

Unanswered questions about the Karbala raid

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In its attempt to manufacture a case for military aggression against Iran, the Bush administration has made wholly unsubstantiated allegations that Iranian agents were responsible for a January 20 raid conducted on a supposedly secure US facility in the Iraqi city of Karbala. Five American military personnel were killed in the raid.

The only rationale given for this charge came from American officials speaking to the media on condition of anonymity, who said that the operation—carried out by unidentified individuals in American uniforms—was too “sophisticated” for Iraqi opponents of the US occupation to have carried out on their own.

Why Iran would have an interest in staging such an attack, and this attack in particular, has never been explained. The five US soldiers who were killed—one of them on the spot and the four others after being abducted—had been meeting with local authorities to coordinate security operations for pilgrims—many of them Iranian—coming to Karbala for the Shia religious festival of Ashura.

Moreover, as Juan Cole, professor of Middle Eastern studies at the University of Michigan, pointed out on his web site, “Informed Comment,” whoever carried out the attack dumped the bodies of the captured Americans as well as the cars used in the raid in the town of Mahawil, a predominantly Sunni area—hardly a spot likely to be chosen by Iranian-backed Shia militia members.

There has been little new factual reporting on the aftermath of the raid, aside from remembrances and funerals for the US troops who were killed. Who carried it out and what their motives were remain a mystery.

Yet the insinuation of an Iranian connection has been widely disseminated. The *New York Times* carried a January 31 article with the bald headline, “Iran May Have Trained Attackers That Killed 5 American

Soldiers, US and Iraqis Say.”

Citing unnamed US officials, the *Times* reported, “The officials said the sophistication of the attack astonished investigators, who doubt that Iraqis could have carried it out on their own—one reason a connection to Iran is being closely examined. Officials cautioned that no firm conclusions had been drawn and did not reveal any direct evidence of a connection.”

One of the officials added that the attacks “could be seen as retribution for three recent American raids in which Iranians suspected of carrying out attacks on American and Iraqi forces were detained.” In other words, Iranian guilt is deduced from the raids carried out by US military forces themselves against Iranian consular officials in Iraq.

Aside from these sensationalist and unfounded charges, the *Times* article makes the following interesting observations:

“Tying Iran to the deadly attack could be helpful to the Bush administration, which has been engaged in an escalating war of words with Iran.”

In addition, the *Times* included this: “The unusual nature of the attack has made it a major topic of discussion in the upper echelons of the Iraqi government. It has spawned bizarre theories including the idea that a Western mercenary group was somehow involved.”

What is the basis of this “bizarre theory?” According to all accounts of the raid, the dozen or so who carried it out were waved through checkpoints surrounding the meeting site because they were traveling in a convoy of SUVs of the type used by American forces in Iraq, wearing US uniforms and carrying US-style weapons as well as ID cards. Moreover, they spoke English.

According to the Associated Press, “One Iraqi official said the leader of the assault team was blond.”

At this point, no one has provided a credible explanation of the attack or identified those who carried

it out. But the Iraqi theory reported in the *New York Times* is certainly no more “bizarre” than the claims that Iran was responsible.

In short, if the attackers dressed, acted and looked like Americans and spoke English, there is always the possibility that they were indeed Americans.

There are certainly an ample number of “Western mercenaries” in Iraq. As the Pentagon revealed last December, there are as many as 100,000 private government contractors in the country.

Companies like Blackwater USA and DynCorp have thousands of employees—many of them former US military personnel—under arms in Iraq. In a number of instances, government contractors have been implicated in criminal activity ranging from the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, to the killing of civilians, to wholesale embezzlement and graft. They have acted, at least until very recently, as a law unto themselves, subject to neither Iraqi jurisdiction nor that of the US military. (See: “Civilian contractors in Iraq placed under US military”).

As for a motive, there are any number of possibilities. Reports of bitter conflicts between uniformed troops and private military contractors—on at least some occasions involving armed violence—have come out of Iraq. (See: “Detention of US security contractors highlights ‘culture of impunity’ in Iraq”)

The existence of multi-million-dollar criminally corrupt operations, such as the one involving the former head of US reconstruction contracts in the city of Hillah, could certainly generate acts of murderous violence if anything or anyone threatened to expose or disrupt them. (See: “Iraq fraud arrests expose criminality of US occupation”)

It is also worth noting that the officer killed in the attack, Capt. Brian Freeman, was known in the military as a vocal opponent of the war. He had left the US Army in 2004 but was called back as a member of the Individual Ready Reserve and sent to Iraq as a civil affairs officer because of the growing shortage of deployable personnel.

Last December, just a month before he was killed, he took aside visiting Democratic senators Chris Dodd of Connecticut and John Kerry of Massachusetts at a Baghdad helicopter-landing zone to tell them what a disaster the US occupation had become.

But perhaps the most likely potential motive is

suggested by the way in which the attack has been used to accuse Iran of responsibility for killing US troops.

In this regard, it is useful to recall the startling testimony delivered last week by former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski on the growing danger of a US war against Iran and what he called a “plausible scenario” for Washington launching such military action.

Such a war could begin, Brzezinski warned, with “Iraqi failure to meet the benchmarks, followed by accusations of Iranian responsibility for the failure, then by some provocation in Iraq or a terrorist act in the US blamed on Iran, culminating in a quote/unquote ‘defensive’ US military action against Iran . . .”

Could the raid in Karbala have been the type of “provocation” of which Brzezinski warned?

There is an historical precedent for such staged military actions being used as the pretext for war. On September 1, 1939, Germany’s Nazi regime used SS troops dressed in Polish uniforms to “attack” a German radio station near the border in Upper Silesia. To lend greater authenticity to this self-assault, concentration camp inmates were murdered and brought to the scene to provide the necessary bodies. The provocation paved the way to the “defensive” German military invasion of Poland and the outbreak of the Second World War.

There is no more concrete evidence at this point to substantiate the case that there was a US source for the Karbala attack than there is to back up the claim that there was an Iranian one. But given the record of the Bush administration—the first major government to promulgate an international policy of “preventive war” since Hitler’s Third Reich—such a scenario cannot be dismissed out of hand.



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