focused much of the blame for failures in Iraq on Iran, claiming Tehran has funded, trained, and armed militias in Iraq, and fueled violence against Iraqi security forces, coalition forces, and Iraqi civilians aimed at undermining the Iraqi government. They also repeatedly referred to Iran's "lethal support to the Special Groups"¹ and claimed that these groups "pose the greatest long-term threat to the viability of a democratic Iraq."

Petraeus and Crocker pointed to the March uprisings in Basra and Baghdad as dramatically demonstrating the extent of "Iran's malign influence." By contrast, Petraeus and Crocker claimed that coalition forces have vigorously pursued al Qaeda in Iraq and that the terrorist organization, along with other extremist elements, "have been dealt serious blows." They stated al Qaeda is "in retreat and disarray in Iraq" and the threat it poses "has been significantly reduced," but also conceded it "remains lethal and substantial."

In an April 10 speech, President George W. Bush reaffirmed the Petraeus-Crocker claims and reduced his "axis of evil" trio (Iran, North Korea, and Iraq) to a duo, calling Iran and al Qaeda

¹ David H. Petraeus, "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq," April 8-9, 2008, <http://www.senate.gov/~foreign/testimony/2008/PetraeusTestimony080408p.pdf>; and Ryan C. Crocker, "Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," April 8, 2008, <http://www.senate.gov/~foreign/testimony/2008/CrockerTestimony080408p.pdf>.

“two of the greatest threats to America in this new century.” Bush said that “the regime in Tehran also has a choice to make. It can live in peace with its neighbor, enjoy strong economic and cultural and religious ties. Or it can continue to arm and train and fund illegal militant groups, which are terrorizing the Iraqi people and turning them against Iran. If Iran makes the right choice, America will encourage a peaceful relationship between Iran and Iraq. Iran makes the wrong choice, America will act to protect our interests, and our troops, and our Iraqi partners.”² By issuing Tehran an ultimatum, Bush gave the lie to any U.S. commitment to diplomacy.

In their public statements, administration officials consistently tie Iran to rising violence in Iraq. As evidence of increased Iranian support and training for Shiite militias, the administration cites the March uprising in Basra and attacks on the Green Zone in Baghdad. On April 11, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told reporters, “I think that there is some sense of an increased level of supply of weapons and support to these groups. I would say one of the salutary effects of what Prime Minister [Nouri al-Maliki] did in Basra is that I think the Iraqi government now has a clearer view of the malign impact of Iran’s activities inside Iraq.”³ In a news conference and briefing on April 17 and 20, respectively, Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) talked about Iran’s “nefarious influences” on Iraq and repeatedly cited Iran as the major force behind the insurgency in Iraq.⁴

National Security Advisor [Stephen Hadley](#) told *Fox News*, “Iran is very active in the southern part of Iraq. They are training Iraqis in Iran who come into Iraq and attack our forces, Iraqi forces, Iraqi civilians. There are movements of equipment. There’s movements of funds. So we have illegal ... militia in the southern part of the country that really are acting as criminal elements that are oppressing the people down there.”⁵

The Bush administration believes it only stands to benefit from painting a polemic narrative of Iran. Casting Iran as a bad guy serves the dual purpose of both being able to justify a continued U.S. military presence in Iraq and drumming up support for a possible military strike against Iran.

Efforts to tie Iran to increased violence in Iraq have also come from outside the administration. In an opinion article for *U.S. News & World Report*, Fouad Ajami, an outspoken supporter of the Iraq War and advisor to Rice, writes: “In the Iraqi theater of great concern to us, Iran has been sly and duplicitous. It can dial up the violence and dial it down; it can arm and wink at the forces of the radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr while professing fidelity to the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki... The Iranians and the militias and the criminal gangs rushed to fill the vacuum and to lay claim to the spoils. No one knows for sure the extent of criminal activity and smuggling that take place in the oil traffic in Basra. But it is reckoned to be large and profitable enough to sustain the militias and the warlords who contest the government's power in that city and in the south as a whole.”⁶

In a FoxNews.com opinion piece entitled “A Roadmap for Success in Iraq,” Alirezah Jafarzadeh, a former affiliate of the National Council of Resistance in Iran, argues that the United States should enlist the Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian exile group based in Iraq that both the U.S. and Iranian governments consider a terrorist organization, “as a strategic partner in the fight

² George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Iraq,” Office of the Press Secretary, White House press release, April 10, 2008, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080410-2.html>.

³ Karen De Young, “Iran Top Threat to Iraq, U.S. Says,” *Washington Post*, April 11, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/11/AR2008041101606.html>.

⁴ Sue Fleming, “Rice Says Arabs Must Shield Iraq from Iran’s Sway,” Reuters, April 17, 2008.

⁵ Associated Press, “Hadley: Iran a Threat to Iraq’s Stability,” FoxNews.com, April 13, 2008

⁶ Fouad Ajami, “[Iran’s Sly Games in Iraq](#),” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 11, 2008.

against Islamic fundamentalism and a bulwark against the Iranian regime's influence in Iraq."⁷ He concludes, "If Tehran's tentacles are cut off in Iraq, the Iraqi people will have a real chance to form a peaceful, non-sectarian and democratic society. That is a plan that seems to already have the support of the U.S. Congress."

But while the Bush administration and pundits paint a good guys-bad guys narrative to sell conflict to the American people, reality is far more muddled. The administration script of connecting Iran to U.S. failures in Iraq does not include efforts at working with Iran to improve the situation in Iraq, nor does it include precedence even within the Bush administration itself for cooperating with Iran.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, hundreds of thousands of Iranians held candlelight vigils, the mayor of Tehran sent a cable to the mayor of New York, and reformist President Mohammad Khatami expressed his condolences to President Bush. Iranians then provided intelligence and cooperated with the United States to topple the Taliban in Afghanistan. Iran also helped secure an agreement among all elements of the Afghan opposition to form the successor government, insisted that the agreement include a commitment to hold democratic elections in Afghanistan, and persuaded the Northern Alliance to make essential concessions to seal the deal on the agreement. While many in Iran saw this as an opportune moment to work toward normalizing relations with the United States, Bush instead chose to repay Iran by infamously labeling it a charter member of the "axis of evil."

The inconvenient truth about Iraq is that it is a major area in which U.S. and Iranian interests significantly converge. Both countries support Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and its Badr Organization. As a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia aptly put it, "The American military occupation of Iraq has facilitated an Iranian political occupation of Iraq."⁸ But with a growing undercurrent of nationalism that opposes these influences, time may be running out for the United States and Iran to work together to achieve a stable Iraq. Rather than demonizing Iran, the United States should focus on a diplomatic surge that includes direct, comprehensive, and unconditional talks not only on Iraq, but also on the range of outstanding issues between the two countries.

To its credit, in 2006 the Bush administration invited Iran to enter into limited direct talks over Iraq's security. However, the sessions quickly degenerated as both sides aired grievances and blamed the other for failures in Iraq. Efforts by both governments to micromanage the process, as well as the infrequency of meetings, have thwarted any prospect of successful results. The Bush administration's newest round of claims against Iran is another nail in the coffin for any chance that serious diplomatic talks might resume, let alone succeed. Meanwhile, the Iranian government appears poised to simply wait out this U.S. administration and hope that the next might not be so hostile.

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⁷ Alirezah Jafarzadeh, "A Roadmap for Success in Iraq," FoxNews.com, April 13, 2008.

⁸ Robert Dreyfuss, "Is Iran Winning the Iraq War?" *The Nation*, March 10, 2008.