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Moving Toward a Confluence of Disruptive Events in the Middle East

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Analysis. By Gregory Copley, Editor, GIS. A diverse range of intelligence sources have highlighted a pattern of imminent upheaval across a wide area of the Middle East, expected to culminate during, and following, September 2007, involving (a) possible military action within Iraq to change the Government; and (b) renewed provocations against Israel by proxy forces in Lebanon (*HizbAllah*) and Gaza (HAMAS). The two issues are intrinsically related, but are being coordinated separately to some extent.

The great strategic substance, however, is that these two events and others are coming together in a confluence of disruptive trends which will profoundly affect the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, and possibly also exacerbate the already worsening US-Russian relationship, given Moscow's commitment to strong relations with Tehran (and, by default, Damascus) to help stabilize Russia's southern flank.

The upheavals could also give the Turkish General Staff the opportunity or *casus belli* it needs to openly intervene militarily in northern Turkey, ostensibly to protect its interests and to suppress activities there by the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). But the chain of events was also likely to lead to a planned – and well-prepared – escalation by Iran and Syria to engage in activities both against Israel and to expand or preserve their access to and through Iraq.

A move by some Iraqi military officials to change the Shi'a-dominated Government of Nouri Maliki – which is now cooperating closely and openly with the clerical Government of Iran, and deliberately resisting cooperation (insofar as possible) with the US – would not, ultimately, be viewed askance in Washington, which essentially now feels that the original US route to "democracy" in Iraq cannot be achieved rapidly enough to forestall an effective Iranian victory in Iraq. The comparisons with the November 1, 1963, coup against then-South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem are apparent, and have probably been considered in Washington, but the alternative – the continued slide of a Maliki-dominated Government toward Tehran – is clearly inimical to US interests.

Significantly, and not surprisingly, Washington is not of one mind as to the possible moves against Prime Minister Maliki, and many in official Washington (including some of those who view Maliki with alarm) regarded the revelation by the Saudi Arabian Government in mid-July 2007 of evidence of Mr Maliki's covert relationship with Tehran as merely evidence that Saudi Arabia wanted to supplant the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi Government with a Sunni-dominated one. But GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* sources within a variety of Iraqi Government structures confirm that, whatever Riyadh's motivations for revealing the intelligence documents showing the links between Maliki and Tehran, Prime Minister Maliki has indeed committed himself and his Administration to follow the Iranian clerics' instructions.

At the same time, as noted in late June by GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs*, the Iranian and Syrian governments now appear to have completed their preparations for resumed open conflict against Israel,¹ initiating through *HizbAllah* and HAMAS as fairly transparent proxies, in a process designed to lead to an escalation into more direct Syrian (and, perhaps, eventually Iranian) military involvement in conflict against Israel, while Iran attempts to use its present asset base in Iraq to stop an Iraqi nationalist military backlash designed to replace Maliki. The entire process presages an escalation of conflict in Iraq at the same time that the pressure resumes against Israel. Indeed, the resumption of activities against Israel –

seen as a primary goal by *HizbAllah* and HAMAS, and the Syrian leadership around Bashar al-Assad – is almost viewed as a cover operation by Tehran.

This follows the essential failure of, and the lessons learned from, the Israeli-*HizbAllah* conflict which began on July 12, 2006, and continued until a United Nations-brokered ceasefire went into effect on August 14, 2006. While that conflict was – correctly in some respects – perceived as an Israeli military and diplomatic failure, it was also insufficiently successful from an Iranian/Syrian perspective to be escalated into a more general conflict.

And while Bashar al-Assad and his key advisors are pressing for a more “heroic” Syrian war with Israel, in order to consolidate the otherwise weakening position of Bashar in Damascus², the Turkish military leadership is itself viewing how best it might reverse what it considers to be an undesirable outcome to the July 22, 2007, Parliamentary election which confirmed the Islamist dominance of the Grand National Assembly (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*).

[Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s election win was a landslide for AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*: Justice and Development Party), giving the incumbent party 46.6 percent of the national vote and 340 seats in the Turkish Assembly. It was the first time in half a century that an incumbent party increased its vote.]

The Turkish General Staff (*Genelkurmay Başkanları*: TAF) had given the impression that it would have liked to have escalated the military situation with regard to northern Iraq before the Parliamentary election, possibly in the hope of being able to forestall the election through the creation of a “national emergency”: constitutional grounds for election deferment. Now it may still seek to redress the political situation inside Turkey by availing itself of an increasingly unstable situation in the northern parts of Iraq – in which not only are the Iraqi Turkmen now under direct and sustained pressure from the major Kurdish tribes, the Talibani and Barzani, but there is, in any event, growing sectarian conflict – to act. This may have the added benefit of forestalling – or acting as a cautionary note on – the next major Turkish vote: for the Presidency.

The Grand National Assembly was due to meet on August 4, 2007, with its principal mission to choose a successor for the strongly secular outgoing President, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who has been a fierce critic of the AKP. The AKP now has the strength to guarantee that its nominee for the Presidency, outgoing Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Gul, a committed Islamist, can win the Presidency. Unless the TAF moves soon to regain control, its authority and power will continue to be eroded, and yet Turkey’s position on entry into the European Union (EU) will still essentially be unattainable.

But in many respects a possible Turkish intervention in northern Iraq – which would have significant, long-lasting effects, and which the US Government is anxious to avoid – is the smaller part of the equation. A nationalist military coup in Iraq – which could only be conducted by the Turkish Army Special Forces; the Army as a whole is too Shi’a and too difficult to weld into an anti-Maliki force – is something which the Iranian clerics in Tehran fear and are prepared to oppose. Indeed, the key figure ostensibly involved in the potential coup is a general who has not been seen for at least two years, so concerned are the anti-Maliki figures with ensuring the safety of the proposed event.

This is not the first time rumors of a possible coup against the Maliki Government have surfaced. But Baghdad sources cite a significant number of indicators that this might be the time – if it was ever to occur – that it would have a chance of success. If not now, then the Iranian-sponsored groups, supported inside Iraq by actual Iranian special forces personnel, would grow sufficiently strong to prevent such an occurrence.

Moreover, the Iranian Government is certainly better-equipped to understand what is going on inside the Iraqi Army and Government than is the US Government. Virtually none of the massive US Embassy staff in Baghdad speaks Arabic; most State Department and military personnel – and even Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) personnel – turn over too rapidly to acquire any real historical knowledge or deep contacts, and yet they dismiss any attempts to provide input, presumably for fear of being misled. Meanwhile, the Iranian intelligence service, an element of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (*Vezerat-e Ettela’at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*: VEVAK), has been directly observed by GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* field operatives to control at least one key brothel (and almost certainly many more) in Baghdad, frequented by US officials based in the city. Moreover, all of the women working in the facility speak only Farsi, not Arabic,

and stay *in situ* only a few days before being “rotated out” with their intelligence take, to be replaced by fresh girls.

This confirms the obvious: that Tehran is engaged in a massive intelligence operation inside Iraq, and has the tools to do it well. The lack of even a basic language capability in the US Embassy in Baghdad confirms that the few US Army intelligence officers engaged “at the coal face”, working with Iraqi police and military units, are being pressed too hard to deliver intelligence and, at the same time, are not believed – or are ignored – at higher levels of the US policy structure. This, in essence, confirms what this writer said in a speech to a US Army Command & General Staff College course on May 27, 2007:

“[W]ith Washington in the mode of thinking that all that matters is ‘how the war plays in Washington’ or the media, it is not surprising that the bureaucracies have failed to sense that what is underway in Iraq and Afghanistan are wars in which survival is at stake. Not only the long-term survival of the West, which can be rationalized away as a long-term thing, and not immediately pressing, but also the survival of those who fight against the Coalition, who have a far greater sense of urgency than does Washington about how they fight the wars. And they are fighting for survival, which means that they [Iran and Syria] are taking the war more seriously than the Western public.”³

The trends toward pivotal action in the region by any of the key players – the Iraqi coup planners, the Iranian clerical leadership, the increasingly isolated Syrian President, and the Turkish General Staff – will depend on how much will they have. The Turkish General Staff, for example, failed to forestall the re-election of the Islamist Government on July 22, 2007, and may be unable to prevent the election to the Presidency of Foreign Minister Gul. Syria and Iran, both, have demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting proxy war against Israel and the US in the past, but have almost prayed that Israel or the US would start direct conflict against them. Will Tehran and Damascus have the will now to do what they have prepared so long to do?

The US, essentially, is doing nothing. It has not used well the time which continuing the conflict has bought, and the gradual successes on the ground under the generalship of Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of the Multi-National Force - Iraq (MNF-I), is insufficient to meet US strategic needs, which are essentially driven by the timetable of Washington, and particularly the 2008 US Presidential election. The US, then, has no option but to hope that its increasingly fractious relationship with Prime Minister al-Maliki is ended by Maliki’s ouster. Certainly, the US is doing nothing to support the Iranian population in removing the Iranian leadership through a psychological strategy campaign, and nor is it doing anything to effectively, and carefully, replace Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, and put in place a leader who would break with Tehran (and make peace with Israel), such as Rifa’at al-Assad.

GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs Senior Editor Yossef Bodansky, writing in a prescient [March 20, 2006](#), *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis* report entitled *As Syrian Government-in-Exile About to Form, the Battle is Joined Between Utopianism and Islamism on the One Hand, and Strategic Interests on the Other*, noted:

The only viable alternative to the sustenance of Bashar’s reign or the Khaddam-Bayanouni alliance⁴ is the resurrection of the traditional alliance of the minorities and the urban élite blocs on the basis of economic liberalization in, and modernization of, Syria. This has long been the position of Dr Rifa’at al-Assad and the traditional elements of the minorities *bloc* leadership he represents. The ascent to power in Damascus of a Rifa’at-led alliance would also further the strategic interests of the US as he has repeatedly promised to stop the Syrian sponsorship of terrorism and insurgencies against all of Syria’s neighbors. Presently, Rifa’at al-Assad is besieged by representatives of both leading minority and urban élite families to continue to challenge Bashar and return to power in Damascus.

But the US seems to have no coherent policy toward Syria, urging simply “democracy” in Syria.

See: *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [September 12, 2005](#): *Saudi Leadership Launches Initiative With US at Secret Paris Meeting to Topple Syria’s Bashar al-Assad*.

Meanwhile, the US' only option seems, on the one hand, to be to threaten direct military action against Iran by deploying two highly-vulnerable carrier battle groups (and possibly now a third) into the Arabian Sea, or, on the other hand, to promote the prospect of bilateral negotiations with the Iranian clerics (the plan by US former Secretary of State James Baker, seen in Tehran as a sign of surrender by the US). This begs the question, then, as to whether the US has a coherent strategy with regard to Iraq. Certainly, Tehran and Damascus do.

And the al-Maliki Government also seems to have made a firm commitment toward joining the Tehran-Damascus alliance. Senior al-Maliki advisors have made a point of visiting Damascus recently, and taking large cases of cash with them. Beneath the ideology, this is something which the key leaders in Damascus, Tehran, and Baghdad understand: cash, and the retention of power and privilege. Those in power in both Damascus and Tehran know that their support bases are shaky, which is why both require conflict to galvanize public support around the "state" (ie: the leadership).

That the Iranian clerics are unrepresentative of the Iranian population has long been evident, which is why most critics of the Iraq Study Group recommendations, led by former US Secretary of State James Baker, believe that Washington-Tehran negotiations merely strengthen the anti-Western clerics and undermine the position of the essentially pro-Western Iranian population.

The US-based blog-site, *Anti-Mullah*⁵, run by experienced, Farsi-speaking security expert Alan Peters, noted on July 29, 2007: "Recent polls from inside and outside Iran indicate that 92 percent of the Iranian population is against this regime[,] but for whom should they rise up? For whom should they overthrow the *Mullahs*? And get what in exchange?"

Peters went on to note:

Having examined all aspects of the situation on the ground to the extent to which I am privy, the West has to have two main goals:

1. To put their backing behind two or more of Iran's major tribes, like the Qashghai and Bakhtiari, perhaps in combination with the Boyer-Ahmadi, which all have tribal borders with each other. And oil rich Khuzestan.

2. To constitutionally establish a separation of church and state (the tribes will not object as they hate the *Mullahs* so badly they will enjoy poking the secular stick into their eye).

Reason? The *Mullahs* wanted and tried and pushed to replace the traditional tribal leaders (*Khans*) with a *Mullah* appointed by Tehran. To the extent of executing some of those same leaders, notably from the Qashghai tribe.

At the same time, while most Iranian opposition leaders are falling by the wayside through lack of credibility, at least one, the nationalist leader of the overarching Azadegan movement, Dr Assad Homayoun, has retained respect by refusing to accept financial support by anyone other than Iranians, and by supporting the approach that the tribal and regional groups should work toward a secular state, and has also worked toward the theory that the Iranian Armed Forces and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC: *Pasdaran*) should remove support for the clerics and support a popular movement aimed at introducing secular governance, even if temporarily under military leadership.

Meanwhile, reinforcing the reports that the situation inside Iraq is transforming toward a possible nationalist military coup, reliable Baghdad sources noted that, on July 31, 2007, nine senior Iraqi Army generals collectively submitted their resignations to the Iraqi General Staff, ostensibly protesting both the al-Maliki Iraqi Government and the US Government, citing "the conduct of the state by the US occupiers and the Iraqi Government". The complex chain of events and their strategic ramifications thus appeared, as at July 31, 2007, to be well in motion.

Footnotes:

1. See *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [June 30, 2007](#): *Iran, Syria Make Strenuous Preparations for Combat-Readiness, Partly Reflecting Major Internal Leadership Schisms*.
 2. See *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [July 3, 2007](#): *Syria's Inner Circle Fractures*.
 3. *Toward Victory in the New Cold War*. An Address by Gregory R. Copley to the US Army Command & General Staff College, Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, May 21, 2007. See *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [May 21, 2007](#).
 4. Ali Saad-al-din Bayanouni is the secretary-general of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*), now in exile in London. Abdel-Halim Khaddam, a Sunni Shamari from Abu-Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border area, was Vice-President of Syria under Bashar al-Assad. As Bodansky noted in the March 20, 2006, report: "The majority rule which Khaddam and Bayanouni are offering, and Arab governments support, is an alliance of the two Sunni *blocs* — the urban élite and predominantly Islamist-*jihadi* rural *blocs* — against the minorities *bloc*. Khaddam can keep Bayanouni and the *Ikhwani* on his side only if he promises to ensure the Islamic character of the government, something which is not conducive to development of real democracy or economic empowerment, and, most important, out-perform Bashar in providing support for the Islamist-*jihadi* insurrection in Iraq and against Israel (which gains the Syrian Government Tehran's support and all-important free oil); hardly a contribution to the US strategic interests in Iraq and throughout the Middle East."
 5. <http://noiri.blogspot.com/2007/07/god-is-being-removed-and-replaced-by.html>
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