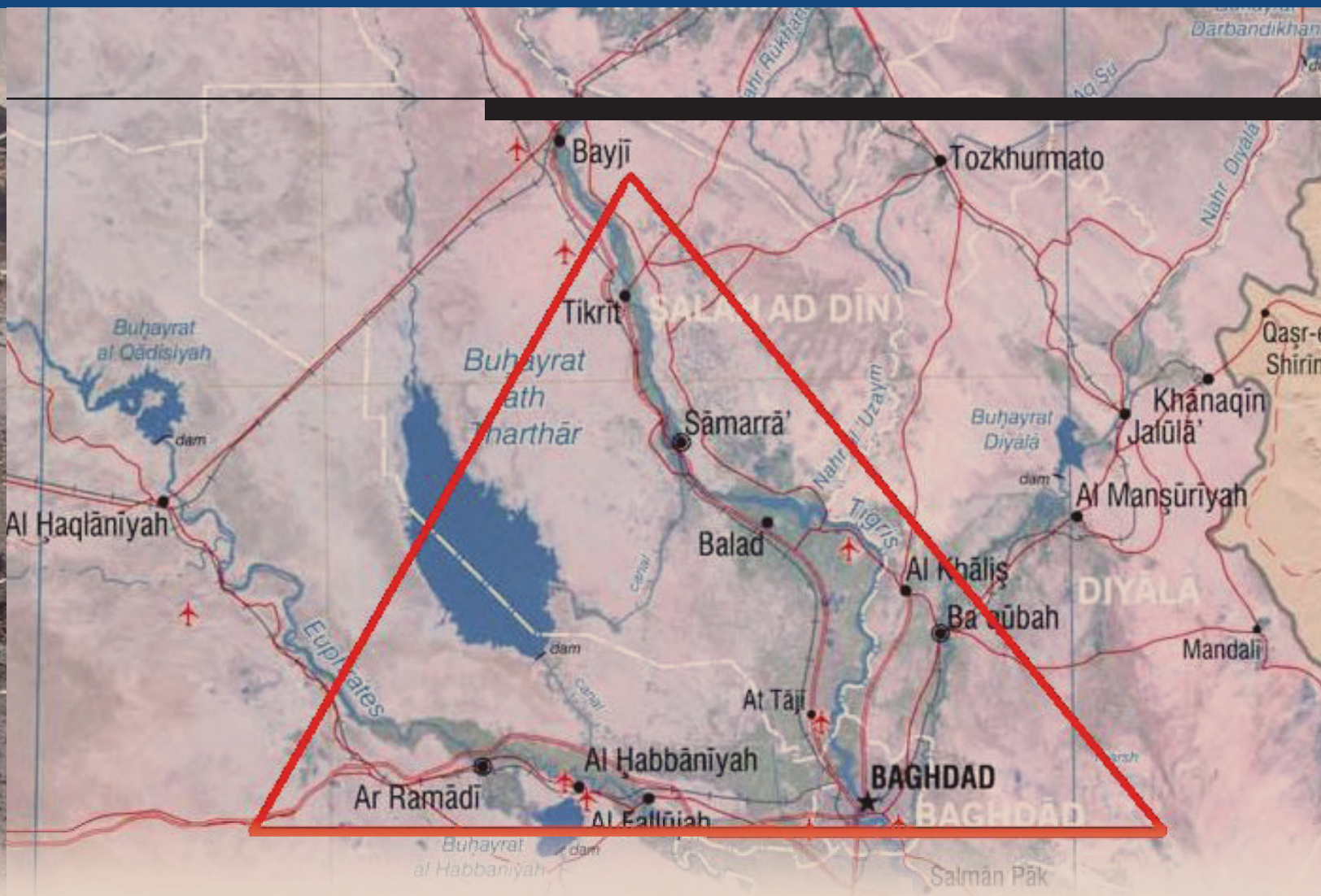




SHIITE SUPPORT FOR SUNNI TERRORISTS?

By Anthony Tucker-Jones

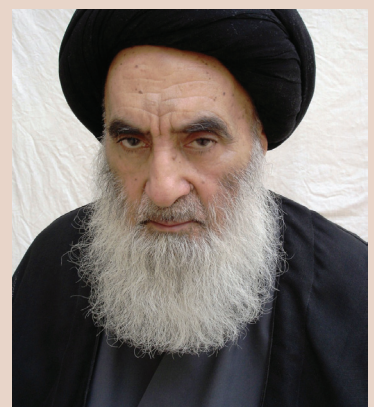
Iran's exploitation of the rift between the two key strands of Islam has resulted in some surprising alliances. Traditionally, Shia Iran has been at bloody loggerheads with Sunni-dominated Iraq since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. There is also an ethnic element because the Iranians are predominantly Persian, not Arab. However, since the coalition's invasion of Iraq, it often appears evident that the Iranians pursue a policy of "my enemies' enemy is my friend."



To that end, Iran's mullahs have poured funding, training, and weapons not only into the Shiite insurgency in Iraq, but also into the al-Qaeda-led Sunni insurgency. Many of the civilian deaths and coalition casualties in Iraq in recent years have been attributed to specific types of explosive devices deployed by the insurgents, who have demonstrated increasing technical competence. The bombs are reportedly very similar to those employed by Hezbollah, an acknowledged Iranian surrogate, in southern Lebanon.

Whereas Christianity is divided

predominantly by the Catholic and Protestant faiths, Muslims are also split into two main groups. The division between the Sunnis and the Shia is the largest and oldest in the history of Islam. The split occurred after the Prophet Mohammad's death in the seventh century, culminating in the battle of Karbala (the Sunnis backed the accession of Mohammad's closest companion, while the Shia supported his son-in-law). Today worldwide the Sunnis constitute the largest strand of Islam, while the Shia, who make up about 10 percent, are the second largest grouping.



*Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.
Photo: IsaKazimi*

Although there is no love loss between Baghdad and Tehran, Iran under the ayatollahs is unlikely to reconcile itself with the “Great Satan,” as it dubbed America. For three decades, America has vigorously sought to contain Iran’s regional ambitions. Washington branding Iran part of the “axis of evil” did little to

increase the likelihood of rapprochement. I believe that Iran’s strategic thinking is that it is well to keep America preoccupied in Iraq and Afghanistan to alleviate some of the potential pressure that might otherwise be targeted against Iran’s nuclear program.

Another school of thought argues that Iran’s attainment of nuclear weapons would enable that nation to back terrorism with impunity. The rulers of Iran have clearly gained much from the subversive employment of their proxies against those who stand in their way, and it is believed that adversaries may be more circumspect in opposing Iranian-backed terrorism and subversion if Tehran has recourse to nuclear weapons.

There may be some merit in this, but I believe that Iran has greater priorities than sheltering its terrorist initiatives by wielding a nuclear arsenal. I believe that Tehran’s biggest potential gain would be from the acquisition and ownership of nuclear weapons. These may be most likely attained by keeping Washington distracted with military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, thereby delaying confrontation by the United States in response to noncompliance with Iran’s “civil” nuclear program.

The regional balance of power in the Gulf was irreversibly altered after the rise of the fundamentalist ayatollahs and placed into a state of flux with Iran remaining, to this day, vehemently anti-American. Shortly after the fall of the shah in 1979, the Iran-Iraq War polarized the Arab world into two loose factions that were no longer firmly united against Israel.¹ To safeguard Iran’s fledgling revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini created the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which made up for inexperience with Islamic zeal, innovation, and loyalty to the ruling council.

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An insurgent stronghold goes up in smoke after an air strike in Fallujah, Al Anbar Province, Iraq, Photo: CPL Joel A. Chaverri, USMC

When Saddam Hussein attacked Iran's Arab-dominated Khuzestan province in 1980, he hoped the population would rise up against their Persian oppressors. When this did not happen, eight years of bloodshed followed. Iran was severely traumatized. In terms of casualties, it is the third largest postwar conflict after Korea and Vietnam. Although total Iranian losses remain unclear, there were probably at least a million casualties.² Nor was Iran blind to the fact that America had supported Iraq as a bulwark against Iranian fundamentalism throughout the 1980s. Closer to home, Saddam had to contend with the Iraqi Shia al-Dawa al-Islamia (Islamic Call Party), which sought to end his regime and that of the Gulf kingdoms.

Although more than half of Iraq's population are Shia, at the end of the 1991 Gulf War the ayatollahs failed to fully support their coreligionists in Iraq.

Shia rose up against Saddam in Karbala, Najaf, and other Iraqi Shia-dominated cities. Although Iran covertly directed the Revolutionary Guards and forces from the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, based in Tehran) to assist where they could, the Iranian air force stood by and did nothing as Iraqi ground forces and helicopters swiftly crushed the ill-equipped rebels.

During Operation Desert Storm Saddam's army folded in just four days of fighting, leaving no more than seven of its 43 divisions operational. Crucially, when the dust settled these remaining divisions were in the Baghdad area and enabled Saddam to cling to power despite his defeat in and around Kuwait. Washington made it clear (under pressure from Sunni Saudi Arabia) that it would not assist the Shia uprising, nor would it tolerate an Iranian-style Shia Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The intervention of the Iranian Air



Northern Tehran City, Iran with Alborz Mountains in the background. Photo: Apcbg

Force could have made all the difference, but Iran was pragmatic because such an act could have brought swift retribution from Washington.

Both the West and Iran abandoned the Iraqi Shia rebellion to its fate. In the bloody aftermath, around 3,000 Iraqi Shia clerics fled to the Iranian city of Qom, the second holy city of Shia Muslims. Today, Khuzestan is home to in excess of 100,000 Iraqi Shia migrants.³ The opposition Badr Organization, part of the SCIRI under Shia cleric Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, was not short of potential recruits. However, following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, at Washington's invitation al-Hakim, minus his Iranian-backed army, was allowed to return home to help form an interim Iraqi government. Al-Hakim was assassinated and Badr championed a militant uprising.

Washington asserted that one of its reasons for attacking Iraq was the presence of Sunni Ansar al-Islam (The Partisans of Islam) in northern Iraq,

which had links with Baghdad and subsequently evolved into al-Qaeda in Iraq. Ansar came into being in the late 1990s when it split from the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan. Notably, the commander of the Arab contingent was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who had fought in Afghanistan. He was connected with alleged al-Qaeda plots in Jordan in the 1990s and early 2000s. Al-Zarqawi had been wounded in the leg during the coalition invasion of Afghanistan and like some other al-Qaeda operatives, passed through Iran before rejoining operations against coalition forces in Iraq.

Washington's worst suspicions about Ansar al-Islam were confirmed after its remaining fighters fled into Iran only to filter back later. Their spiritual leader, Mullah Mustapha Krieka, likened Ansar's operations to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. After the Ansar enclave was overrun, al-Zarqawi fled to northwestern Iraq to the "Sunni triangle" area. Gathering his followers, he dubbed them Tawhid



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wal Jihad (Monotheism and Holy war). It appears that he was supported by networks from Saddam's old intelligence and security services. He based himself in the city of Fallujah, west of Baghdad. It took major US operations involving high-intensity combat to pacify Fallujah.

Following the coalition's invasion

of Iraq, it became clear that Iran was supporting die-hard Sunnis, many of them former Saddam loyalists or al-Qaeda supporters.⁴ Within two years of the fall of Saddam, the United Kingdom was lodging formal protests after evidence emerged that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard had supplied Iraqi insurgents with shaped explosive charges. Iran was also accused of providing training, and small arms (including .50 caliber sniper rifles) to the insurgents.

Following the invasion, looting was common and organized attacks grew into an insurgency in the Sunni central region. Most of the militants were Iraqis who had offered resistance to the invasion—namely the Fedayeen, though they were soon to be reinforced by foreign Islamists who exploited Iraq's long, porous borders. The insurgency had many of the hallmarks of the Palestinian Intifada: hit-and-run gunmen, car bombs, and suicide bombers. It was particularly intense for American forces in the Baghdad area and the Sunni triangle. The insurgency rapidly became unmanageable.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former commander of the Revolutionary Guards, as Iran's sixth president in July 2005 inevitably heightened tensions with the West and Iran continued supporting Islamist groups in Iraq. While Iran sought to create mischief in the Iraqi Sunni areas, its key efforts were directed in assisting the main Shia militias, in particular the Mahdi Army and the revitalized Badr Corps, which paid lip service to the SCIRI. Thanks to Iranian training facilities, the 5,000-strong Mahdi Army was able to dominate Najaf and Sadr City in eastern Baghdad.⁵ Ultimately, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani ordered the army's members to lay down their arms in Najaf.

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Eventually, insurgents were becoming better equipped and were receiving considerable assistance from Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.⁶ According to U.S. intelligence officials, up to 2,000 members of Moktada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and other Shia militias received extensive training in Lebanon at the hands of Iranian-backed Hezbollah. A Mahdi commander admitted to sending 300 fighters, known as the Ali al-Hadi Brigade, to Lebanon.⁷ Because of Syria's long-standing support of Palestinian groups, such as Hamas, Islamic jihad, and Hezbollah, it may have become inevitable that Syria would be a conduit for Iranian-backed jihadists flowing into Iraq.

In addition to logistical support, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard also provided training for Iraqi Shia fighters inside Iran itself. According to British Intelligence sources, the Iraqi Badr Organization retained "strong links" with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, which funded, trained, and armed the militia group totalling up to 20,000 men.⁸ In the summer of 2005, insurgents were attacking British forces in the Amarah area bordering Iran with increasing sophistication.

At their height, the estimated number of insurgents was about 5,000, of which up to 3,000 were estimated to be foreign fighters—a clearly significant proportion.⁹ However, American generals on the ground reported that only small numbers of prisoners were foreign nationals. Nonetheless, by late 2006 and early 2007, senior U.S. officials considered al-Qaeda in Iraq as the driving force behind the insurgency. Its membership was estimated to be the largest Sunni terrorist group in Iraq. Many saw the hand of Iran behind it.¹⁰

By early 2008 there were signs that al-Qaeda was withering following a mass



Iranian posing on an Iraqi T-62 tank in Khorramshahr, Khuzestan in Iran, just across the border from Iraq. Photo: Hamed Saber

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defection of Sunni supporters to the U.S. military. More than 80,000 Sunnis helped the local tribal groups (Concerned Local Citizens' militias) to successfully eject al-Qaeda from western and northern Iraq. In the Balad area north of Baghdad, Abu-Tari (the emir of the al-Layin and al-Mashahdah sector) saw his force reduced from 600 fighters to less than 20.¹¹ It seemed as if Iran's backing of the Sunni insurgency had failed, but with the final withdrawal of U.S. combat units in the summer of 2010, terrorist attacks continued in both Shia and Sunni neighborhoods.¹²

Only time will tell if coalition forces achieved strategic success in Iraq or whether Iran's Machiavellian interests will be the ultimate beneficiary of that multi-factional conflict. The Center for Security Policy has stated, "The Sunni-Shia alliance, formed under the aegis of the Sudanese Islamic figure, Hasan al-Turabi, solidified and intensified throughout the 1990's..."¹³ It appears that Iranian subversion in Iraq and Afghanistan may be some of the most recent manifestations of this relationship. ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Tucker-Jones served with British Defence Intelligence and is now a historian and defense writer. His latest book, The Rise of Militant Islam, (Pen and Sword, 2010) examines how Western intelligence misinterpreted landmark events on the road to 9/11 and failed to curb global jihad.

ENDNOTES

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¹³ LtGen. William Boykin, LtGen. Harry Soyster, Christine Brim et al. 'Shariah: The Threat to America', the Center for Security Policy, 2010



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