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# Instigating Instability: Iran's Support of Non-State Armed Groups in Iraq

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The increase in Iranian sponsorship for insurgent, militia, and terrorist activities in Iraq during the past two years is of great concern for the United States and the newly formed government of Iraq as they strive to establish a durable democracy. Since its 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has supported and armed radical and violent Islamic organizations, or non-state armed groups (NSAGs), around the globe. For nearly two decades, Iran's foreign policy was motivated by the international exportation of its Islamic revolution. More recently, however, Iran's foreign policy has become less steeped in religious ideology and more influenced by pragmatism and national interest. As an historical supporter of NSAGs, Iran continues its external sponsorship of such groups in Iraq today. Iran's support for non-state armed groups in Iraq exemplifies a more pragmatic approach in comparison to its foreign policy that sought to spread its Islamic revolution in the 1980s. With the help of Iranian-backed NSAGs in Iraq, Iran seeks to establish a pro-Iranian government and increase its influence over Iraq's Shi'a community in a post-Saddam era. Iran also aims to prevent against the future possibility of an American-led invasion of Iran by fueling Iraq's insurgency through the support of NSAGs.

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Iran's role in Iraq provides an excellent case study of state-sponsorship of NSAGs and their use as an important and highly effective foreign policy tool. As a predominantly Shi'a country neighboring Iraq, Iran has much to lose if it fails to garner favorable support from Iraq's Shi'a majority. Moreover, if the United States is successful in establishing a western-leaning democracy in Iraq, there is a greater chance that the United States will invade Iran and enforce regime change. In an attempt to stave off such a future incursion and to establish closer ties with Shi'a leaders in Iraq, Iran has embarked on a foreign policy of covert support and sponsorship for many different NSAGs in Iraq, including Shi'a, Kurdish, and Sunni groups, and other terrorist organizations linked to al-Qaeda.

Iran also aims to expand and improve its relations with Iraq's Shi'a community. Iraqi Shi'a are significantly divided along religious and secular lines, and currently lack any decisive political or religious leader. Thus, Iran has adopted a policy of maintaining amicable relations with all of the Shi'a factions in Iraq. As Juan Cole, an expert on Shi'a Islam, notes, "It seems clear that the Iranians are trying to butter both sides of the bread and all four crust edges."[1] In other words, Iran's government has adopted a policy to support as many different groups as it can to ensure a self-interested and favorable outcome in Iraq. Sponsorship of diverse religious and armed groups across Iraq will guarantee that instability and chaos prevails for Iran's benefit. Indeed, sponsoring opposing NSAGs can be risky with the potential for an outbreak of civil war and spillover effect into Iran, but Iran has much to gain by tying the United States down to Iraq and its insurgency. By making

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sure the United States is confined to Iraq, some argue, Iran will be permitted to continue the development of its nuclear program. Nevertheless, Iran can take advantage of the outcome in Iraq and has adopted a foreign policy for the support of NSAGs that preserves many national interests.

In an attempt to stave off a future incursion by the United States and to establish closer ties with Shi'a leaders in Iraq, Iran has embarked on a foreign policy of covert support and sponsorship for many different NSAGs in Iraq, including Shi'a, Kurdish, and Sunni groups, and other terrorist organizations linked to al-Qaeda

In its support of NSAGs, Iran has been careful not to ignite the outbreak of an all-out sectarian war between Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds for fear of a spillover effect into Iran. Since Iran's sponsorship of NSAGs in Iraq is a relatively new phenomenon, measuring the effectiveness of Iran's policy will remain outside the scope of this study. In any case, Iran's support of NSAGs has moved forward very prudently. From one standpoint, Iran wants to ensure the U.S. military is overwhelmed and unequipped to fight Iraq's insurgency. From another angle, however, Iran is taking a risk to preserve its national interests by supporting opposing NSAGs that could spark a sectarian war where Iran could potentially lose control of its influence in Iraq altogether.[2]

## Iran's Historical Support for NSAGs and Relations with Iraq

Since the overthrow of the Iranian Shah at the start of the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran began a new radical period characterized by a foreign policy that sought to propagate Iran's revolution to other Muslim countries. In addition to spreading its revolution, Iran supported the sponsorship of international terrorism and the spread of radical and violent Islamic movements around the world. The following passage summarizes Iran's post-revolution foreign policy:

> Its principal themes included a belief in the revolution's exportability; a commitment, at least in the early years of the revolution, to altering the nature of the regimes in the Persian Gulf and the regional balance of power; a conviction that certain aspects of Western culture were threatening to Iran's cultural and national identity; a suspicion of Western, and particularly American, intentions toward Iran; a revolutionary ideology that attached value to a truculent, muscular posture in international relations…and a willingness to use unconventional means, including assassination and hostage taking, to achieve foreign policy ends.[3]

As shown above, Iran adopted a foreign policy that was driven by ideology during the 1980s. Its foreign policy was also anti-western in nature and opposed to any relations with the United States. Today, Iranian policymakers have preserved certain aspects of its post-revolution polices from the 1980s. In particular, Iran today is increasingly concerned about the presence of the United States in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan.

By the 1990s, Iran's foreign policy grew more pragmatic and was less steeped in ideology: "[Today,] Tehran has become less active in its support for radical Islamists. The fate of Shi'a communities outside Iran is no longer a major concern of Iran's leadership."[4] This shift in policy stemmed in part from the rise of a political reform movement in Iran and from a change in national priorities, including both economic and geopolitical interests. Moreover, the Iranian government desired a foreign policy that emphasized greater international trade and commerce, foreign direct investment, and coordination of its oil policy with international oil companies to prevent any future price collapse. A similar foreign policy continues today.[5]

Despite a shift in foreign policy objectives, Iran has been accused of sponsoring terrorist activities in Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Lebanon. Iran has also been known to back terrorist activities as far away as Argentina. Furthermore, Iran has planned assassinations of dissidents in the United States, Europe, and neighboring Pakistan.[6] In particular, international Iranian/Shi'a terror activity is based on an organizational and command infrastructure that includes five levels:

- Iranian embassies and consulates (which enjoy diplomatic immunity);
- Iranian institutions, organizations, and companies (the Iranian national carrier, shipping companies, banks, etc.);
- Institutions, organizations, and companies belonging to Iranian or Muslim residents living all over the world, which are prepared to assist Iran or its embassies;

- Cooperation with radical Islamic states and organizations (such as Sudan);
- Terror "by proxy" through sponsored organizations such as Hezbollah.[7]

Such an organizational structure has permitted Iran to operate more fluidly around the world in support of NSAGs and other subversive activities. From 1980 to 1999, Shi'a terrorist organizations and other Iranian establishments carried out 260 international attacks (not including Hezbollah-sponsored terrorist actions in Lebanon and other terrorist attacks against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988). The terrorist attacks included the detonation of explosive devices and car bombs[8] (31.53%), kidnappings of hostages (25.76%), hijacking/detonating airplanes (4.61%), and assassinations (generally by shooting—37.30%).[9] Table 1.1 breaks down Iranian and Shi'a international terrorist attacks by region.

Table 1.1: *Iranian and Shi'a Terror Attacks 1980-1999*

| | |
|---|---|
| 57 attacks in Europe | 21.92% |
| 173 attacks in the Middle East | 66.54% |
| 23 attacks in Asia | 8.85% |
| 6 attacks in the United States | 2.31% |
| 1 attack in Africa[10] | .38% |

Source: Shaul Shai, *The Axis of Evil, 82*.

Such statistics are important because they demonstrate Iran's significant infrastructure to support and operate international terrorism and other NSAGs around the world. In order to finance such activities, Iran often allocates money to government entities like its Foreign Ministry or Revolutionary Guards, or to semi-governmental entities like charitable foundations established by Khomeini to export the Revolution. In addition, Iran has raised funds through drug trafficking of poppy and cannabis, or by producing counterfeit money.[11] Indeed, Iran is a veteran supporter and financial backer of covert terror operations and other illicit behavior.

When it comes to the present situation in Iraq, Iran has a significant advantage over other Iraqi insurgent groups because of its previously established network of agents and proxy groups used to export terror. In addition, as a neighbor of Iraq, and with cooperation from its regionally sponsored groups like Hezbollah, Iran has been able to support NSAGs on a much wider scale. Moreover, after fighting the Iran-Iraq War for eight years, Iranian intelligence has a well-developed knowledge of Iraq's geography and terrain to oversee effective operations within Iraq.

Despite a well-established infrastructure to support terror, many analysts question why Iran adopts policies to support NSAGs that often contradict Iranian national interest. In the following passage Shaul Bakhash explains why Iran's foreign policy is often seen as incongruous:

> Foreign policy was significantly influenced by domestic politics and rivalries; by the conflicting agendas of different government agencies or quasi-independent groups acting with only partial government sanction; and by the propensity of government itself to pursue several conflicting foreign-policy goals at the same time.[12]

The above excerpt makes the claim that many Iranian domestic actors often operate quasi-independently of the national government, leading to the implementation of contradictory policies. The domestic actors involved in national and international security policymaking are the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps[13], also known as the IRGC or *Pasdaran*. Each institution is directly or indirectly involved in supporting NSAGs. Each unit, however, often operates independently of the others, resulting in conflicting outcomes. Without a centralized mechanism to oversee each of the individual institutions, the Iranian government has had difficulty in producing a unified internal national policy regarding NSAGs.[14]

Despite the adoption of conflicting policies, Iran's domestic actors have been instrumental in permitting Iran's government to succeed as an external supporter of NSAGs. In particular, the IRGC and its Special Forces, most importantly its al-Quds unit, have played the most influential role in directly supporting NSAGs, including some that have been linked to al-Qaeda, an extremist Wahhabi/Sunni terrorist group.[15] The IRGC has provided sanctuary, weapons, and training for many terrorist and insurgent organizations. In the 1990s, for example, it operated twelve training camps within Iran, graduating 4,000 to 5,000 annually.[16] The IRGC has also sponsored training camps in Lebanon for its main terrorist proxy group, Hezbollah, as well as setting up camps in South Africa and the Sudan.[17] The use of training camps for Iranian proxy groups has been a tactic continued today. By supporting proxy groups, Iran

is able to cover its tracks and protect itself from a country that might seek retribution after a terrorist attack. Since it is not easy to clearly trace back the roots of a proxy group to Iran, Iran is able to deny any sponsorship of terrorism.[18]

It is also important to note that Iran has reportedly had direct contact with many operatives of al-Qaeda, assisting both directly and indirectly with some cells' operations. In particular, Iranian/Shi'a-backed Hezbollah has trained al-Qaeda operatives and provided weapons and bomb-making capabilities for the group during the 1990s and the beginning of the next decade.[19] Iran's Revolutionary Guards have also been directly involved with several al-Qaeda members. In recent years, one report has alleged that the IRGC provided sanctuary to two senior al-Qaeda fugitives, as well as to dozens of other mid-level al-Qaeda operatives entering Iran from Afghanistan. The same report also claims that Iran has permitted al-Qaeda members to use Iran as a base for operations.[20]

Most recently, other reports allege that Abu Musaab Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born and current leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, was originally linked to both Hezbollah and Iran for strategic and tactical reasons. Specifically, in the late 1990s Hezbollah equipped Zarqawi and his followers with bomb-making capabilities for any possible future attacks in Jordan or elsewhere.[21] Overall, the allegations that link Iran to al-Qaeda are very significant, although not clearly defined. Despite being led by Shi'a clerics who view Islam in a very different way from Sunnis, Iran has allegedly continued its support for the training and aid of several al-Qaeda operatives prior to the invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. Before the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-Qaeda's objectives of fighting the infidel West were largely harmonious with many of Iran's own policies against the West, ultimately leading to a very convenient relationship. As it will be examined below, however, Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda has grown more complicated and ambiguous in a post-Saddam era.

**The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Special Forces have played the most influential role in directly supporting NSAGs**

In exploring Iran's current support for Iraqi NSAGs, it is also important to look briefly at Iran's relationship with Iraq during the past two decades. As stated previously, Iran and Iraq fought a fierce war from 1980 to 1988, leaving more than one million dead. The legacy of the war continues to affect relations today. Ultimately, the war was driven more by regional hegemony and territory than it was by religion or historically-rooted conflict.[22] Following the end of the war in 1988, Iran and Iraq maintained tepid relations with each other. The two countries eventually restored diplomatic relations in the 1990s but tensions remained. In particular, both Iran and Iraq supported dissident groups to instill fear against each other. Iraq, for example, sponsored the anti-Tehran Mujahideen-e Khalq organization (MEK) that carried out assassinations for several Iranian politicians, in addition to claiming other terrorist attacks against Iran. For its part, Iran sponsored the Iraqi exiled Shi'a group, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and its armed wing, the Badr Corps. The two groups were used as pawns by both Iran and Iraq as a tool for keeping the other power in check.[23] The two groups still exist today, and one of the reasons Iran continues to back the Badr Corps, an NSAG, is because it is still anxious about the prospect of a future MEK terrorist attack on Iranian soil.

**Despite a shift in foreign policy objectives, Iran has been accused of sponsoring terrorist activities in Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Lebanon**

Overall, the Iran-Iraq War created a new relationship of mistrust between Iran and Iraq. Iraqi Shi'a bitterly fought against Iranian Shi'a in an eight-year war of attrition. As a result of such a brutal war, Iraqis continue to feel an element of disdain for Iranians, and vice versa. Iran has had to tread delicately with the Shi'a of Iraq to establish greater power and influence over Shi'a politicians and religious leaders.

## Iran's Support of NSAGs in a Post-Saddam Iraq

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his Sunni Baathist Party marked the beginning of a new period of hope for Iraqi Shi'a and Kurds. For the first time in decades, the Shi'a and Kurds would align to form a democratic government representative of all Iraqis. Unfortunately, the past two years of Iraq's reconstruction has been tainted by an inability to restore law and order because of a mounting insurgency. Iraq also has been negatively affected by an unstable economy, high unemployment, and a relatively untrained army and police force to restore order.

Iraq is considered a weak state and Iran has been one of the many proactive forces to take advantage of the chaos within Iraq by working to protect its many national interests, including

improved relations with Iraqi Shi'a, through the external support of NSAGs. More importantly, the only way for Iran to preserve its interests in a state of lawlessness, where more than one hundred insurgent groups abound, is by supporting its own NSAGs.[24] Iraq's central government is largely unable to control provincial and municipal governments because of the national scope and complexity of the insurgency and lack of military forces. As a result, local governments must rely on local militias and other armed groups to wield any power.[25]

Iran favors instability as a means to safeguard its interests in Iraq so long as Iraq's instability does not destabilize Iran.[26] In other words, Iran has adopted a policy that aims to manage the chaos it has incited with the external support of NSAGs; it does not want Iraq to be completely stable, nor does it want Iraq to descend into total chaos.[27] To best understand why Iran has sponsored NSAGs as elements of the insurgency in Iraq, the criteria most relevant to Iran from Table 1.2 will be applied to the analysis below.

*Table 1.2 Reasons for State Sponsorship of an Insurgency*

| | |
|---|---|
| Regional influence | Support for coreligionists |
| Destabilization of neighbors | Support for co-ethnics |
| Payback for a previous action | Irredentism |
| Regime change | Leftist Ideology |
| Ensuring influence within the opposition | Plunder |
| Internal security | Prestige |

Source: Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 30.

## Garnering Shi'a Support in a Divided Community

Since 2003, Shi'a political and religious leaders from both Iraq and Iran have been engaged in a competition to win the hearts and minds of Iraqi Shi'a.[28] Iran in particular has found it very difficult to gain influence over the Iraqi Shi'a because of tribal, religious, and secular divisions.

The Shi'a are divided into many disjointed sub-groups. Indeed, religion plays an important role for each community, but tribal and kinship ties are equally as important and cannot be overlooked. One of Iran's main goals for Iraq is to establish a Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government that will be partial to Iran. However, Iran is learning that such a goal is difficult to ascertain due to the divisions that exist within the Shi'a community. Despite such divisions, Iran is aware of its violent past with Iraq and the repercussions that prevailed. Therefore, Iran is working to promote the formation of a pro-Iranian government to avoid any future conflict between the two countries that could result in another Iran-Iraq War that destroyed Iran's national defenses.

Another dilemma faced by Iran in bolstering support from Iraqi Shi'a is the inherent distrust that lingers across Iraq from the Iran-Iraq War: "Today, nearly all of the clergy inside Iraq and many of the Islamic groups in exile see Iran as a state that manipulates Iraqi Shi'a in pursuit of its own interest."[29] Iran and its clerics have often been viewed as the spiritual leaders for Shi'a Islam around the world, operating from Iran's religious centers like Qom and Mashhad. This esteemed position, however, is in danger of eclipsing in a post-Saddam era. For decades, Saddam suppressed his Shi'a majority and prohibited religious activities from taking place in the most revered cities of Shi'a Islam, Najaf, and Karbala. In the wake of Saddam's overthrow, clerics in Najaf and Karbala have been working to reestablish the two cities as the most sacred centers of Shiism, thus threatening Iran's power and influence among the Shi'a internationally. Moreover, the clerics of Najaf and Karbala, some of whom are linked to SCIRI, have begun to question Tehran and Qom's *velayet-e faqih* system where the rule of law is "established through a clerical jurisprudential system in which a senior cleric acts as the spiritual leader of the Islamic state."[30]

Iran's support for NSAGs in Iraq has been greatly influenced by both the threat that Iran will lose its religious and spiritual influence over Shi'a in Iraq and internationally, and the desire to ensure a pro-Iranian and Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government. When applying the categories from Table 1.2 to these factors, it is clear that Iran, then, is supporting NSAGs for regional influence, prestige in the Shi'a community, destabilization of Iraq, and support for co-religionists. Although there are several Shi'a armed groups in Iraq, the two main Shi'a factions, Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Corps, the armed wing of SCIRI,[31] best exemplify how Iran benefits from supporting opposing factions.

Since the 1980s, Iran has housed and supported SCIRI exiles to undermine Saddam Hussein and Iraq. Today, SCIRI has returned to Iraq with its 10,000-strong Badr Organization, becoming Iraq's most powerful Shi'a political bloc.[32] One of the original founders and leaders of SCIRI, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, returned to Iraq triumphantly in May 2003 after twenty-three years in exile to cheering supporters, but at the end of August Ayatollah al-Hakim was assassinated in a car bomb attack in Najaf.[33] His brother, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, has been named the new leader of SCIRI, but the loss of Ayatollah al-Hakim deprives both SCIRI and Iran of a strong and distinguished pro-Iranian ruler. Thus, Iran has been forced to look for new allies in an attempt to continue its exertion of power over Iraq.[34]

SCIRI's Badr Organization still receives sizeable funding and training from the IRGC and, after the assassination of Ayatollah al-Hakim in the summer of 2003, was deployed to prevent against any further outbreaks of violence in Najaf. This event established a new precedent in which an externally-backed militia was used to restore order. Moreover, use of the Badr Organization marked the beginning proliferation of individual and ethnically-based militias across Iraq: "If each community in Iraq believes that the United States cannot provide security, then they will form their own militias and it will be difficult to build a true national army and sense of Iraqi nationhood. This already appears to be happening."[35] The Badr Organization's presence is strongly felt throughout the south, but there are also units based in Kurdistan at Sulaimaniya and Myadan. The majority of its forces remain in Iran at its headquarters in Kharamanshahr.[36]

Since SCIRI has gained extensive control of the Ministry of Interior in recent months after coming to power in the newly formed Iraqi government, Badr Organization members have infiltrated the ministry's police, intelligence, and commando units. In addition, the Badr Organization is accused of running underground prisons where militia members have tortured and killed prisoners, most of whom are Sunnis.[37] Based on the largely Sunni and ex-Baathist nature of Iraq's insurgency, many Shi'a have been targeted for their involvement with the United States in forming a new government. Iran has an interest in preventing a rise in the number of insurgent attacks targeting Shi'a so that its regional influence and support for the new Shi'a government is not undermined. This may well be a factor in Iran's continued support for a group like the Badr Organization, which is capable of protecting various Shi'a communities across Iraq from other NSAGs. Specifically, Iran is concerned about the prospect of *jihadist*s and Wahhabi fundamentalists igniting a sectarian war between Shi'a and Sunnis.[38] Lawlessness and violence prevails in Iraq, and the only way for Iran to ensure the formation of a pro-Iranian government is by fighting lawlessness with lawlessness—in other words through the support of NSAGs.

In addition to SCIRI and its Badr Organization, Muqtada al-Sadr, the fourth son of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr who was assassinated by Saddam in 1999, heads another important Shi'a faction, including the Mahdi Army. Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, whose emergence has polarized the Iraqi Shi'a community, has three dissimilar, homegrown components: "The clerical core, formed mostly of young clergy and novices who were loyal to [Sadr's] father, the charity networks built by [Sadr's] father, and spontaneous armed mobs, which derive from the security vacuum after the fall of the regime."[39] Today, the Mahdi Army is largely in control of Baghdad's Shi'a neighborhoods and several important cities in the south, including Basra. Al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army are backed by the IRGC and have allegedly received $80 million from Iran to sustain its operations in 2004 alone. In addition, the IRGC supposedly trained between 800 and 1,200 members of the Mahdi Army along Iran's border in the south of Iraq.[40]

> Iraq is considered a weak state and Iran has been one of the many proactive forces to take advantage of the chaos within Iraq by working to protect its many national interests, including improved relations with Iraqi Shi'a, through the external support of NSAGs

Moqtada al-Sadr is a relatively young radical leader in his early thirties and, as a result of his age and inexperience, lacks any serious religious clout compared to other Shi'a clerics. His battles against Iraq's Shi'a clerics has tarnished his credibility among many of the Shi'a elite: as one commentator put it, "Single-handedly, Muqtada is waging a war against what he termed as traditional clerics, 'non-Iraqi' clerics and pro-Baathist clerics, in other words against everyone but himself."[41] Specifically, al-Sadr is responsible for the death of the prominent moderate Shi'a cleric of Najaf, Abu'l-Qasim al-Khoei in 2003. Al-Sadr has also been accused of using his followers to menace Ayatollah Ali Sistani, currently the most-prominent Iranian-born Shi'a cleric of Iraq, who remains apolitical and very popular.[42]

Starting out with relatively little widespread support, al-Sadr's popularity increased significantly after a standoff with U.S. Coalition Forces at Najaf's holy shrine and mosque. According to some polls, al-Sadr has become the second-most popular man in Iraq after Ayatollah Sistani.[43] Since al-Sadr's recent rise to power, his Mahdi Army has successfully taken control of city police forces in southern cities such as Basra.[44] Al-Sadr's rise to prestige through his Mahdi Army even carried over into the political arena, where 24 pro-Sadr candidates were elected to the Transitional National Assembly in January 2005.[45]

Certainly, al-Sadr has defined himself as a prominent leader among certain Iraqi Shi'a, leading to greater external support from Iran for his followers. Al-Sadr's more influential stature, however, has created a rift with other Shi'a groups, including SCIRI and the Badr Organization. In fact, al-Sadr's militia violently clashed with Badr forces in Baghdad over constitutional issues during the summer of 2005: "Their confrontations threaten to break down the Shi'a political dominance that has been in Iran's interest to sustain."[46] Iran backs both groups in the Badr-Sadr rivalry to ensure that it will enjoy favorable relations if either group finally establishes power in a permanent Iraqi government. Moreover, due the lack of one clear Shi'a political or religious leader in Iraq, Iran must support the main Shi'a factions as a way to preserve its influence throughout Iraq. Nonetheless, this rise in intra-Shi'a violence does not bode well for the future political stability of the country.

### Regional Influence and National Security

Although Iran's Revolutionary Guards are not technically an NSAG, they have been used like one in a covert manner to directly support and train terrorist proxy groups and militias in both Iran and Iraq. It is estimated that Iran has 14,000 intelligence agents operating in Iraq.[47] Moreover, Iran is spending an estimated US$70 million a month on its special operations units.[48] Iran has deployed its IRGC and Special Forces for three primary reasons:

1. To ensure the Mujahideen-e Khalq, which was the Iranian dissident group originally sponsored by Saddam Hussein, does not plan any more attacks against Iran or gather intelligence for the United States;[49]
2. To prevent any further spread of Kurdish nationalism across Iraq's borders into Iran's Kurdish territories;[50] and
3. To keep Iraq unstable enough to prevent any future attack by the U.S. military against Iran and to make certain Americans are "pinned down to divert their attention from [Iran's] nuclear program."[51]

Although the third reason is largely speculative, there is a high probability that Iran might be pursuing such a policy that aims to use Iraq as a diversion to build its nuclear program.[52] According to Table 1.2, Iran is supporting its IRGC as a quasi-NSAG for reasons motivated by regional influence, internal security, and destabilization.

In addition to supporting the main Shi'a factions, the IRGC has also assisted Lebanese Hezbollah, which sent approximately 100 fighters to Iraq immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein: "The presence of Hezbollah fighters in Iraq is meant to neutralize any attempt by the Coalition Forces to activate opposition to Iran from within Iraq."[53] Hezbollah members have also been integrated into various local police force units of several southern Iraqi cities, including Nasiriya and Ummara.[54] It is also believed that Iran supports other groups including a cell of the Mujahideen for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (MIRI), a paramilitary unit coordinated out of the IRGC's base in Ahvaz, Iran; Thar-allah (Vengeance of God), one of many militant groups suspected of assassinations in Iraq;[55] al-Dawa (The Call), an Islamist group historically aligned with SCIRI and Hezbollah;[56] and the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan (IMK).[57]

Overall, Iran has used the IRGC and its Special Forces as a means to support many different proxy groups and other militias within Iraq to fuel the instability that currently exists. In addition, Iran aims to protect against any future attacks that might be planned in Iraq by dissident groups currently in operation. Moreover, Iran desires to stave off any future invasion led by an American coalition:

> The ongoing 'chaos' in Iraq is Iran's 'insurance policy,' for if there were peace and quiet in Iraq the American might decide to pay more attention to Iran. The coalition's failure to stabilize the situation in Iraq forces them to maintain a military presence and they suffer from a growing number of losses and a reduced legitimacy for their presence in Iraq.[58]

Iran will continue to externally support NSAGs as one way to flex its muscles against the United States.[59]

## Ensuring Influence within the Opposition: Support for Sunni Groups

As demonstrated in Table 1.2, one other important reason why a state externally supports an NSAG is to make sure an opposition movement does not adopt goals or policies that are hostile to the state's interests.[60] In the case of Iran, for example, it sees the sponsorship of such groups as another way to destabilize Iraq. In particular, there are two noteworthy terrorist groups linked to Iran in Iraq: Ansar al-Islam (Jund al-Islam) and al-Qaeda. Although Ansar al-Islam is a Kurdish based group backed by Iran, it also has important ties to al-Qaeda.[61] Initially, Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi was a prominent leader in Ansar al-Islam before recently splintering off, ultimately leading to his current position as the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In the early 2000s, Zarqawi developed terrorist networks in Iran, using it both as a country of transit and a base for operations to plan several terrorist attacks.[62] At the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq, Iran used Ansar al-Islam to fight the Kurdish Peshmerga in the north. In addition, Iran supported Ansar al-Islam to patrol the entrance and exit to/from Kurdistan and Iran. In 2003 when the United States attacked Ansar al-Islam's bases in northern Iraq, Iran allegedly provided sanctuary for the surviving members of the group. Ansar al-Islam was able to regroup to a certain extent in Iran and train its forces with the help of the IRGC. The group continues to operate in northern Iraq but to a lesser extent than before with only 1,000 fighters.[63]

**Al-Sadr's rise to prestige through his Mahdi Army carried over into the political arena, where 24 pro-Sadr candidates were elected to the Transitional National Assembly in January 2005**

Aside from Ansar al-Islam, Iran has also allegedly permitted other al-Qaeda cells to plan operations within its borders.[64] More importantly, in late 2003 it was believed that Zarqawi planned his Iraqi operations from Iran.[65] At the beginning of Iraq's insurgency, the al-Qaeda cells were largely disorganized in Iraq, only attacking sporadically. However, over time the attacks grew more organized and al-Qaeda's target list greatly expanded:

> Attacks on U.S. soldiers continue, but new targets include other coalition forces; US civilians; Iraqis working with the coalition, such as policemen or the mayor; and infrastructure such as oil and water pipelines or electrical pylons, the Jordanian embassy, the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, and the UN headquarters.[66]

More troubling for Iran, however, was the fact that Zarqawi and his al-Qaeda associates began to see many Shi'a as *rafida*, or renegades, because of their collaboration with the Americans in the formation of Iraq's new government. In addition, Zarqawi has recently declared war on the Badr Organization and proposed the formation of an Omar Brigades to assassinate leaders of the Badr Corps.[67] One could argue that such an increase in the targeting of Shi'a by al-Qaeda is potentially very troublesome for Iran. Initially, Iran's support for the opposition insurgent groups stemmed from sharing a similar objective as al-Qaeda, mainly attacking U.S. Coalition military personnel and bases. However, in the past year it appears that supporting the opposition is beginning to backfire on Iran. Although civil war has not ignited as a result of the new attacks against the Shi'a, there is a great risk for such a possibility. If sectarian war were to erupt, Iran would be in grave danger of losing control of the situation, in addition to losing the power it wields over many of its externally sponsored armed groups.

## Conclusion

The situation in Iraq today is unpredictable at best and anarchical at worst. The sponsorship of NSAGs in Iraq by Iran has greatly contributed to the chaos and instability that prevails today. Iraq's lack of a central authority to enforce law and order across the country has bred the national proliferation of NSAGs. The case of Iranian involvement in Iraq shows how NSAGs can be used as important foreign policy instruments of a state. Iran has sponsored militia, insurgent, and terrorist groups to ensure that its power in Iraq is maintained. External support for Iraq's NSAGs, and in particular Shi'a militias, has permitted Iran to reconstruct its relations with Iraqi Shi'a. More than ever, Iran desires to establish a pro-Iranian, Shi'a-led government and by supporting the major Shi'a factions Iran has a better chance of realizing this goal. In addition, Iran benefits doubly because the unmanageable nature of the insurgency also means the US is less able to devote its attention to Iran and the development of its nuclear program.

Over the years, Iran has developed a well-organized infrastructure to support and execute terrorist and insurgent attacks. Such a strong network of experienced intelligence agents has assisted Iran in establishing new bases of

operations from Iraq. Unfortunately, more time is needed to conclude whether or not Iran's sponsorship of NSAGs is effective in safeguarding its national interest in Iraq. Certainly, Iran has supported Shi'a, Kurdish, and Sunni groups as a means to assist Iran in the preservation of its interests. However, by supporting opposing groups Iran runs the risk of igniting a sectarian war. Therefore, time will be the only true determinant of whether or not Iran has fully staved off a protracted civil war and successfully managed the chaos that prevails in Iraq.

Overall, the non-state actors that infiltrate Iraq today are representative of the new global trends revolutionizing the nature and scope of internal wars and conflict, including an increase in the use of violent technology and new innovations for supporting wars from a distance. Internal wars no longer possess purely local elements but incorporate more transnational or global trends. One such global force is that of an externally-backed NSAG. What is more alarming, however, is that this is very cost-effective in fighting a superpower like the United States, compared to the full deployment of conventional forces. In any case, more research is needed to address just how effective NSAGs can be used as foreign policy tools. Iran's motivations for sponsoring NSAGs in Iraq is more clearly known but whether or not such a policy can be successfully maintained in a country that teeters on the edge of perpetual chaos remains to be seen.

[1] Edward Wong, "Iran is in Strong Position to Steer Iraq's Political Future," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2005, A6, Accessed through Lexus Nexus.
[2] Zbigniew Brezinski and Robert M. Gates, Task Force Co-chairs, *Iran: Time for a New Approach* (Uncorrected proof) (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), 27-28.
[3] Shaul Bakhash, "Iran's Foreign Policy under the Islamic Republic, 1979-2000," *in Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*, L. Carl Brown, ed. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 251-252.
[4] Daniel Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Jerrold Green, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2001), 92.
[5] Brezinski and Gates, 16.
[6] "External Affairs, Iran," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—The Gulf States*, August 9, 2005, Available from *Jane's Information Group* (Viewed November 15, 2005).
[7] Shay, 42.
[8] This category statistically includes suicide attacks. See Shay, 125 # 4.
[9] There are additional attacks that are not included in these categories such as tossing of hand grenades and Molotov cocktails. Such attacks account for 0.8 % of all attacks and were therefore not included in the data. See Shay 81-82 and 125 #3.
[10] *Ibid*., 82.
[11] Shay, 223-225.
[12] Bakhash, 252.
[13] During the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guard had 750,000 troops. Today, the number has dropped to 150,000. Al Venter, "Iran Still Exporting Terrorism to Spread its Islamic Vision," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 9, no. 11 (November 1, 1997), Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*.
[14] Yael Shahar, "Al-Qaida's Links to Iranian Security Services," *Institute for Counter Terrorism*, January 20, 2003: <http://www.ict.org.il/> (Viewed November 26, 2005).
[15] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Developing Military Capabilities* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2005), 48-49.
[16] Thomas Hunter, "Bomb School: International Training Camps," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 9, no. 3 (March 1, 1997), Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*.
[17] *Ibid*.
[18] Venter, Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*.
[19] Yael Shahar, "Al-Qaida's Links to Iranian Security Services," *Institute for Counter Terrorism*, January 20, 2003: <http://www.ict.org.il/> (Viewed November 26, 2005). If this source is correct, then it would further demonstrate a strong link between Iran and its link to al-Qaeda, in addition to its direct sponsorship of international NSAGs.
[20] *Ibid*.
[21] More will be discussed on Zarqawi's links to Iran in the proceeding section.
[22] Anoushiravan Ehteshami,, "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2003): 117.
[23] Ehteshami, 126.
[24] "Iraq Country Report-Main Report—The political scene: Shia-led confederation proposed by some Shia leaders," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, September 9, 2005, Accessed through *Economist Intelligence Unit Reports*.
[25] "Security—Iraq," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—The Gulf States*, November 3, 2005 (Viewed November 15, 2005 and accessed through *Jane's Information Group*).
[26] Edward Wong, "Iran is in Strong Position to Steer Iraq's Political Future," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2005, A6, Accessed through Lexus Nexus.
[27] "Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?" *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report no. 38, March 21, 2005, 22.
[28] Laith Kubba, "Iraqi Shi'i Politics," in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 143.
[29] Kubba, 148.
[30] Ehteshami, 125.
[31] Today the Badr Corps is known as the Badr Organization for Development and Reconstruction.

[32] "Battle for Iraq lies in the south," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 1, 2005, Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*.
[33] Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army is accused by some for the assassination of al-Hakim. See Nimrod Raphaeli, "Muqtada al-Sadr vis-à-vis the Shi'a Religious Establishment," *Middle East Media Research Institute: Inquiry and Analysis Series*, no. 177 (June 4, 2004).
[34] "Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, June 23, 2005 (Viewed November 5, 2005 and accessed through *Jane's Information Group*).
[35] Kenneth Katzman, "Political Scenarios in Post-War Iraq," in *Iraq Reconstruction and Future Role* (Abu Dhabi, UAE: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2004), 77-78.
[36] "Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, June 23, 2005 (Viewed November 5, 2005 and accessed through *Jane's Information Group*).
[37] Edward Wong and John F. Burns, "Iraqi Rift Grows After Discovery of Prison," *The New York Times* (online), November 17, 2005. See also Dexter Filkins, "Sunnis Accuse Iraqi Military Executions," *The New York Times* (online), November 29, 2005.
[38] Mohsen M. Milani, "Iran, the Status Quo Power," *Current History*, January 2005, 34.
[39] Jabar, 18.
[40] "External Affairs—Iran," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment-The Gulf States*, August 9, 2005 (Viewed November 5, 2005 and accessed through *Jane's Information Group*).
[41] Faleh A. Jabar, "The World Roots of Religiosity in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Middle East Report* 227 (Summer 2003): 17.
[42] *Ibid*., 17.
[43] One poll taken in December 2003 claimed that only 1 percent of Iraqis supported al-Sadr's activities. However, in May 2004 some 68 percent of Iraqis supported al-Sadr to some degree. Ryan Philips and Jeffrey White, "Sadrist revolt provides lesson for counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, August 1, 2004, Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*
[44] Kathleen Ridolfo, "Iraq: Al-Sadr Militia Taking Law Into Own Hands," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 4, 2005: <http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=11&y=2005 &id=35B8BB23-2A15-4275-99EE-B368FDE58B0A> (Viewed November 4, 2005).
[45] "Battle for Iraq lies in the south," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 1, 2005, Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*.
[46] "A Critical Triangle: Iraq, Iran and The United States," *United States Institute for Peace Briefing*, September 2005: <http://www.usip.org/newsmedia/releases/2005/0923_triangle.html> (Viewed 18 November 2005).
[47] Nimrod Raphaeli, "Iran's Stirrings in Iraq," *Middle East Media Research Institute: Inquiry and Analysis Series*, no. 173 (May 5, 2004).
[48] "Iran's Role in the Recent Uprising in Iraq," *Middle East Media Research Institute: Special Dispatch Series*, no. 692, April 9, 2004.
[49] "Are US troops operating in Iran?" *Foreign Report*, February 24, 2005 (Viewed November 15, 2005 and accessed through *Jane's Information Group*).
[50] "Security—Iraq," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—The Gulf States*, November 3, 2005 (Viewed November 15, 2005 and accessed through *Jane's Information Group*).
[51] See N. Raphaeli.
[52] See Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Taking on Tehran," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2005, for an overview of Iran's nuclear program.
[53] See N. Raphaeli.
[54] Raymond Tanter, "Iran's Threat to Coalition Forces in Iraq," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch #827, January 15, 2004, Accessed through CIAO Net.
[55] Michael Ware, "Inside Iran's Secret War for Iraq," *Time*, August 22, 2005, Accessed through *Expanded Academic Index*.
[56] Ed Blanche, "Iraq's militias become a threat," *Jane's Terrorism & Security Monitor*, April 1, 2004, Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*.
[57] "Iraqi Kurdistan," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—Gulf States*, April 28, 2005 (Viewed November 15, 2005 and accessed via *Jane's Information Group*). See also "Islamic Movement of Kurdistan," *www.globalsecurity.org* (Viewed November 30, 2005). It could be speculated that one reason why Iran

supports this group is to fight Iranian dissident groups located in Northern Iraq, such as the MEK or the Kurdish Communist Party of Iran (Komala)—See "Kurdish Communist Party of Iran (Komala)," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, July 1, 2005.) One could also argue that such a group is supported by Iran to make certain Iranian Kurds are prevented from linking up with Iraqi Kurds to ignite Kurdish national fervor.

[58] Shay, 255.

[59] Ehteshami, 124.

[60] Byman, Chalk, Hoffman, Rosenau, and Brannan, 34.

[61] Jonathan Schanzer, "Tehran's Hidden Hand: Iran's Mounting Threats in Iraq," in *Operation Iraqi Freedom and the New Iraq: Insights and Forecasts*, Michael Knights, ed. (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004), 354.

[62] Rohan Gunaratna, "Abu Musab al-ZARQAWI: A new Generation terrorist leader," *Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Commentaries*, July 5, 2004, 3.

[63] Schanzer, 354.

[64] US State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004* (Washington DC: US State Department, April 2005), 88.

[65] Matthew Levitt, "USA ties terrorist attacks in Iraq to extensive Zarqawi network," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, April 1, 2004, Accessed through *Jane's Information Group*.

[66] Stephen Metz, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2003): 30.

[67] Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Al-Zarqawi's Rise to Power: Analyzing Tactics and Targets," *The Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 22, November 17, 2005, 2-3.