

Helping Iraqis without Iran: An Enemy of Our Enemy Need Not Be Our Friend

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Articles & Testimony

There is a popular joke in Baghdad about a man who buys a black-and-white television set. He takes the set home, plugs it in, but it doesn't work. So he runs back to the market and confronts the merchant. "You've sold me a defective television," he complains, "I plug it in but there's no picture." The merchant pastes a picture of Saddam Hussein to the screen, smiles, and responds, "It works now, plus it's in color."

On February 27, after months of foot dragging, the state department finally agreed to back construction of an Iraqi opposition radio transmitter to be run by the Iraqi National Congress. Breaking Saddam's media monopoly is a good idea and long overdue. There's only one problem: Some in the state department want to base the transmitter in Iran. Cooperating against Saddam might help Washington and Tehran repair relations, these diplomats argue. It sounds good in theory, but it's a remarkably bad idea.

I lived in northern Iraq for nine months last year while teaching Iranian history at local universities. While there, the Iranian government - so often portrayed as reformist or moderate in the American press - worked tirelessly to both promote Islamic Revolution and undermine stability not only in the U.S.-protected safe haven, but in Turkey as well.

Turkey is a model of success when compared to most of its Middle Eastern neighbors. Because Turkey's constitution strongly divides mosque and state, Turkey presents a strong ideological challenge to Iran's ayatollahs who continue to run their country into the ground. Turkey has not been without serious problems, though. Since 1984, the Turks have been embroiled in a bloody conflict with a separatist group called the Kurdistan Workers Party, better known by the acronym PKK. More than 37,000 people have died. In 1989, the ayatollahs allowed the PKK to set up 20 bases inside Iran to strike at Turkey. Where does the PKK get its weapons? Iran. Since 1999, Iran has supplied the PKK with almost any light weapon it wanted. In 2000, Iran supplied and actively supported the PKK as they did battle with the pro-American and secular groups that control the Iraqi safe-haven.

Iran also extends its support to a variety of Islamist groups that make the Taliban look moderate. In January 2001, the Iranian government helped members of a group called the Kaplanists transit Iran and establish a base inside Iraqi Kurdistan. What exactly do the Kaplanists stand for? In interviews with European and Turkish press, their leader Metin Kaplan claimed he is "the caliph and successor to the prophet." In 1998, he told Turkish TV, "We have declared Jihad. Everybody who opposed Islam and an Islamic state will die." When a rival religious figure challenged Kaplan's leadership two years ago, Kaplan issued a fatwah (religious judgment) calling for his rival's death. Kaplan's followers carried out the order.

Unfortunately, Kaplan is only one part of Tehran's vision for the future of Iraq. As war waged in Afghanistan, Iran supported a new group, the Jund al-Islam (Army of Islam) establish itself along Iran's mountainous frontier with Iraq. A leaflet from the Jund al-Islam explained the group's program: Holy War against "blasphemers and the secularists." Supplied with weapons smuggled across the Iranian border, the Jund al-Islam proceeded to slaughter several dozen "secular" Kurds, beheading them and mutilating their bodies. Such is the vision of the Islamic

Republic, even under so-called moderates like President Muhammad Khatami.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last December, State Department Policy Planning chief Richard Haass told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that, "the pattern of Iranian behavior deserves to be labeled as constructive." Perhaps Foggy Bottom diplomats have a new definition of "constructive," but trusting Tehran to not interfere with a U.S.-financed radio station seems a recipe for disaster.

Saddam is an enemy, and a threat both to the United States and his own people. But an enemy of our enemy need not be our friend. The U.S. erred by letting Saddam remain in power for a decade, and should have allowed Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmad Chalabi to establish a local radio station years ago. But let's not now compound those mistakes by letting Iran dictate what comes next.

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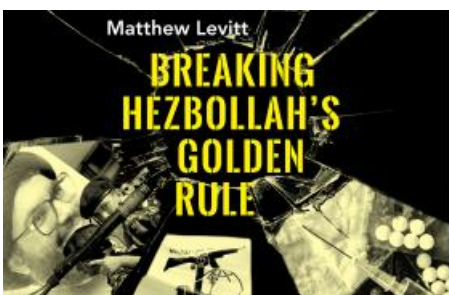
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