

## Policy Watch: Iran and the Iraqi Sunnis

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MARK N. KATZ

The U.S. government has long claimed that Iran is providing arms and training to anti-American Shiite militia groups in Iraq.

For Iran to do this may be reprehensible, but is at least understandable in that the majority of Iranians are Shiites, and Shiite clerics control the Iranian government. On April 11, though, the chief U.S. military spokesman in Iraq, Maj. Gen. William B. Caldwell, said there have been "some cases recently where Iranian intelligence services have provided to some Sunni insurgent groups some support."

The Iranian Embassy in Baghdad hotly denied this. I, for one, do not know whether or to what extent the Iranians are indeed arming Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq. At first glance it seems highly unlikely that they would do this, considering how hostile Iraqi Sunnis have been both toward Iraqi Shiites and towards Iran. On further reflection, though, Iranian support for Iraqi Sunnis in addition to Iraqi Shiites makes sense.

There is a saying that is common in the Middle East as well as elsewhere that runs: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Iran opposes the United States. Iraqi Sunnis also oppose the United States. Thus, Iranian support for Iraqi Sunnis is understandable so long as their common enemy, the United States, remains in Iraq.

But what about the Iraqi Shiites? Though counterintuitive, Tehran may reason that Iranian support for Iraqi Sunnis actually helps the Iraqi Shiites. For the more arms that Iraqi Sunnis have, the more likely they are to fight the Americans. And the more that American forces have to fight Iraqi Sunnis, the fewer resources and energy they will have for fighting against Iraqi Shiites.

Iraqi Sunnis, though, could use Iranian arms to attack Iraqi Shiites. Tehran, however, may have calculated that Iraqi Sunnis already have enough arms to target Iraqi Shiites. Iran's provision of arms to Iraqi Sunni insurgents may actually give them an incentive to stop attacking their Shiite brethren in order to continue receiving support from Tehran.

Iran's condition for supplying arms to Iraqi Sunnis may be that they are to be used against American and other coalition forces, and not Iraqi Shiites. Some Sunni groups might be willing to accept this condition, especially if supplies of Iranian arms help them get the edge over their Sunni rivals. And Tehran is undoubtedly far less concerned about Sunnis using Iranian arms against one another.

In addition, the Iraqi Shiite militias -- and Iraqi Shiites generally -- are not under Tehran's firm control, but often have important differences with it. Iranian support for Iraqi Sunnis may be intended by Tehran as a warning to Iraqi Shiites that if they do not heed Tehran, Iran has other options. Iranian support for Iraqi Sunnis, then, may serve to keep Iraqi Shiites in line.

In light of all this, it is easy to see how the Iranian leadership might persuade itself that supporting both the Sunnis and Shiites could indeed serve to increase Tehran's leverage over Iraq as well as frustrate American efforts to pacify that country. But if the Americans withdraw from Iraq, Tehran may well find that its own influence in Iraq quickly declines. There should be

a corollary to "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" maxim that runs as follows: "When the enemy goes away, the friendship also goes away."

What this means for Iraq is that if the U.S. withdraws -- or is widely seen as about to withdraw -- those in Iraq now receiving aid from Iran are likely to prove even less deferential to Tehran than they are now. And an escalating civil war in Iraq without American forces there to keep it in check is likely to prove an enormous headache for Iran -- no matter how many or how few groups it supports there.

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(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)

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