

U.S. Flight Forward in Iraq: Is Iran the Next War Target?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

In the good old days of traditional geopolitics, à la Zbigniew Brzezinski, the U.S. policy toward the two oil giants of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Iraq, was known under the rubric of “dual containment.” Now, since the 2000 Supreme Court (s)election of the Cheney-Bush duo, this has been changed to “dual extermination.” As the regional implementation of Cheney’s “new Roman Empire” thrust, the policy emanating from Washington has been one of “permanent pre-emptive wars” against alleged terrorist nations, their alleged backers, and so on. First Afghanistan, then Iraq, now Iran and, according to well-informed regional actors, simultaneous hits against Syria and Lebanon, are planned by the United States and its “closest regional ally,” Sharon’s Israel (see article, page 44).

If this strategic plan were to be fully implemented, then, as a Saudi newspaper close to Crown Prince Abdallah has editorialized, it will set the entire region—and perhaps the world—on fire.

Only a drastic policy course change in Washington, as Lyndon LaRouche has insisted, can avert the looming catastrophe. In April, he issued his “LaRouche Doctrine,” which specified that Washington must declare its commitment to stability and security in Southwest Asia as a whole, and acknowledge the key role to be played by the four leading nations there: Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. A plan for withdrawal of the occupying forces, he wrote, must be accompanied by a perspective for economic cooperation in the region, and, emphatically, between Israel and Palestine and their neighbors.

Encouraging steps have been taken, dovetailing with LaRouche’s concept of peace through economic develop-

ment, especially by Iran, whose geo-strategic location makes it the pivotal country in the region. Over the past weeks, the Iranian government has conducted talks with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iraq, in an effort to consolidate economic cooperation and trade agreements and contribute to regional stability. A large Iran-Iraq economic conference was convened in Tehran on Aug. 1, which saw the participation of 300 Iraqi businessmen and an even larger number from Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi, who opened the conference, spoke of “a special and historical opportunity” for the two neighboring states. He stressed the importance of energy cooperation, specifying plans to build a pipeline from Basra to Abadan, and to initiate a swap deal between the two countries. Iraq would supply 350,000 barrels a day of crude oil to Iran’s Abadan refinery; and Iran would, in turn, export Iranian crude on Iraq’s behalf, through the Persian Gulf. With Azerbaijani and Turkish government leaders, President Khatami discussed cooperation on transportation networks, including the North-South Corridor, as well as gas deals.

Instead of encouraging such steps, the Bush Administration has reacted like the proverbial bull to a red flag, doing everything imaginable to aggravate the situation and exacerbate the conflict in Iraq, and against Iran. One wonders if this is the expression of the usual insanity one has become accustomed to from such quarters, or whether there is a method in the madness; that is, a deliberate commitment to unleash chaos.

The ‘Final Solution’ to Moqtadar al-Sadr

The U.S. launched its advertised final offensive against the Mahdi Army militia of Moqtadar al-Sadr on Aug. 12,

after a week of intense fighting between the radical Shi'ite cleric's militiamen and the occupation forces in the holy city of Najaf, as well as other Shi'ite cities where he has military strength: Amarah, Nasiriyeh, Kut, Basra, and Sadr City in Baghdad. The first sign of the offensive came when interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi issued an ultimatum for the al-Sadr militias to leave the city. "We think that those armed should leave the holy sites and the [Imam Ali Shrine compound] as well as leave their weapons and abide by the law," he said during a blitz visit there on Aug. 8. Although al-Sadr spokesmen had said they would be open to negotiate a ceasefire, Allawi was intransigent: "There is no negotiation with any militia that bears arms against Iraq and the Iraqi people."

On Aug. 10, the U.S. Army told Najaf residents to evacuate their homes. Speaking of the city's cemetery and the shrine of Imam Ali, one of Islam's holiest sites, the U.S. Marines announced over loudspeakers, "To all Najaf people, these areas will be closed military zones." To al-Sadr's militia, they said: "This is the last warning to all armored militias. This is the last chance for you to drop your weapons and leave Najaf peacefully or death will be your penalty."

Then on Aug. 12, U.S. Marine Maj. David Holahan, executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines Regiment, announced: "Major operations to destroy the militia have begun." The declared intention was to force the militiamen to surrender, or kill them.

The actual assault proceeded as planned, with U.S. Marines encircling the Imam Ali shrine, and U.S. planes dropping bombs on the al-Sadr militiamen located in the city's historic cemetery. Attacks were launched simultaneously against suspected al-Sadr strongholds in Kut, where a neighborhood was bombed, leaving 75 dead and twice as many wounded, mainly civilians. And fighting escalated in the other centers of al-Sadr's forces. In Basra, the militiamen threatened that, were the siege of Najaf to continue, they would sabotage oil pipelines and the port, whence Iraqi oil is shipped abroad.

Just prior to the final assault, Ayatollah Al Hussein al-Sistani, the highest religious authority of the Shi'ites, left Najaf to fly to London for treatment of a heart ailment. Both the U.S. forces and the interim Iraqi government wanted the revered leader, noted for his moderating influence, to be out of the picture. Other leading Shi'ite figures of the Marja in Najaf feared al-Sistani's death, had he remained, and urged him to leave when he did. It was mooted that al-Sadr could have sought refuge in al-Sistani's residence, which would have set him up for killing.

Rather than be intimidated by the show of force, the resistance spread. Not only did other cities rise up against the occupation, but political figures from within Allawi's interim government began to jump ship. Masses demonstrated in Nasiriya calling for the ouster of Allawi, who has authorized the attacks, and they set fire to the local office

of his political party. At the same time, the deputy governor of Najaf, Jawdat Kadam Najimal-Kuraishi, announced his resignation. On the day of the final assault, he declared: "I resign from my post denouncing all the U.S. terrorist operations that they are doing against this holy city."

Deputy president Ibrahim al-Jaafari had urged U.S. troops to leave the city to end the fighting. "I call for multinational forces to leave Najaf and for only Iraqi forces to remain there," Jaafari said in remarks broadcast on Al Jazeera television on Aug. 11. "Iraqi forces can administer Najaf to end this phenomenon of violence in this city that is holy to all Muslims." He also protested that any orders for offensive action against militants should have come from the Iraqi government, not the U.S. "I think that killing Iraqi citizens is not a civilized way of building the new Iraq, which is based on protecting people and promoting dialogue, not bullets," he told the BBC's "Newsnight" program. He also criticized Zorfi's call for the Shia fighters to leave Najaf, saying "I think decisions like this should have been taken centrally . . . in Baghdad."

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a major power in the "new" Iraq, accused the U.S. of using excessive force, and "called for a new security strategy in which tribal leaders had a greater say." Fifty tribal leaders of Najaf had, in fact, met with Allawi on Aug. 8, during his quick visit to the city, and lobbied with him to give them, a traditional force in Iraqi society, a chance to mediate a solution to the conflict. Allawi refused any mediation, and maintained his position that there could be no room for negotiations with al-Sadr.

As for Moqtadar al-Sadr, he continued to fight and urge his followers to do the same. In response to Allawi's demand that the militia leave Najaf, al-Sadr told the press: "I will continue fighting. I will remain in Najaf city until the last drop of my blood has been spilled." Invoking the memory that his father and uncle were both martyred, Sadr told his troops: "Keep fighting even if you see me a prisoner or a martyr. God willing you will be victorious." He said he still wanted Iraq to remain united and thanked "those who tried to resolve the crisis peacefully." Calls by his spokesmen for negotiating a ceasefire fell on deaf ears.

As one leading strategic analyst, Dr. Toby Dodge, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Britain, commented to BBC, the actual military position of the United States is "unenviable," and the resistance is spreading. He listed the Sunni strongholds of Fallujah, Ramadi, and Samarra as all under the control of the resistance, whereas Mosul is contested. Regarding the Najaf offensive, which was supposed to establish an "example," Dodge noted: "Moqtada Sadr's main base of support is not the Shia holy cities, but instead the Baghdad suburb of al-Tharwa (Sadr City). This slum of up to 2 million people will become the battleground against Mr. Sadr and his Mahdi Army. U.S. forces have had great difficulty operating here, fighting in

crowded and narrow streets, with a lack of local knowledge.” Thus, he concluded, a “two-front revolt” will further deteriorate the situation, and Mr. Allawi “will become little more than the mayor of Baghdad.”

If one adds that the southern cities of Basra, Amarah, Nasiriya, and Kut are increasingly under the al-Sadr forces’ control, it is a bleak picture for an occupying army.

In addition, the polarization of the southern cities dominated by pro-al-Sadr elements, against Baghdad—which is viewed as totally under U.S. occupation control—has led to alarming developments. It was reported in the Arabic press that the deputy governor of Basra, Salem al-Maliki, himself an al-Sadr representative, ordered the closure of the Southern Oil Company, which effectively shut down production. Furthermore, he reportedly called on fellow Shi’ites in Kut, to join with Basra, Amarah, and Nasiriyeh, in an “autonomous” southern region, independent of Baghdad. Were this to materialize, it could constitute the first step towards disintegration of Iraq as a nation.

Target: Iran

The military offensive aimed at wiping out al-Sadr’s militia, coincided with a drumbeat of accusations and threats against neighboring Iran. In fact, the Israeli daily *Ma’ariv* wrote on Aug. 12 that the Najaf offensive was a “clear message to Iran,” that the United States would move against it.

The new drumbeat began with statements made by Secretary of State Colin Powell on Aug. 1, while on a visit to Baghdad, that he was “uneasy about some of the actions that it [Iran] has been taking in the South.” He was reportedly responding to reports of “diplomats” about alleged Iranian interference in Iraq. Interim Iraqi Defense Minister Hazem Shaalan, explicitly accused Iran of funnelling arms and fighters into Iraq.

It is well known that many Shi’ite political parties in southern Iraq maintain links in Iran, where many lived in exile for years. Foremost among them is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, whose leading members have participated in the transitional Iraqi governing bodies. More than the southern cities, it is the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala, which have strong ties to Iran, especially its theological center at Qom. In point of fact, however, it is the supreme Shi’ite authority, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani, based in the holy city of Najaf, who wields the greatest influence, including over Iranians.

Iranian government leaders are well aware that their *de facto* influence in Iraq has raised concerns, especially among Sunni political forces in the region, outside Iraq. Both Kuwait, which has a Shi’ite minority, and Bahrain, whose Sunni leadership has been forced to concede some political posts to members of the Shi’ite majority, are nervous. And the same goes for the Shi’ite region in Saudi Arabia’s East. Were forces in Iran to attempt to exploit their influence in these areas,

there could be a backlash, according to one European-based regional expert. So far, however, the Iranian government has put its efforts into trying to create regional stability and security. One wonders if the expansion of the war in Iraq against the Shi’ites might not be intended to provoke the Iranians into conflict, instead.

The lever that has been used most frequently to pressure Iran is, in fact, the nuclear issue: Although Iran has signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as an additional protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), allowing for more far-reaching inspections of its nuclear facilities, the U.S. Administration has insisted that Tehran is using its energy program to camouflage a program for weapons development. Powell, in his Baghdad statements, also said the Iranian nuclear program was likely to be referred to the UN Security Council, which could decide on sanctions.

A meeting held in Paris on July 29, between the EU-3 (Great Britain, France, and Germany) and Iran, to settle new charges against Iran’s program, ended in a draw, with agreement to continue the dialogue later. A wish list was presented by Iran to the Europeans, for access to technology, and for protection against military threats from abroad (that is, Israel); there was no reported European response. On Aug. 1, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi announced at a press conference that his country had resumed production of centrifuges, but had not resumed enriching uranium. He said that this was a response to the failure of the EU-3, back in June (and obviously again in Paris) to help close Iran’s file of possible nuclear nonproliferation violations at the IAEA. “We still continue suspension on uranium enrichment, meaning that we have not resumed enrichment,” Kharrazi said. “But we are not committed to another agreement with them (Britain, Germany, and France) on not building centrifuges.”

After the Paris talks and Kharrazi’s announcement, the Bush Administration increased its rhetoric, and turned up the volume. Both President Bush and National Security Adviser Rice made threatening statements. On Aug. 8, Rice stated that the world finally is “worried and suspicious” over the Iranians’ intentions and is determined not to let Tehran produce a nuclear weapon. On two nationally broadcast interview shows, Rice threatened that the United States would act alone to end the program if the Administration could not win international support.

A potential monkey wrench was thrown into the works, when *Jane’s Defense Weekly* published a story, on Aug. 11, that the traces of enriched uranium which had been detected in Iran, on its centrifuges, had actually originated elsewhere. IAEA inspectors said they could confirm that a sample of uranium enriched to 54%, found in Iran, had come from Pakistani equipment. Another sample, of 36%, had come from Russian equipment, which had been sold to China, thence to

Pakistan, and finally to Iran, through A.Q. Khan. Therefore, Iran's contention it has not enriched uranium seems to have been confirmed. Given the Cheney Administration's record with information on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, of course, this is no guarantee the targeting will be reduced.

Another Pre-Emptive Strike?

Just how worried Arabs are about the targeting, is indicated by the reported attempts of the Jordanian government to reduce tensions between Tehran and Washington. The *Jordan Times* reported Aug. 10 that Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher said Jordan had tried to bring the U.S. and Iran together, regarding their estimates of the Iraqi situation. "Jordan supports efforts to improve ties between the two countries, but it was not mediating," he said. Another government spokesman said Jordan was also supporting efforts to create a region free of WMD. "Efforts to create a WMD-free Middle East should not only include Iran," said government spokesman Asma Khader, "but also Israel."

Iran's own response is the best indication of how seriously threats of an Israeli strike should be taken. Not only Kharrazi, but other leading Iranian political figures have repeatedly insisted that the country will not give up its nuclear energy program. Pressure is mounting on the government, from the public and press, but especially from the Conservative-dominated parliament, that Iran restart its uranium enrichment program, as an assertion of its rights and independence.

The toughest response came from Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani, who announced on Aug. 11 that a successful test had been completed of the new Shahab-3 missile, which is capable of hitting all sites in Israel, as well as U.S. bases in the Gulf. He said Iran was improving the range and accuracy of the Shahab-3 in response to Israel's moves to boost its anti-missile capability. A defense ministry spokesman confirmed that the test had been carried out "to assess the latest developments implemented on this missile," without further details.

Explicit warnings have been issued by Iranians, of retaliation, were they to be attacked. "If Israel behaves like a lunatic and attacks the Iranian nation's interests, we will come down on their heads like a mallet and break their bones," said Revolutionary Guards Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi on Aug. 11. Shamkhani commented also on Israel's anti-missile Arrow II. "The Israelis have recently tried to increase their missile capability and we will also try to upgrade our Shahab-3 missile in every respect," he said, adding that the improvements to the Shahab-3 "will not be limited to the missile's range and will include all its specifications."

How would Iran react, if attacked? The question has been the subject of speculation from many sides. The usual response is that it would support moves by the Lebanese Hezbollah to attack sites in Israel, or strike Israel itself. Neither option

would be limited in consequences.

On Aug. 11, an important editorial appeared in the Saudi paper *Al Riyadh*, which is said to be close to Crown Prince Abdallah. Entitled: "America's Nero: Will He Set the World on Fire?" it gave a detailed picture of what plans may be, in the United States and Israel, for aggression against Iran, and what the consequences might be.

Locating the critical potential for conflict in considerations linked to the internal U.S. election process, the paper writes that the race to the White House is "bound to the failure or success of [operations in] the Arab region and Iran." It notes the buildup of Israeli forces on the borders with Syria and Lebanon, and then addresses Iran. "Iran has become the real concern, a scary concern, this is how it's being painted. And Iran is still considered part of the axis of evil. Now they are talking about stopping its nuclear program by diplomatic means or probably by the use of force against installations."

The editorial states that America, well aware of "the size of Iran and its sensitive position on the sands of the Gulf, neighboring Iraq, and Central Asia," would probably time and coordinate any action with Israel, "for simultaneous attacks on Syria and Lebanon," which could then be presented to the world as successful actions to "to finish off these 'out-law states.'"

But, the paper stresses, these are blueprints, not reality. "When one calculates all the consequences, they could lead to worse results [for the U.S. and Israel] than those that have been planned on paper. Who could guarantee that Iran would not use chemical weapons or conventional weapons to strike Israel, and the oil platforms in the Gulf; an uprising of the Shia in Lebanon and Iraq and Central Asia? Or, who could guarantee that there would not be a Syrian-Lebanese reaction, though limited, that could set the whole region in flames?"

Oil, it continues, could become a factor that would "tear apart allies and friends, if the American adventure goes beyond all limits." Production could come to a halt, according to the dictum, "*Après moi, le déluge*." Iran could render the war more widespread and more painful in the whole region, and outside the region. The editorial here is talking about the earlier references to the Shia in Lebanon, Iraq, and Central Asia; significantly, the Saudi publication does *not* mention what could occur, if the Shi'ite populations were mobilized in Kuwait, Bahrain, or even at home in Saudi Arabia.

The point driven home is that, if the United States and/or Israel, were to act according to fanatical "religious-imperial thinking," then "this adventure would set big fires in the whole region."

Arab experts consider this editorial to be an informed evaluation of what a U.S. or Israeli escalation of the war could provoke. But so far, the only means for outflanking such an outcome is the "LaRouche Doctrine," which has not yet been acted upon.