

Report challenges US claims of Iranian sponsorship of Iraq insurgency

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The think tank British American Security Information Council (BASIC) has published a discussion paper titled “Iranian support for violence in Iraq: a review of the evidence.”

Authored by Jacob Halpin, former National Grassroots coordinator at the international development advocacy organization RESULTS, the paper focuses on the Bush administration’s accusations that Tehran is seeking to destabilise Iraq by providing support for armed groups fighting the American-led occupation of that country.

BASIC describes itself as an independent research and advocacy organisation that plays a “unique role as a transatlantic bridge for policy makers and opinion shapers.” Halpin’s paper is significant in that it highlights serious disquiet that US accusations over Iranian involvement in Iraq are being made, without any real evidence to back this up.

Intelligence so far presented by Washington to link Tehran with armed groups in Iraq is “sketchy, especially in terms of linking such support to the Iranian government,” it states.

Given the non-substantive character of the Bush administrations allegations, the report questions the “more strategic motives” behind such claims. In addition to accusations of Iranian involvement providing a “useful scapegoat to divert the blame for failures in Iraq away from the occupying powers,” it notes, casting Tehran as a “source of regional instability” could strengthen the US administration’s hand “as it seeks support for stronger measures to oppose Iranian nuclear ambitions.”

“In particular, should the administration decide to embark on a military strike—an option which it says is still ‘on the table’—then garnering public and political support in advance would be vital.”

The fact that Washington is once again considering an attack on a country which it has yet to prove is involved in any threat to either itself or its neighbours underscores the aggressive and criminal character of US foreign policy. The paper makes no critique of this policy, despite noting that in contrast to US belligerence, “Iran has an incentive to avoid involving itself more directly militarily in Iraq, as this might provoke armed confrontation with the United States, and possibly wider regional conflict.”

Nor does the paper question the right of the US to mount a

militarily attack. But it does warn that in the absence of a convincing justification, “global unpopularity for military action would likely greatly exceed the opposition to the invasion of Iraq.”

“Indeed, many comparisons have been made with the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003,” the paper states, “when the Secretary of State Colin Powell told the UN Security Council that the evidence of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons was irrefutable.”

Mindful of the extent to which the mass protests against the Iraq war continue to reverberate amongst working people internationally, Halpin’s paper makes clear that the current accusations against Iran are even flimsier.

The paper does not rule out Iranian involvement in Iraq. But citing the historically close cultural, social, economic and religious ties between the two countries, it warns of the dangers of conflating “legitimate acts of foreign relations and cross-border movements of people” with the alleged Iranian involvement in the insurgency.

It notes, as an example, Western reports that had attacked Iranian “meddling” after the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad in January announced plans to open a branch of the Iranian national bank in Baghdad, “reflecting an assumption that Iran has no legitimate right to be involved in a country invaded and occupied by US and allied forces.”

The US administration has stated explicitly that Iran is aiding and abetting insurgent attacks on US forces, as well as fomenting civil war. In his State of the Union address in January 2007, President Bush claimed that “Iran was allowing terrorists to move in and out of Iraq, as well as providing material support for attacks on American troops,” Halpin states. And, John Negroponte, US director of National Intelligence, in his 2007 Annual Threat Assessment, asserted that “Iran’s lethal support for select groups of Iraqi Shia militants clearly exacerbates the conflict in Iraq.”

The problem, the report suggests, is that these claims have not been quantified.

Halpin provides an overview of the three main armed groups alleged to be operating in Iraq with Iranian ties: the Badr Corps, the Mahdi Army and Quds Force.

Both the Badr Corps and Quds Force do have close ties with

Iran, although these are not as straightforward as some have claimed.

The Badr Corps was founded in Iran in 1982 as the military wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) during the Iran-Iraq War. It fought alongside Iran during the war and, following its end in 1988, “continued with the aim of toppling Saddam Hussein, conducting low-level cross-border warfare against his regime.”

The SCIRI, which advocates the establishment of a separate Shia region of Iraq, “initially welcome US efforts ... to oust Saddam Hussein.”

“In preparation for the US invasion of Iraq, a series of meetings took place between commanders of the Badr Corps, the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps], and the Iraqi Shia tribes,” Halpin continues, “at which the importance of exerting immediate influence in Iraq upon the disintegration of existing power structures was emphasised. Badr Corps units were tasked with entering Iraq amidst the arrival of foreign troops and the break-up of the Iraqi government.” This enabled the SCIRI to become particularly strong in central and southern Iraq.

The extent and duration of the US occupation has “cooled” relations between the US and the SCIRI, the paper states. The SCIRI was incorporated into Iraq’s postwar order, and is currently “one of the two main parties in the United Iraqi Alliance coalition,” with 47 percent of the seats in Iraq’s governing Council of Representatives.

As such it has “a strong interest in ensuring that governmental authority is not eroded by escalating violence,” it continues, but notes that the “return of Badr Brigades exiles to Iraq” following the war saw “a series of revenge attacks against former members of the largely Sunni Iraqi secret police.” Such “tactics” have subsequently been “integrated into the activities” of the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, in which the SCIRI has a major presence.

The Quds Force is a special branch within the IRGC, some of whom provided training to Hezbollah, the anti-Soviet jihadists in Afghanistan in the 1980s and “supported Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia against Serbian forces.”

Although Quds “almost certainly has an extensive network in Iraq,” the paper states, “Intelligence is thin on the extent to which the Iranian leadership is directing Quds force operations, and on the extent to which the Quds is directly attacking coalition forces, and on whether Tehran intends its assistance for such purposes.”

As for the Mahdi Army, the paper notes that in October 2006 Major General Richard Zahner, deputy chief of staff of intelligence for Multinational Forces in Iraq, said that Iran had been supplying it with weaponry and financial aid. As the paper makes clear, however, the emergence of the Mahdi Army is an entirely home-grown phenomenon, caused by the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

“Born in the vacuum left by the fall of Saddam Hussein,” it

began with Shia clerics organising the provision of essential welfare services within Baghdad, Halpin states. And it has grown in strength, especially amongst young unemployed Shia males, as opposition to the occupation has gathered pace.

The weakness of the US case against Tehran was underscored by the fact that the US administration delayed releasing “evidence” to back up the claims made by Bush in his State of the Union speech. It was finally unveiled on February 11 at a briefing to journalists.

Such delays could be because of the lack of credibility of some of the material, the paper suggests. At any rate, at the official briefing, given by three anonymous US officials, “no cameras were allowed and no transcript of the session was subsequently provided.”

The most “critical piece of evidence was the EFP [Explosively Formed Penetrator],” Halpin states, a roadside bomb device which officials stated was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of coalition forces. The sophisticated process needed to manufacture EFP’s had been traced to Iran, journalists were told, “and such a capability has not yet been found in Iraq.”

“The official said that, based on general intelligence assessments, it was believed such activities are linked to the highest levels of the Iranian government.”

This claim was contradicted the following day by Marine Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said he had no evidence that Iran’s government was directing the supply of weapons to “Shia insurgent groups in Iraq.”

Moreover, Halpin notes that equipment involved in the production of EFP’s was discovered in a raid by US troops in Baghdad in 2005 and that “EFPs are not exclusive to Iran, but are in fact relatively common around the world.”

“In sum,” the report continues, “the evidence thus far of Iranian involvement in Iraqi roadside bombs and other support of militia groups is somewhat patchy.... What had been discovered so far may represent small elements of a bigger picture, but at this stage experts are left trying to extrapolate from limited certainties to form broader conclusions.”

Halpin concludes with a warning: “Until the exact nature and extent of this Iranian activity can be ascertained more fully it is inevitable that evidence presented by US and UK authorities will be treated with skepticism. Few are ready to accept a repeat of the intelligence debacle which contributed to the 2003 Iraq war.”



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