

## After Saddam – Two Democracies or Two Irans?

Dr. Constantine C. Menges, March 2003

The Bush Administration intends to help the people of Iraq establish a moderate constitutional government after their years of suffering under the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. This will be difficult, but it is achievable because the Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmed Chalabi, has worked for nearly ten years to bring about a political accord among the leadership of the Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia communities within Iraq.

However, it is also possible that the clerical regime in Iran could succeed in using the aftermath of the war to bring to power an organization it has backed and funded for many years, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. This would mean that after Saddam, there could be “two Irans” - two Shia Islamic extremist regimes instead of one.

The Saddam Hussein dictatorship has relentlessly persecuted all religious groups in Iraq for years, with its most harsh repression directed against the Shia leadership because 60% of Iraqis are Shia Muslims. This persecution led to many hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shia fleeing to the protection of Shia-ruled Iran. Beginning in 1980, the Iranian clerical regime recruited many into operations intended to destabilize and overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime. This was part of Ayatollah Khomeini’s intensive effort to bring extremist Shia Islamic groups to power in the Muslim world, including Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as well as Iraq. This was also the time when Iran began its large-scale support for Islamic terrorist groups targeting Israel, the United States, and prodemocratic Iranians abroad. Khomeini summarized Iran’s purpose in saying that “all Muslims, [should] join the holy war. There are many enemies to be killed and destroyed”.

It is a fact that contemporary Islamic terrorism began in 1979 with the Iranian Islamic regime. Two of the most well-informed observers of Iran, Dr Assad Homayoun and Dr. Michael Ledeen, have documented the fact that Iran has, over the years, not only promoted terrorism but also has spent many hundreds of millions of dollars on propaganda, psychological warfare, and covert political action to achieve its purposes. For years, the US Department of State has identified Iran as the “most active” state sponsor of terrorism. US government reports document the fact that Iran is working to acquire nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons of mass destruction, as well as to build an ever-larger fleet of ballistic missiles. These reports identify China, Russia, and North Korea as the leading suppliers.

Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 not only to seize some of its oil fields, but also to end its destabilization activities. After millions were killed and wounded, the two dictatorships signed a truce in 1988, but both continued arming and funding political groups seeking

the overthrow of their enemy. The most senior officials in Iran have been responsible for organizing and supporting terrorist groups as well as pro-Iranian Shia groups in Iraq.

At present, it is estimated that the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq has between 12,000 and 40,000 armed members and many thousands of others who are politically organized. Even before the US began military operations against Saddam Hussein, armed elements of Iranian backed Shia groups began infiltrating into Northern Iraq, establishing bases. This led the US State Department spokesman to say on March 2, 2003 “any Iranian supported presence in Iraq is destabilizing and not positive.”

Post-Taliban Afghanistan offers a preview of what might well occur in post-Saddam Iraq. Iran had used some of the Afghan refugees who had been on its territory to establish an Afghan Hezbollah terrorist/armed group and these were immediately inserted into Afghanistan after the Taliban regime fled. The Washington Post reported that Iran supplied “cars, trucks, weapons, ammunition and cash” to various Afghan factional leaders opposed to the new Afghan government. In February 2002, US intelligence official was quoted as saying that Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps were operating in Afghanistan against the US-supported government and that they had “lots of money, are armed to the teeth, and call themselves ‘soldiers of Mohammed’”. Various assassinations against senior Afghan officials are ascribed to Iranian covert action.

It is highly likely that Iran will do much more in post-Saddam Iraq than it has so far done in Afghanistan to bring about a pro-Iranian regime. It is also quite possible that Russia and China and all of their extensive covert intelligence resources will aid Iran. Russia has been closely involved with Iraq for more than thirty years, and China for twenty years. The combination of Iranian, Russian, and Chinese political, propaganda, paramilitary, and covert organizations working together could well overwhelm the good intentions of those many Iraqis who hope to establish a constitutional government.

Many of the hostile activities against the pro-democratic Iraqis - coercion, intimidation and assassination - could occur in the shadows and beneath the visibility of American military forces. These lack regional and language capabilities to perceive, much less prevent, many of these actions.

The best defense against this highly probable destabilization effort by the clerical regime in Iran is to help the people of Iran use political means to liberate themselves from a dictatorship which polls and partially-open elections reveal that more than 80% of them completely reject. Ironically, while the US may not currently have the regional and language capabilities to defend against Iranian covert action, it does have the symbolic credibility of its democratic institutions and the knowledge and experience needed to provide discreet assistance to help the people of Iran free themselves.

A good recent example was the fact that with discreet external assistance, the people of Serbia were helped in the short time period from June 1999 to October 1999 to

rise up politically and remove the communist/ultra-nationalist dictatorship of Slobodan Milosevic which had ruled since 1987 and which had brought so much suffering to the Balkans. Just as in Serbia, once the Iranian people lose their fear of the dictatorship and rise up using political means, it is highly probable that the Iranian Army - more than 80% of which also voted against the hardline clerics in the most recent national election - will not defend the regime, but rather will act to prevent the extremists in the secret police, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from successfully repressing the Iranian people's quest for liberty.

President Bush said recently "the people of Iran want the same freedoms as people around the world." If the United States helps the people of Iran obtain that freedom it will open a new day in the Middle East by securing democracy in both Iraq and Iran, it will enormously reduce the threat from international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and it will prevent the tragic possibility of post-Saddam Iraq coming under the control of Iranian-backed Shia extremists.

---

Constantine C. Menges Ph.D., a Senior Fellow with the Hudson Institute, formerly served as Special Assistant for National Security Affairs to the President. His latest book is **2007: The Preventable War - The Strategic Challenge of China and Russia**.

\*This paper was published by MINDS with the consent of the author. Another version of this paper was published in The Washington Times, April 24, 2004, A19.