

PolicyWatch 1492

Iran's Ongoing Proxy War in Iraq

[*Michael Knights*](#)

Policy #1492

March 16, 2009

In December 2008, shortly before assuming office, President Barack Obama called for "tough but direct diplomacy with Iran." As the new administration moves forward, it must realize that U.S.-Iranian negotiations will take place while Iran is killing Americans in Iraq and increasing its support for armed Iraqi factions. Like its predecessor, the Obama administration must prepare for the challenge of negotiating under fire.

Iranian-Backed Operations, 2003-2007

In addition to significant economic investment and relationship building among Iraq's political parties, Iran develops influence in Iraq by providing Iraqi militants with training, shelter, money, and equipment. Analysis of declassified interrogation and other intelligence material published by the West Point Counterterrorism Center, the Institute for Studying War, and the Long War Journal, has publicly revealed what military intelligence professionals have been piecing together for longer than five years: that Iran has been developing a covert action program in Iraq for decades, one that is open-ended, resilient, and well-funded, and that utilizes a broad range of Iraqi proxies.

Iran's best known militant proxy in Iraq is called Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous), often referred to as Special Groups; these cells specialize in certain types of signature attacks, such as the employment of Iranian-produced weapons or components, including the roadside bombs referred to as explosively formed projectiles (EFP). The latter munitions are particularly significant because of their lethality; although they have been used in just 5-10 percent of roadside bombings, they account for 40 percent of U.S. casualties.

Most Special Group cells comprise four to ten persons, and multiple cells are grouped under regional commanders who have long experience in Iran's intelligence services. These cells are semiautonomous, sometimes striking targets specified by Iran (U.S. bases or Iraqi politicians and security officials) and sometimes attacking at will, including freelance assassinations for profit. In some cases, notably the January 2007 kidnap-murder of five U.S. soldiers in Karbala, these proxies have shown a marked proclivity for risk taking in their dealings with the United States. Use of new Iranian-manufactured weaponry has also been blatant, displaying an evident disregard for the plausible deniability that has, in the past, been an important aspect of Iranian proxy actions against the United States.

Resurgence of Iranian-Backed Attacks?

The Special Groups have suffered major disruptions since 2007, losing many leaders, arms caches, and safe havens. Yet by the end of 2008, they began to return from Iranian safe havens to resume operations in Iraq. On February 4, 2009, Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin noted, "We know that some elements that were working with Shiite extremists left the country, went into Iran, and came back, and we've captured . . . some of those elements."

Reporting on the Special Groups' resurgence has frequently lagged. In December 2008, Lt. Gen. Thomas Metz, director of the Joint Improvised Explosive Device (IED) Defeat Organization stated that use of EFPs had dropped markedly from sixty to eighty per month in early 2008 to twelve to twenty by July 2008. But General Metz's statement did not reflect that EFP use had recovered in key locations by late 2008. By January 2009, sixteen EFP attacks were attempted in East Baghdad alone, compared with eighteen in April 2008 at the height of the battle for Sadr City. Likewise, in the last quarter of 2008, fourteen EFP attacks were carried out against U.S. forces in Maysan province, the crossroads for the Special Groups' movement of men and materiel across the Iraq-Iran border. Advanced EFP cells continue to operate in Basra and even Kirkuk, where they are comprised of Shiite Turkmen and Arabs.

Besides EFPs, Iran's hand has been visible in rocket attacks across Iraq. Taking a page from Lebanese Hizballah's book, Iranian-backed groups in Iraq have specialized in the use of long-range rocket attacks on coalition bases. Tehran's support has not been subtle: Iran has supplied bulky Fajr-3 240 mm rockets, positively identified by Multinational Forces technical specialists as newly constructed missiles, not old Saddam Hussein-era BM-24 240 mm rounds. In the last six months, Iranian Fajr-3 rockets have been fired twice at UK facilities in Basra Air Station and once at U.S. facilities in Maysan. The heavy 240 mm rockets have killed four coalition soldiers and wounded sixty-one since being introduced in 2006. Iranian-made MJ-1 fuses and rocket fuel packs with imprinted production dates as recent as 2008 have been recovered from Special Groups arms caches. Indeed, a resurgent rocket

threat has become apparent at Camp Bucca Theater Internment Facility near Umm Qasr port and Basra Air Station (the latter of which came under rocket fire on March 9 and 11). In the first month of 2009, seventeen rocket rounds utilizing new fuel packs and fuses were launched at the main U.S. base in Maysan.

Impact on U.S.-Iranian Engagement

It would be premature to say that Tehran has scaled back its support for Special Groups. More likely, as General Austin noted in February, Iranian-backed attacks have been disrupted by the combined operations of Iraqi and multinational forces as well as by Muqtada al-Sadr's call for a halt on unauthorized military operations. Likewise, Gen. Ray Odierno, commander of Multinational Force Iraq, noted in October 2008 that Iran "dials it up and down" in respect to supporting militias, meaning that temporary restraint should not be confused with permanent dismantlement of proxy networks, which Iran has cultivated for decades.

In fact, Iran's relationship with such proxies is arguably closer than ever. For instance, the split of Asaib Ahl al-Haq from the mainstream Sadrism movement will deepen with Muqtada's attempt to convert most of the Jaish al-Mahdi -- the Shiite paramilitary force loyal to al-Sadr -- into a social services movement, and with the nascent political alliance forming between mainstream Sadrists and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki since the provincial elections. Moreover, the recent election meted out severe punishment to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Iran's main political ally, for its perceived ties to Iran. Covert support to armed groups may compensate for lost political influence.

Ongoing Iranian-backed proxy warfare against the United States needs to be factored into contingency planning related to any U.S.-Iranian dialogue. The risk-taking proclivities of Iran's proxies and the blatant use of Iranian materiel create the ever-present risk of a politically disruptive event. Indeed, hardline members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps may even deliberately employ such spoiler tactics if U.S.-Iranian dialogue moves forward.

The United States can draw upon many modern experiences of negotiating under fire, but Britain's post-2003 experience with Iran bears particularly close scrutiny. As a leading member of the EU's negotiating team on Iran's nuclear program, the UK had to continue a constructive dialogue even as Iranian EFPs and rockets killed British troops and as Iranian government forces kidnapped British citizens. Sir John Sawers, Britain's ambassador to the UN, noted in a February 2009 BBC interview that "the Iranians wanted to be able to strike a deal whereby they stopped killing our forces in Iraq in return for them being allowed to carry on with their nuclear program." As the United States begins to engage Iran, provocations and threats will be common. Striking the right balance -- maintaining or restoring deterrence while preserving the diplomatic processes -- will not be easy.

Michael Knights is an associate fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states.