



## **The Bush administration has trumped up charges against Iran for its role in the Iraq War. Is it misinterpretation, misinformation, or worse?**

### **Iran in Iraq?**

**Faced with growing public opposition to the U.S. war in Iraq, the Bush administration has been desperately trying to divert attention to Iran. Washington has gone so far as to make a series of dubious and unfounded charges that blame the Iranian government for the difficulties facing American forces fighting the Iraqi insurgency.**

Despite the absence of any credible reports of Iranian involvement in attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, President George W. Bush last month formally authorized U.S. forces to “kill or capture” suspected Iranian agents in Iraq. “It makes sense that if somebody’s trying to harm our troops, or stop us from achieving our goal,” [Bush said](#), “that we will stop them.” It is unclear how U.S. occupation forces will be able to consistently discern the many thousands of ordinary Iranians who come to Iraq on business or for religious pilgrimages from these alleged agents they are authorized to kill. But the U.S. authorization does appear to effectively grant a license to assassinate Iranian officials who serve in various diplomatic functions. Heavily armed American forces have already seized several Iranian diplomats over strong protests of both the Iranian and Iraqi governments.

Virtually all attacks against U.S. forces over the past couple of years have come from Baathist, Sunni, and other anti-Iranian groups. If Iranian-backed Shi’ite militias are also now targeting American forces, as President Bush implies, U.S. soldiers are now caught in a wedge between militants of both Arab communities. Despite U.S. charges, however, U.S. soldiers at this point have little to fear from Iran or Iranian-backed elements.

Similarly, of over 10,000 suspected insurgents arrested in U.S. counter-insurgency sweeps, the relatively few foreigners among them have been Arabs, not Iranians. It makes little sense, then, why the Bush administration has depicted Iran as the principal foreign threat to U.S. forces in Iraq. The National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, compiled by America’s sixteen intelligence agencies and issued on February 11, downplayed Iran’s role in Iraq’s ongoing violence and instability.

Indeed, the Bush administration’s sudden focus on Iran’s role in Iraq may simply be an effort to provoke an Iranian reaction that could then become an excuse for war. Whatever the reason, the motivation for blaming Iran must be pretty strong, given how much effort the U.S. government is putting into promoting such weak evidence.

#### **The Most Recent Charges**

The administration’s case so far has been based primarily on assertions that bomb fragments, such as those displayed by U.S. military officials in a February 11 press conference in Baghdad, were of Iranian origin. They have shown no proof making this linkage, however. U.S. officials originally promised that they would be able to show documents, computer files, confessions by captured Iranians, or evidence that Iranian officials were caught with explosives. None of this has been made public, however, raising doubts as to whether such evidence even existed in the first place.

U.S. officials have noted the increased sophistication over the past several months of what are known as “improvised explosive devices” (IEDs), which have been used by Iraqi insurgents against U.S. and Iraqi military convoys. The increased sophistication is not necessarily a result of outside aid, however. In virtually every conflict, particularly those involving irregular warfare, each side constantly seeks to improve the accuracy and lethality of its weapons in the course of the struggle.

Of particular concern to U.S. officials has been the increase in attacks by IEDs using “explosively formed projectiles” (EFPs). U.S. officials claim that such devices have killed 170 U.S. and allied soldiers, which constitutes only a small proportion of the nearly 4000 U.S. and allied troops killed in the war so far. But the capability of these EFPs to penetrate heavy armor makes them particularly difficult to defend against.

While the Bush administration [insists](#) that the machine-tooling was so sophisticated that they could only have been manufactured in Iran, British government scientists [have found](#) that the devices could have simply been “turned on a lathe by craftsmen trained in the manufacture of munitions.” The pre-invasion Iraqi army and the munitions industry that supported it certainly possessed enough resident technical expertise to produce the material that the insurgents are using. Indeed, it is rather bizarre that the same U.S. administration that insisted just four years ago that Iraq was technologically advanced enough to produce long-range missiles and was on the verge of developing an atomic bomb would now be incapable of developing an effective roadside bomb without direct support from its neighbor Iran.

Furthermore, so many metal tubes and explosives were stolen from Iraqi army stockpiles during the chaos following the 2003 U.S. invasion, [the insurgents](#) have enough materiel to manufacture their own IEDs for decades. It is also important to note that these more lethal IEDs are not a recent nefarious Iranian invention designed to attack American troops. Indeed, insurgent groups such as the [Irish Republican Army have used EFPs](#) to attack enemy patrols for decades.

Even if the pieces of weaponry displayed by U.S. military officials came from Iran, there is a huge black market in various explosive devices in Iraq. So it would not be surprising to find components from any number of countries, including those of recent manufacture. Given the lack of security along the long Iranian-Iraqi border, it would not be difficult to smuggle weapons across the frontier without the knowledge of either government. Furthermore, despite its repressive theocratic orientation, the Iranian regime is hardly monolithic. Even if some of these devices were of Iranian origin, it is far more likely that they entered Iraq through the machinations of individual Iranian officers or criminal gangs than as a result of orders from the “highest levels of the Iranian government,” as [alleged](#) by the United States.

In short, the administration has thus far made a series of dubious assertions without evidence. “We know more than we can show,” [one senior official claimed](#) when pressed for tangible evidence that the EFPs were made in Iran. Unless or until they can show more, however, there is no reason to believe their alarmist claims.

Even the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Peter Pace, [admitted](#) that there was no proof that the Iranian government was supplying Iraqi insurgents with the lethal weaponry. The British government [withdrew](#) similar charges over a year ago. The Iraqi government has [also denied](#) U.S. accusations of an Iranian connection.

### **Why Such Claims?**

Given that the increased use of EFPs has been apparent for many months and the U.S. government has not produced any additional evidence regarding their origins, it is highly probable that Washington is raising the issue now primarily for political reasons. Indeed, National Public Radio [reported that](#) military officials in Iraq were under intense pressure from Washington to go public with these findings right away.

Most speculation has centered around the possibility that the Bush administration is trying to divert attention from the failures of its policies in Iraq by blaming a foreign government. More disturbing still would be U.S. efforts to lay the groundwork for a U.S. attack on Iran. It may also be an attempt to provide cover for President Bush’s rejection of the growing bipartisan consensus – as exemplified by the Baker-Hamilton Commission Report – of the importance of engaging Iran on issues related to Iraq and regional security.

In his January 10 speech announcing the escalation in American combat forces in Iraq, President Bush insisted that Iran was “providing material support for attacks on American troops” and allowing “terrorists and insurgents” to use its territory “to move in and out of Iraq.” In response, he made a not-so-subtle threat to attack Iran. “We will disrupt the attacks on our forces,” [Bush said](#). “We will interrupt the flow of support from Iran...and we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.”

Bush presented no evidence to support these charges. Nor did he address why Iran would support “terrorists and insurgents” that elsewhere in his speech he identified as Sunni extremists and part of the al-Qaida terrorist network, both of which are fanatically anti-Shi’ite and anti-Iranian. Nor did he address the [considerable evidence](#) that what limited outside support the insurgents have been receiving has come primarily from private sources in Saudi Arabia, a U.S. ally.

By the time of the State of the Union speech later that month, however, the administration began to realize that its charges that Iran was somehow aiding al-Qaida and other enemies of its allies in Baghdad were not being taken seriously. So they began to push the far more plausible message that Iran was arming Shi'ite extremists.

Segments of the Iranian government and religious hierarchy certainly have been providing training, arms, financial, and logistical support to Iraqi Shi'ite political groups and their militias. Some of these militias have engaged in death squad activity against the Sunni Arab community in Iraq.

However, most these groups are allied with the U.S.-backed Iraqi government. Indeed, the largest party in the ruling coalition is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), whose leadership spent most of their exile years in Iran and was recognized as the government-in-exile by the Iranian clerics while Iraq was still under Saddam Hussein's rule. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards trained and organized the SCIRI's militia, known as the Badr Corps, which even fought alongside Iranian forces during the 1980s in the war with Iraq. Similarly, the Dawa Party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maleki and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of President Jalal Talabani also have had close and longstanding ties with the Iranian government. By contrast, with the possible exception of some radical elements outside the official government hierarchy, Iranian authorities have generally been reluctant to ally themselves with the more extremist anti-government Shiite factions.

In other words, the Iranian government and the U.S. government are essentially on the same side in Iraq's ongoing conflict. Thanks to the willingness of the United States to overthrow its secular archenemy Saddam Hussein, Iran now has close allies in charge in Baghdad. And, as part of a desperate effort to curb the growing Sunni-led insurgency, the United States has been willing to throw its support to Iraq's democratically elected government, though it is run by pro-Iranian Shi'ite hardliners, and to turn a blind eye as the Badr Corps and other radical Shi'ite militias have thoroughly infiltrated the Iraqi police and military.

On one hand, President Bush is quite correct [in alleging that](#), in response to terrorist attacks against Shi'ite civilians by elements of the Sunni-led insurgency, "Radical Shia elements, some supported by Iran, formed death squads" that have contributed to the "vicious cycle of sectarian violence that continues today." What he ignores, however, is that the majority of this death squad activity has come from U.S.-armed-and-trained Iraqi police and military units. [According to official Central Command figures](#), these forces have received thousands of U.S.-made machine guns, grenade launchers and high-mobility vehicles – not to mention hundreds of thousands of AK-47 rifles – courtesy of the American taxpayer.

In other words, the United States is far more responsible for providing support for death squad activity by radical Shi'ite militiamen in Iraq than is Iran.

### **Geopolitical Implications**

Not only has the United States suffered enormous losses in lives, resources, international standing, and long-term security as a result of its invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration has delivered a strategic and diplomatic windfall to the reactionary Iranian mullahs and their supporters in both countries.

Rather than acknowledge this predictable result of that tragic decision, however, President Bush has instead put the blame on the Iranians. He has insisted they have no right to interfere in the internal affairs of their next-door neighbor that the United States invaded and, nearly four years later, continues to occupy. Furthermore, instead of recognizing that Iran is simply seeking to gain some advantage from the dramatic U.S.-instigated changes in the political and strategic situation on their western flank (as would any regional power in a comparable situation), President Bush has tried to depict Iran's role as something far more sinister: as yet another front of "the war on terrorism."

It is true that, not surprisingly, the Iranian government has pursued policies that have generally not encouraged the establishment of a democratic, pluralistic and stable Iraqi society in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion. However, it is extremely dangerous for the Bush administration to misrepresent and exaggerate Iranian actions and to engage in hyperbole and threats. Although elements of the Iranian regime may have contributed to the suffering of the Iraqi people, it pales in comparison to the damage inflicted upon that country by the United States.