



August 6, 2004

U.S. unease grows as Iraqi chaos bolsters Iranian position

By Farah Stockman

WASHINGTON - Before the U.S. military marched to Baghdad to take out Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraqi and Iranian exiles warned the U.S. government of an unintended consequence the coming war in Iraq could bring: the rise of Iran.

They argued that the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan had already eliminated Iran's enemy to the east, the Taliban, whose brand of Islam was hostile to Iran's Shiite faith. A second U.S.-led war in Iraq would eliminate Iran's enemy to the west, Saddam, who previously had initiated a bitter, eight-year war against Iran.

Now, true to those predictions, Iran - a country President George W. Bush once declared a member of the "axis of evil," along with North Korea and Iraq - is exerting unprecedented influence in the Middle East, defying the international community over its nuclear program and providing funding and personnel for Shiite political parties in Iraq.

Despite the warnings, some U.S. officials involved in formulating Iraq policy now count the failure to limit Iranian influence as one of the major deficiencies of postwar planning in Iraq.

"Iran has the potential of playing a helpful role in Iraq, but we are uneasy about some of the actions that Iran has been taking," particularly in the southern region, Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters last week in Baghdad.

Concern in Washington and Baghdad is mounting as Iraq's fledgling government takes its first steps toward democracy.

"Iranian intrusion has been vast and unprecedented since the establishment of the Iraqi state," Iraq's new defense minister, Hazim al-Shalaan, told Al-Sharq al-Awsat, a London-based Arabic language newspaper. He accused Iran of sending spies to "shake up" the political landscape in Iraq.

"The Bush administration has to face the reality that Iran is now the regional superpower," said Mohammed Hadi Semati, an Iranian political scientist at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

Pressure to decide how to deal with Iran's new influence mounted last month when the report from the Sept. 11 commission said that as many as 10 hijackers had been given safe passage through Iran. And Saturday, Iran heightened tension over the nuclear issue by

vowing not to give up its uranium enrichment program and confirming that it had resumed building centrifuges for that purpose.

Iran has said its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only and has denied meddling in Iraq's affairs. Recently, Iran tried to foster goodwill with Iraq's new government by offering to host eight-nation talks about protecting Iraq's borders from infiltration by foreign fighters.

But Iranian opposition groups say that offer was made after thousands of mullahs, informants, agents and fighters had already crossed the 1,500-kilometer, or 900-mile, border into Iraq, sometimes under the guise of Shiite pilgrims.

"Members of the Iranian opposition warned repeatedly of the dangers of fundamentalists coming from Iran," said Ali Safavi, a former member of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an opposition group with strong ties to militants. "In the chaos following the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the border was left unguarded, and tens of thousands entered Iraq."

U.S. officials call the possible election of an Iranian-style theocratic government in Iraq "the nightmare scenario" but say they believe the chances of it are remote. But still, Iran's ties to the new Iraq run deep, and there is little doubt that Iraq's Shiite majority will do well at the polls and maintain close links with its powerful Shiite neighbor.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of Iraq's most influential Shiite clerics, was born in Iran, although he advocates more separation between religion and politics for Iraq. Millions of Iraqis are de facto dual citizens who took refuge in Iran during Saddam's regime and are now returning to Iraq.

A popular party in Iraq, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, was formed in Iran in the 1980s during Saddam's persecution of Iraqi Shiites. Abdul Aziz Hakim, head of the party, has received funding from Iran and met several times with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Some Iran specialists in Washington say the new political realities in the region will force Iran and the United States to work toward friendlier relations based on newfound common interests, such as stability in Iraq. But Iranian exiles, longtime enemies of Tehran, say the situation can only get worse.

"It is safe to say that the No. 1 beneficiary of the Iraq war unwittingly was the fundamentalist regime in Iran," said Safavi. "It goes without saying that if, in fact, the Iranian clerics succeed in their plan, the whole region will be in a lot of trouble because you would have not one, but two fundamentalist regimes."