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Iran's Threat to Coalition Forces in Iraq

by [Raymond Tanter](#)

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Brief Analysis

On January 13, 2004, Eli Lake of the New York Sun reported that two senior members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had defected to coalition forces in Iraq. This defection constitutes a good opportunity to reflect on several issues, including Iran's efforts to infiltrate the Iraqi Shi'i community, Tehran's potential plans to target (either directly or by proxy) U.S. forces in Iraq, and the appropriate U.S. policy response to this potential Iranian threat.

Iran's Support for Anti-American Terrorism

According to the State Department's Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002 (issued in April 2003), Tehran provides the Lebanon-based Hizballah with "funding, safe haven, training, and weapons." Such support (estimated at \$80 million per year) has given Iran a terrorist proxy of global reach. For example, Hizballah suicide bombings against the U.S. Marine barracks and the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut (in October 1983 and September 1984, respectively) killed some 300 U.S. diplomats and soldiers. In addition, the twenty-two individuals on the FBI's list of Most Wanted Terrorists include three Hizballah operatives accused of the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847, during which a U.S. Navy diver was murdered. The hijacking featured the infamous image of an American pilot peering out of the cockpit with a gun to his head. Moreover, according to a November 1, 1996, report by the Washington Post, Saudi intelligence concluded that a local group calling itself Hizballah was responsible for the June 1996 truck bombing of the Khobar Towers U.S. military housing complex on the kingdom's Persian Gulf coast. The Saudis also asserted that this local group was a wing of Lebanese Hizballah. More recently, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah made the following remarks in a speech given one week before coalition forces launched Operation Iraqi Freedom (as broadcast on al-Manar, the organization's Beirut-based satellite television station): "In the past, when the Marines were in Beirut, we screamed, 'Death to America!' Today, when the region is being filled with hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, 'Death to America!' was, is, and will stay our slogan."

Iran's support for anti-American terrorism is not limited to Hizballah, however. According to the State Department, some al-Qaeda operatives have obtained safe haven in Iran. U.S. intelligence believes that one such operative is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for whose capture the State Department's "Rewards for Justice" program offers up to \$5 million.

Iran's links to al-Qaeda may predate the organization's post-September 11 flight from Afghanistan. At the trial for those suspected of bombing the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, one of the defendants testified that he had provided security for meetings between al-Qaeda and Hizballah operatives. In addition, phone records revealed at the trial demonstrated that, during the period preceding the bombings, 10 percent of the calls made from Osama bin Laden's satellite phone were to Iran.

Iranian Efforts in Postwar Iraq

Over 2,000 Iranian-sponsored clerics have crossed into Iraq from Iran since the cessation of major combat in May 2003. Many of them carry books, compact discs, and audiotapes that promote militant Islam. Moreover, according to Iranian dissident sources, the IRGC's Qods (Jerusalem) Force is establishing armed underground cells across the Shi'i southern region of Iraq, often using the Iranian Red Crescent as a front. Such sources also contend that the Jerusalem Force has established medical centers and local charities in Najaf, Baghdad, Hillah, Basra, and al-Amarah in order to gain support from the local population. In addition, according to a September 2003 Washington Times report, IRGC agents have been deployed to Najaf in order to gather intelligence on U.S. forces. Tehran has also permitted members of Ansar al-Islam, a terrorist faction with close links to al-Qaeda, to cross back into Iraq and join the anti-American resistance.

Even as Tehran began to send Iranian operatives into postwar Iraq, members of Hizballah infiltrated the country as well. Because most of Hizballah's members are Arab, they may constitute an even more effective Iranian proxy in Iraq than Iranian agents trained in Arabic. According to Iranian dissident sources (and confirmed in part by U.S. intelligence), Tehran tasked Hizballah with sending agents and clerics across a major portion of southern Iraq. Indeed, once major combat operations came to an end, Hizballah "holy warriors" crossed into the country not only from Syria, but from Iran as well. Initially, these operatives numbered nearly 100, but this relatively small figure belies their potential impact on behalf of Tehran. Hizballah has established charitable organizations in Iraq in order to create a favorable environment for recruiting, a tactic that the organization had previously tested in southern Lebanon with Iranian assistance. Moreover, according to Mohammed al-Alawi, Hizballah's chief spokesman in Iraq, the organization's agents act as local police forces in many southern cities (e.g., Nasiriya, Ummara), ignoring an official U.S. ban on militias. Overall, Tehran seems to be using Hizballah to supplement its own penetration of local Iraqi governing offices and judiciaries.

In addition, Iranian dissident sources report that Tehran has used Hizballah to smuggle Iraqis living in Iran back into their native country. A significant number of Iraqis have dual nationalities and have resided in Iran for many years; some have even served as IRGC commanders. Hizballah can help conceal their long association with Iran; indeed, some of these individuals have apparently joined Iraqi police forces since the end of major combat.

Iranian dissident sources also contend that Hizballah is casing coalition assembly centers in Iraq and tracking the timing and order of movements by various coalition vehicles, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and motorcades (this assertion has yet to be confirmed by U.S. intelligence officials). Hizballah agents are reportedly videotaping various locations in two-person teams, often using public transportation such as taxis. Footage of targets is sometimes concealed between banal imagery (e.g., wedding festivities) in order to avoid detection by coalition forces. Such reports echo Hizballah's own public statements, voiced as early as mid-April 2003, regarding its willingness to attack U.S. forces in Iraq and its increasing ability to do so.

Talks with Iran?

The devastating earthquake that struck Iran in December 2003 renewed the debate over whether Washington should resume its quiet dialogue with Tehran. That dialogue was suspended in spring 2003 after intelligence linked al-Qaeda operatives held in Iran to a series of suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia. Now that Tehran has agreed in

principle to some limits on its nuclear program, Iranian-sponsored terrorism heads the list of topics that Washington needs to discuss with Tehran. Another key issue is Tehran's efforts to build an intelligence infrastructure in Iraq. Prior to resuming U.S.-Iranian dialogue, Washington should not only insist that Iran expel al-Qaeda, but also demand that Ansar al-Islam, Hizballah, and the IRGC's Jerusalem Force withdraw from Iraq. With over 10,000 coalition forces stationed in southern Iraq, force-protection planners should be particularly wary of Hizballah's intelligence efforts, given the organization's past attacks against U.S. military forces in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

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