Iran and Syria's proxy war in Iraq

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Those who imagine an easy way out of Iraq via diplomacy see Iran and Syria as parts of the solution. That's wishful thinking, at least for now. Far from being candidates for a deal to stabilize Iraq, Iran and Syria are instead waging proxy war against U.S. forces in Iraq.

The ruling mullahs in Tehran and the Assad dictatorship in Damascus want the United States defeated in Iraq. Listening to the Democrats' presidential candidates, watching a defeatist Congress and reading public opinion polls showing dwindling support for the war, they think they're winning. Why should they negotiate an arrangement that helps stabilize Iraq and permits even a partial accomplishment of American objectives?

The real measure of what Iran and Syria are up to is what they are doing on the ground in Iraq.

Senior American commanders in Baghdad cite virtually incontrovertible evidence that Iran is stoking the violence in Iraq and contributing directly to the deaths of American troops. Weapons, including mortars, rockets and munitions bearing Iranian markings, smuggled into Iraq from Iran are helping to arm Iran's allies among the Shiite militias, including those of the anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi army.

U.S. intelligence traces an especially lethal form of roadside bomb, known as an explosively formed penetrator, directly back to Iran. These sophisticated devices utilize precisely machined copper discs activated by a radio link and triggered by a passive infrared sensor. The semi-molten copper slug produced when the device is detonated can penetrate the armor of many Army and Marine vehicles, wreaking havoc on those inside. Iraq's industrial base lacks the technical capability to manufacture these precision anti-armor weapons. Moreover, they are identical, right down to the radio frequencies used to activate them, to anti-tank weapons used against Israeli forces last summer by the Iranian-armed Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon.

U.S. commanders report that these bombs inflicted 30 percent of all American military casualties (excluding Anbar province, where the weapons have not been encountered) during the last three months of 2006. Counting combat deaths in 2006 and 2007, the American military says these bombs have killed at least 170 U.S. soldiers and Marines.

In recent months, U.S. intelligence has obtained satellite photographs of three training camps for Iraqi insurgents near Iran's capital, Tehran. Prisoner interrogations plus other sources of intelligence indicate that the camps are being used to instruct Iraqi militants in weapons use, ambush techniques, kidnapping, assassination and other forms of insurgent warfare.

All of these activities, from weapons supply to training to infiltration into Iraq, are being run by Iran's

al-Quds force of Revolutionary Guards, originally formed as the shock troops of Iran's Islamic revolution. Any suggestion that the al-Quds force could somehow be conducting a proxy war in Iraq against the United States without the knowledge or consent of Iran's ruling Islamic Council is absurd. Al-Quds answers directly to the Islamic Council's radical clerics, holders of supreme power in the Iranian government.

Thus, Iran's intervention in Iraq can be none other than a deliberate, calculated decision by the government of Iran to wage indirect war against the United States.

Syria is Iran's junior partner in Middle East malevolence. It dutifully serves as transit point for Iran's illegal rearming of Hezbollah in Lebanon, contravening a United Nations Security Council resolution and defying the ineffectual protests (some things never change) of the U.N. peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon.

Syria also acts as transit point for foreign jihadists - currently estimated at 60 to 80 per month - bound for Iraq. Plentiful U.S. and coalition intelligence, confirmed by numerous prisoner interrogations, shows that foreign fighters and suicide bombers arrive in Damascus and are then conveyed in small groups to the Syrian-Iraqi border for infiltration into Iraq.

Syrian officials piously disclaim any responsibility for this conduit, noting that not even the mighty United States can prevent illegal immigration across its border with Mexico. This is clever rhetoric but, in fact, wholly disingenuous. In Syrian President Bashir Assad's tightly run dictatorship, nothing approaching this constant transit of Iraq-bound terrorists could operate without the Syrian government's full knowledge and assent.

Syria, like Iran, has made a calculated strategic decision that keeping American and Iraqi blood flowing will drive the United States out of Iraq. Watching the Democrats' presidential candidates falling all over each other with promises to "end the war" by withdrawing American forces from Iraq only confirms their analysis.

Against these harsh realities, fanciful diplomatic talk of "flipping" Syria and striking a "grand bargain" with Iran rings hollow. Whatever remote chance diplomacy might have would require preconditions. First, U.S. military gains in Iraq. Second, sending this message to Tehran and Damascus: You cannot afford the price of killing American soldiers in Iraq.

In the Middle East especially, diplomacy without steel is a mirage.

Robert J. Caldwell is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's Sunday Insight section and can be reached via e-mail at robert.caldwell@uniontrib.com.