



Ballots, Bombs, and Bullets – Tehran’s stirrings in Southern Iraq

Dustin Dehéz

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“In truth, there have been two wars: the first, the relatively painless march to Baghdad; the second, the violent struggle in which some Sunnis, aided and abetted by jihadis, are fighting for power. Arguing about the first of these conflicts does little to illuminate the second.”

With an unexpected high turn out in last week’s constitutional referendum, Iraqis showed what could be described as continuing support for the transitional process in their country. A 60% turn out seemed most unlikely a couple of weeks ago, when Iraqis clashed violently with British troops in Basra. When in late September 2005 two British soldiers were captured by the Iraqi Police, the British felt compelled to intervene in order to rescue the two soldiers. The two servicemen were being held and interrogated in an Iraqi police compound based in Basra, although the military statute gave them immunity. Meanwhile, British forces surrounded the compound to free the soldiers but clashed with an Iraqi mob that attacked the group of British *Warrior* tanks with stones and Molotov-cocktails and set one of the tanks into flames. The picture of a burning British soldier jumping from the tank made it onto the front pages of the British tabloids the following two days, leading British commentators to question the British part in Iraq and raising concerns over Iran’s role played in backing up militants in southern Iraq.

The two British servicemen were freed in a covert operation afterwards by British Special Forces, after negotiations about their release failed and pictures of the blood covered soldiers got to British officials. It was feared that the men could be handed over to militants belonging to Mukhtadar al Sadr’s Mahdi-Army and could eventually face death. The incident drew attention to fundamental problems British forces have to face in Southern Iraq. During the past two years the South of Iraq was generally regarded as a relative secure place in stark contrast to the volatile situation in the Sunni-triangle. But the situation in and around Basra deteriorated seriously in recent months to what some observers have already called a second mess in Iraq. It also raised serious concerns over Tehran’s influence in the region that allegedly got more and more significant in recent months. British forces claimed that road bombs were getting more sophisticated and were of striking similarity with those bombs frequently used by Hezbollah. Some are claiming that Iran is supplying Shi’a insurgents with sophisticated equipment in an attempt to show Britain that its tough stance towards Tehran about its nuclear ambition could have serious repercussions for their presence in Iraq and that it should better not risk another direct clash. Although the Iranian government immediately rejected the allegations they can’t easily be dismissed.

How Ahmadinejad’s victory produced three winners

Things are getting even more confused when Iranian domestic policy is brought into the analysis. When Ahmadinejad won the recent presidential elections it was widely expected that conservatives in Iran – now with a substantial majority in parliament, a conservative supreme leader and conservative president – would try to turn back the clock, making Iran the last mediaeval state in the 21st century. But a few

months after the elections, the vote seems to have paradoxical results: Many conservative members of parliament backed rival candidates in the presidential elections and are now voting against some of Ahmadinejad's crucial bills in parliament. Although being beaten in the presidential elections Ahmadinejad's main rivals for presidency – Muhammad Baqir Ghalibaf and Ali Aqbar Rafsandschani – are now even more powerful than before. While Rafsandschani's Expediency Council has now been granted supervisory powers which allows for direct interference in daily politics, Ghalibaf is now mayor of Teheran (he was Teheran's police chief before). This may be a result of Iran's referral to the United Nations Security Council by the IAEA for which Ahmadinejad's firm stance towards the EU-3 (UK, Germany and France) is widely being held responsible, even in parts of the conservative establishment.

Moreover, the economic situation is stagnating; growing imports are cutting the revenues from oil exports despite high oil prices. With fuel subsidies, high fiscal spending and continued customer demand inflation skyrocketed to 12 to 15%.ⁱⁱ The new political situation did not allow for reform of the so called bonyads, state owned companies that are still identified with the widespread corruption in the country. The newly elected and inexperienced president Ahmadinejad seems to be caught in a political stalemate, failing his promised crackdown on corruption on the home front, while being confronted with an increasingly disillusioned European Union in the international arena that is no longer willing to accept Iran's reluctance to fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Iran's role in southern Iraq

The clash of British forces and Iraqis in Basra also raises questions about the role of the Iraqi police. When noticing that Iraqi police wanted to stop and interrogate them, the two British soldiers tried to escape. But the soldiers were arrested – against the principles of the military statute – and taken into custody. What is striking however is that the soldiers tried to avoid the clash with the Iraqi police, British soldiers stated later that day that they do not trust the Iraqi police as they believe it has undergone a large scale infiltration by Iranian agents.

It is more than a small clash between London and Teheran. The British claim that insurgents in southern Iraq are using Iranian equipment for their roadside bombs, has to be taken seriously. The detected bombs are so sophisticated to come from local sources and the British seem to have hard evidence for Teheran's involvement in the roadside bombings that so far killed nine of their servicemen, the last being killed only last Tuesday.ⁱⁱⁱ The intelligence evidence seems to indicate that roadside bombs as used by the Lebanon based and Iranian backed Hezbollah were being brought from Lebanon to Iraq through the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Fresh evidence seems to be available after Ahmed al-Fartusi, who is believed to be one of the high-ranking masterminds behind the attacks against the British, was arrested last week.^{iv} Al-Fartusi is also a senior leader of the Mahdi-Army of Muqtadar al-Sadr. If true that would indicate that Iran is not only backing the insurgents but that the insurgency in Southern Iraq is also strengthening the more militant opposition to the Shi'a central administration. Al-Sadr does have good relations to neighbouring Iran and was hosted by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in 2004. It is commonly believed that some 1.000 of al-Sadr supporters received training in guerrilla warfare in Iran. There are also allegations that Iran has equipped al-Sadr and his supporters with mobile phones.^v So far none of these allegations have been proved in public, but if these assumptions are to be confirmed, Teheran would be playing a very dangerous game. The January elections were won by the Dawa-Party of Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a Shiite and now a de facto ally of Teheran. These ties do not necessarily indicate a new Baghdad-Teheran axis, but Iraq's traditional role of balancing Iranian power in the region is already diminishing. Why should Iran then support the opposition? The answer may be twofold: On the one hand it hopes to tie the British and Americans down in Iraq, thus making a military strike against its nuclear installations less likely. On the other hand it does officially support the new Iraqi government and it might speculate that it can use its influence to limit the insurgency in the South to British troops. But Sadr's troops are operating in Baghdad as well. Forces that are believed to have links to al-Sadr clashed with American troops in Baghdad in the end of September. Al Sadr, a Shi'a cleric is opposed to U.S. presence in Iraq and commands the Mahdi Army, a group of thousands of armed fighters. The clash with American forces in Baghdad was rather a demonstration of power, as al-Sadr is also rejecting the proposed and now agreed upon constitution.^{vi}

Furthermore the Iraqi-Iranian border, as so many others in the Middle East region, is badly policed. With the Ba'hist regime ousted from power by American forces, the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala are open for pilgrims from Iran again. These pilgrims cross the common border with nobody really knowing who or how many, but some observers estimate that up to 10.000 are cross the border daily, while the Iraqi authorities only allowed for 1.000 to 2.000 travellers.^{vii} The motives for Iranian involvement might even be

more substantial: with a radical conservative no in charge in Teheran, there is another danger looming for Iran:

“As already noted, however, the liberation of Iraq and of the Shi’a communities within it could widen Iran’s own political fault lines.”^{viii}

A democratic, stable and Shi’a dominated Iraq would stay in stark contrast to Iran and its system of rule of Islamic clerics (*Welayat-e-Faqih*). It could thus be exactly the alternative so many especially young Iranians are looking for. As an autocratic, strongly centralised, Islamic, Shi’a dominated Iraq is highly unlikely to emerge, keeping Iraq ungovernable might be the best way to avoid changes in Iran itself.

Conclusion – in a Catch 22

With the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the U.S. foreign secretary Condoleezza Rice accusing Teheran of supporting and supplying the insurgents in Southern Iraq the relationship between London and Teheran deteriorated dramatically.^{ix} States supporting terrorism or terrorist activities how indirectly whatsoever tend to cover these activities with all available means. If, as in this particular case, the allegations are coming from high-ranking government officials, even directly from No. 10 Downing Street, than there has to be some sort of hard evidence. Furthermore the history of Iranian covert or open activity in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and elsewhere is not inspiring news to the West.^x However, even if some links between the insurgency and Iran do in fact exist that does not necessarily indicate that the link goes directly to the Iranian presidential office. On the other hand, it seems highly unlikely that Ahmadinejad would not know of these links.

One might wonder what these stirrings might bring in the near future. If Iran does support a Shi’a insurgency in Southern Iraq, that would certainly have a serious impact on the whole region. The emerging divide between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq will likely cause repercussions for countries with strong Shi’a minorities like Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. In the past Iran and Iraq have been widely regarded as natural rivals, but that doesn’t necessarily have to continue. Quite on the contrary, giving Teheran a stake in the peace process without letting it determine the outcome will be crucial for success in peace building. But as already noted, Teheran is very well aware of its options. Keeping the U.S. and British down in Iraq and thereby allowing its nuclear programme to continue, perhaps until it is complete, while at the same time getting closer to Baghdad, Iran is slowly becoming a regional hegemonic power.

ⁱ Stephens, Philip: A change of course would be the least bad option in Iraq. In: Financial Times, 21.10. 2005, p. 13.

ⁱⁱ Habibi, Nadir: Iran. In: Global Insight, Quarterly Review and Outlook; Middle East and Africa. First Quarter 2005, pp. 41-58.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Times, 19.10.2005.

^{iv} Blomfield, Adrian: Teheran’s plan to dominate southern Iraq. Telegraph from 7.10.2005.

^v Raphaeli, Nimrod: Iran’s Stirrings in Iraq. MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis, No. 173, May 2004.

^{vi} Marquardt, Erich: The Return of Moqtada al-Sadr. WorldSecurityNetwork.com, 30.09.2005.

^{vii} Raphaeli, Nimrod: Iran’s Stirrings in Iraq. MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis, No. 173, May 2004.

^{viii} Ehteshami, Anoushiravan: Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam. In: The Washington Quarterly, 26 (4/2003), pp. 115-129, p. 127.

^{ix} Whitaker, Brian/Branigan, Tania: Britain and U.S. give Iran new warning not to back insurgents. www.WorldSecurityNetwork.com, 30.9.2005.

^x As rightly argued by Gary Sick back in 2003. Sick, Gary: Iran: Confronting Terrorism. In: The Washington Quarterly 26 (4/2003), pp. 83-98.

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