

An unpalatable truth for Bush: most foreign insurgents in Iraq are Saudis

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An article in Sunday's *Los Angeles Times* detailing the national origins of foreign insurgents in Iraq has punctured a large hole in the Bush administration's relentless propaganda against Iran. For months, the White House has been demonising Tehran for "meddling" in Iraq by establishing networks to arm, train and finance anti-US insurgents. Most foreign fighters, however, come, not from Iran, but Saudi Arabia, a close American ally, with which the Bush administration in particular has intimate ties.

According to military statistics provided to the *Los Angeles Times*, about 45 percent of the hundreds of foreign militants involved in attacks on US troops and Iraqi civilians and security forces are from Saudi Arabia. Another 15 percent are from Syria and Lebanon and 10 percent from North Africa. Nearly half the 135 foreigners currently held in US detention facilities in Iraq are Saudis.

A senior American military officer told the newspaper that Saudis are believed to have carried out more suicide bombings in Iraq than those of any other nationality. He estimated that half of all Saudi jihadists come to Iraq as suicide bombers, who in the past six months have been responsible for killing and maiming at least 4,000 Iraqis.

As the *Los Angeles Times* explained: "The situation has left the US military [and one could add, the Bush administration] in the awkward position of battling an enemy whose top source of foreign fighters is a key ally that at best has not been able to prevent its citizens from undertaking bloody attacks in Iraq and at worst shares complicity in sending extremists to commit attacks against US forces, Iraqi civilians and the Shiite-led government in Baghdad."

Saudi Interior Ministry spokesman General Mansour Turki insisted that Saudi Arabia was doing everything possible to halt the flow of Saudi fighters, arms and money to Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq. Blaming the Iraqi government for not providing information, he said: "We have no idea who these people are... If we get good feedback from the Iraqi government about Saudis arrested in Iraq, probably we can help."

The senior US officer, however, dismissed the response, saying: "Are the Saudis using all means possible? Of course not... It needs to be addressed by the government of Iraq head on. They have every right to stand up to a country like Saudi

Arabia and say, 'Hey, you are killing thousands of people by allowing your young jihadists to come here and associate themselves with an illegal worldwide network called Al Qaeda'."

As for the Bush administration, it maintains a studied silence on the issue while continuing its campaign against "Iranian interference" in Iraq. While the US dismisses Tehran's denials of involvement out of hand, Riyadh's claims to be stopping Saudi support for Iraqi insurgents are tacitly accepted as good coin. The White House and the State Department refused to comment to the *Los Angeles Times*.

The figures are not new. On June 20, MSNBC.com posted an analysis of articles on Islamist websites celebrating the deaths of foreign fighters in Iraq over the past two years. Of more than 400 militants who had died in Iraq, 55 percent came from Saudi Arabia, 13 percent from Syria, 9 percent from North Africa and 3 percent from Europe. The US military confirmed to MSNBC.com that Saudi Arabia and Syria were the leading sources of insurgents.

Iraqi National Security Adviser Muwafaq al-Rubaie told the media last weekend that more than 160 Saudis had been tried in Iraqi courts and hundreds were awaiting trial. Al-Rubaie headed a high-level Iraqi delegation to Saudi Arabia last week to discuss the issue. He declared that both sides had agreed to condemn inflammatory *fatwas* or religious edicts inciting sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq.

If US foreign policy were at all consistent, the White House and the Pentagon would be condemning Riyadh and demanding action to halt the flow of Saudi fighters. Stories would be appearing in the American media exposing autocratic Saudi rule, its repression of women and savage application of Sharia law. Grave fears would have been raised by the State Department over the announcement last year that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States were launching a civilian nuclear program. The most strident US militarists would be demanding regime change and Bush would be declaring that "all options were on the table"—including the bombing of Riyadh.

That none of this is happening, or is likely to happen, again demonstrates that the US accusations against Tehran are simply pretexts used to justify possible military action against Iran. The threats against Iran are not motivated by concerns about

the lives of US troops but the Bush administration's ambitions to establish American dominance over the Middle East and its huge energy reserves. Far from publicly remonstrating with Riyadh, the White House has in recent months been seeking to line up Saudi Arabia and other "moderate" Arab states, including Egypt and Jordan, in an anti-Iranian alliance.

The US invasion of Iraq has profoundly destabilised the region, inflaming rivalries and sectarian tensions. Saudi Arabia, which reluctantly supported the US invasion of Iraq, regarded the Saddam Hussein regime as a bulwark against Iran, its traditional rival in the Persian Gulf. Riyadh is deeply hostile to the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, which it regards as little more than a proxy for Iran. Saudi King Abdullah and other top officials have pointedly snubbed Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on several occasions to demonstrate their hostility.

Saudi rivalry with Iran intersects with the intense hostility of the Wahhabist religious establishment in Saudi Arabia against the Shiite sect and close traditional ties with Sunni tribal groups in Iraq. Last November, in the wake of the Democratic victory in mid-term US elections, King Abdullah reportedly told Vice President Dick Cheney that his regime would be compelled to intervene in Iraq on the side of Sunni insurgent groups against the Maliki government if US troops were pulled out.

In a prominent comment in the *Washington Post* on November 29, Saudi security adviser Nawaf Obaid warned of Saudi intervention, noting: "Over the past year, a chorus of voices has called for Saudi Arabia to protect the Sunni community in Iraq and thwart Iranian influence there. Senior Iraqi tribal and religious figures, along with the leaders of Egypt, Jordan and other Arab and Muslim countries, have petitioned the Saudi leadership to provide Iraqi Sunnis with weapons and financial support. Moreover, domestic pressure to intervene is intense. Major Saudi tribal confederations, which have extremely close historical and communal ties with their counterparts in Iraq, are demanding action. They are supported by a new generation of Saudi royals in strategic government positions who are eager to see the kingdom play a more muscular role in the region."

While the Saudi monarchy publicly disowned Obaid, his comments reflect the sentiments of a significant segment of the ruling elite. The regime has largely turned a blind eye to the agitation of Saudi religious fanatics for a holy war against Shiites in Iraq. Last December, 38 Saudi religious scholars posted an edict to rally support for the Iraqi Sunni minority, claiming that the "crusaders" [the US] and the "Safavis" [Iran] were conspiring together to destroy Iraq and contain Sunni influence throughout the region. Despite Al Qaeda's opposition to the Saudi regime, there is undoubtedly considerable sympathy in Saudi ruling circles for its murderous attacks on ordinary Iraqi Shiites.

The Saudi monarchy cannot afford to alienate the Bush administration by openly supporting Sunni insurgents in Iraq.

Moreover, the more cautious elements are undoubtedly fearful that Saudi fighters returning from Iraq could strengthen the internal political opposition to the monarchy and further destabilise the country. After all, Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda were the creation of the 1980s "holy war" jointly backed by the CIA, Saudi and Pakistani intelligence against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan.

At the same time, Saudi claims that it is not involved in Iraq are simply not credible. Its huge intelligence apparatus is almost certainly very active in Iraq and may well be providing support to Saudi jihadists in a proxy war against Shiite and Iranian influence. In comments to the *Los Angeles Times*, Iraqi Shiite legislator Sami Askari, one of Maliki's advisers, accused Saudi officials of deliberately sowing chaos in Baghdad and funding groups causing unrest in the country's Shiite south.

The danger that the sectarian war in Iraq will spark a broader regional confrontation underscores the reckless and incoherent character of US foreign policy. Having ousted Saddam Hussein and installed a puppet government dominated by Shiite parties with strong links to Iran, the Bush administration is attempting to marshal support from autocratic "Sunni" regimes like Saudi Arabia in its confrontation with Iran. Incapable of resolving these contradictions, the Bush administration simply maintains a stony silence on Saudi activities in Iraq.

Last week, the Saudi taboo reached absurd proportions when US military spokesman Brigadier General Kevin Bergner gave a press conference on the rising toll of destruction caused by suicide bombers. He pointed out that most suicide bombers were foreigners, as Sunni extremist groups were not able to recruit Iraqis to indiscriminately slaughter their fellow countrymen. Like President Bush, Bergner repeatedly invoked the role of Al Qaeda to justify the continued US occupation. To illustrate his argument, he provided details of a particular suicide bomber from a middle class family, recruited at a mosque, and sent into Iraq via Syria. Bergner omitted to state his nationality, claiming he had not received clearance. According to the military source of the *Los Angeles Times*, the man was a Saudi citizen, like many of the suicide bombers entering Iraq.



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