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USADI Commentary

Tehran's Influence in Iraq Spreading, Deepening

There was more troubling news from Iraq on Tuesday, pointing to the increasing influence of Iran in Iraq, particularly within Iraq's Interim Governing Council (IGC).

As reported by the media, the IGC, which in recent weeks has been in a seemingly confrontational mode with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) especially after its rotating presidency was assumed by Mr. Abdol-al Aziz Hakim in December, issued a statement calling for expulsion of the major Iranian opposition group, the People's Mujahedeen from Iraq by the end of this year.

This is an ominous development and a potential blow to the United State's security and geopolitical interests in the region.

What prompted the IGC, with an endless list of critical issues already on its plate, to make this move? US military commanders in the field have reiterated that the Mujahedeen is disarmed and contained in its main base, Camp Ashraf, and "not doing anyone any harm."

There is only one answer: the Iranian regime is exerting its influence over the IGC through its allies on the council. Regional experts familiar with this issue noted that the expulsion order was originally drafted in Tehran last month but made public when one of Ali Khamenei's protégés, Abdol Aziz al-Hakim, became the IGC's president. Mr. al-Hakim and his brother, Baqer al-Hakim, killed in a massive car bomb in Najaf in August, lived in Iran under the clerics' patronage for more than two decades before returning to Iraq. At the time of the elder Hakim's death *Reuters* wrote: "Iran lost a sympathetic ear that will be difficult to replace."

When visiting Tehran last week, Ahmed Chalabi, another key IGC member, met with Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Hassan Rowhani who said, "Iran is strongly opposed to interaction between the occupiers (the United States) and the Mujahedeen, [because] this is a blatant violation of international norms and we expect that the Iraqi Governing Council seriously deal with the terrorist groups." The *Washington Post* wrote, "Ahmed Chalabi... proposed the resolution" about the Mujahedeen in the IGC meeting on Tuesday. The Post also reported that: "Most of the 24 Governing Council members have been to Iran in recent months."

Jalal Talebani, the leader of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan of Iraq and a staunch ally of Tehran since the mid 1980's, traveled to Tehran last November when he was the rotating head of the IGC. Agence France Presse reported that he had discussed the status of the Mujahedeen with his "Iranian brothers" while visiting Tehran.

And in reaction to the IGC's decision, Iran's Vice President Mohammed Ali Abtahi said yesterday: "We have very good relations with the Governing Council, and we have had discussions (on the Mujahedeen) and this decision is the result."

The *Washington Post* reported that the council's decision against Iranian dissidents, "could alter the regional balance of power" and "is a significant political and security gain for Iran" if it succeeds in removing its most effective opposition from its border. "There are now no major opposition groups operating on any of Iran's borders," the *Post* added.

This IGC action does not serve US interests. As an anti-fundamentalist Muslim secular movement who "seeks a secular government to replace Iran's clerical regime," the Mujahedeen has been the only effective bulwark against Tehran designs in Iraq and revealed the first ever details on the extent of Tehran's clandestine nuclear weapons program. If the IGC's decision is ever implemented, it would deprive the US of a potential ally as it tries to cope with the rise of fundamentalism in Iraq and control Tehran's nuclear mischief making. Since Iran's apologists in the IAEA prevented Tehran's nuclear file from being referred to the UN Security Council last month, the US needs the Iranian opposition as a credible resource on Tehran's secret nuclear program as never before.

The council's decision also shows how influential Tehran is becoming in the IGC. It is also an indication that the fundamentalist regime in Iran is quietly exploring various avenues, hiding behind benign humanitarian and diplomatic guises, to implement its plan for a client Islamic republic in Iraq.

It will be a sad day in the gulf region and in American foreign policy when the Iranian regime uses our service men and women to secure an Iranian-run Islamic Republic of Iraq. Especially when our President said that this war was necessary to bring democracy to Iraq... and the whole region. Iran is not a democracy - nor will it support democracy in Iraq. American leaders need to act immediately so that the IGC does not operate as the right hand of the fundamentalist mullahs that hijacked the Iranian revolution.

European Diplomat: IGC Decision Unrealistic and Designed to "please the Iranians and Annoy the US-led Coalition"

TEHRAN - Senior Iranian officials on Wednesday welcomed a decision by Iraq's Governing Council to expel an Iranian opposition group.

"Naturally the decision is highly acceptable and we welcome it," Vice-President Mohammad Ali Abtahi told reporters.

A European diplomat in Tehran said the decision by the Governing Council, whose authority is limited, to expel the Mujahideen, who seek to install a secular government to replace Iran's clerical leaders, was unrealistic and designed to "please the Iranians and annoy the (U.S.-led) coalition in Iraq." (*Reuters, Dec. 10, 2003*)

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

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Local Iraqis Reaction

Agence France Presse, December 10, 2003

CAMP ASHRAF, Iraq - Iraqi tribes living round the last remaining base of the People's Mujahedeen offered support Wednesday to the Iranian opposition group which Baghdad's interim rulers have decided to expel as terrorists.

A dozen tribal chiefs met leaders of the force who told AFP they could not talk because of "restrictions imposed by American forces". Abbas al-Zawi, head of the Aza tribe, said: "We have met with Mujahedeen leaders Al-Saed Bahman and Mrs. Peri." He said the expulsion order was "not just because it is a peaceful organization" and accused the Governing Council of being a "puppet of the Iranian regime with no legal foundations to take such a decision."

Namman al-Jabbari of the Al-Jobour tribe and Ahmad al-Sumedia of the Al-Sumeidi nodded in agreement and said they would organize a protest. Salem al-Zawi of the tribal council added: "The Mujahedeen have never interfered in the internal affairs of Iraq. We have known them for 20 years and we have never found any terrorists here."

The Mujahedeen's Reaction

Agence France Presse, December 10, 2003

BAGHDAD - The Iranian opposition People's Mujahedeen, disarmed and detained by US forces, rejected Wednesday a decision by Iraq's interim leaders to expel its thousands of militants from the country by the end of the year.

The Mujahedeen suggested the US-appointed council did not have the power or legal right to take such a decision.

"Such a statement has no [practical application] and only paves the way for terrorist activities by the mullahs' regime against the Mujahedeen in Iraq, a spokesman for the group said in a written text, using its usual epithet for the Islamic republic.

The Mujahedeen said its "presence in Iraq as a country under occupation is in the context of the Geneva Conventions."

"Such a statement has been dictated by the ruling clerics in Tehran and has no bearing on that issue.

"The statement merely reflects the fantasies and illusions of the mullahs' regime, which regards the People's Mujahedeen Organization of Iran as the biggest obstacle to its export of fundamentalism and establishment of a satellite theocratic dictatorship in Iraq."

The spokesman accused Tehran's forces of carrying out 150 attacks on the Mujahedeen in Iraq in the past 10 years, killing dozens of its members and a large number of innocent Iraqi civilians.

AFP: Iraq's interim leaders offer Mujahedeen expulsion as a gift to Iran

BAGHDAD - The decision by Iraq's interim leaders to expel thousands of members of the Iranian opposition People's Mujahedeen is a move that will be appreciated in Tehran as the two neighbors set aside old enmities and look for common ground. The fate of the leading Iranian opposition movement was discussed in November when the Kurdish factional chief Jalal Talabani went to Teheran as president of the rotating Governing Council. (*Agence France Presse, Dec. 10, 2003*)

Tehran's Reaction

Agence France Presse, December 10, 2003

TEHRAN - Iran on Wednesday hailed a decision by Iraq's US-backed interim leaders to expel the Iranian armed opposition People's Mujahedeen, but denied suggestions the move was part of a secret deal involving the extradition of Al-Qaeda members from the Islamic republic.

"The decision taken by the (Iraqi) Governing Council is very positive," Intelligence Minister Ali Yunessi told reporters.

"We have very good relations with the Governing Council, and we have had discussions (on the People's Mujahedeen) and this decision is the result," added Vice President Mohammed Ali Abtahi.

IRIB web site, December 10, 2003

TEHRAN - Iran's Defense Minister Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani hailed a decision by Iraqi governing council to expel the terrorist Mujahideen Khalq Organization (MKO) from Iraq.

Addressing a press conference, Shamkhani said the move by the council indicates its power to establish peace, security and stability in Iraq and in the whole of the Middle East region.

Shamkhani dismissed as 'unfounded and unreal' certain rumors on the possibility of any deal between Iran and the US in the MKO case and said even the stances raised by Americans shows White House officials had not been informed of the Iraqi governing council's statement.