



April 15, 2004, 8:36 a.m.

Dangerous Liaisons

Are we compromising with the enemy in Iraq?

By Michael Rubin

On April 14, Shaykh Qays al-Khazali, Baghdad office director for Muqtada al-Sadr, told al-Jazeera that the firebrand cleric sought unconditional negotiation with Coalition forces. What a difference a week makes. On April 7, al-Khazali had stood before al-Manar cameras to enumerate Muqtada al-Sadr's demands calling for American withdrawal. Just two days ago, Muqtada al-Sadr gave an "exclusive" interview to the same network from his Najaf hideout. The medium is significant. Al-Manar is the television channel of Lebanese Hezbollah, defined by the State Department as a terrorist organization. While European diplomats may prevaricate about whether Hezbollah deserves such a designation, the organization is unapologetic about its mission. Just 18 months ago, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah told Lebanon's *Daily Star*, "If they [Jews] all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them world wide." Anti-American and Anti-Semitic slogans decorate the compound Hezbollah and the Iranian-subsidized Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq share in Basra. Muqtada al-Sadr has openly incited violence and called for suicide bombings. Residents of Najaf complain that al-Sadr's militia invades homes, smashes satellite dishes, and holds its own ad hoc law courts, sentencing ordinary Iraqis to Draconian torture.

Sitting in Washington, London, or the oasis of Baghdad's Green Zone, it is easy for officials to advocate engagement. Muqtada al-Sadr's "concession" has ignited calls for compromise by television pundits and politicians who, while well-meaning, will snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. The British government, with tacit U.S. approval, has initiated discussions with the Iranian foreign ministry. A team led by top Iranian diplomat Hossein Sadeghi visited Iraq in recent days, but his talks went nowhere. The Iranian regime used Washington and London's outreach not to promote dialogue, but to humiliate the United States at a time our soldiers sacrifice to preserve Iraq's freedom. Leaking news of the talks on Iranian television, the Islamic Republic's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi demonstrated to his domestic audience that the United States was not in control and had run to Iran for assistance. Moving in for the propaganda kill, Kharrazi stated, "The solution is for occupiers to leave Iraq."

The Iranian government's offer of assistance in Iraq is akin to an arsonist offering his help put out a fire. Even if the Iranian foreign ministry were sincere, it has no more power over Iranian policy than Washington's Department of Motor Vehicles has over U.S. policy. Nevertheless, can engagement with the Iranians — or negotiations with Muqtada al-Sadr — do any harm? They already have. Diplomats and pundits now

suggest that U.N. envoy Lakhdar Brahimi might co-opt Muqtada al-Sadr or his proxies into an interim Iraqi government. The lesson for potential populist leaders? Violence works.

Washington's decision to engage the Islamic Republic has undercut liberty and freedom in Iran. Ahmed Batebi, made famous by an *Economist* cover photograph showing him holding a bloodied shirt during 1999 student demonstrations, remains locked up in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. He and hundreds of other dissidents will see on Iranian state television that, despite Bush's call for freedom, Foggy Bottom and the National Security Council continue to lend legitimacy to an unrepresentative and dictatorial regime. Pundits and diplomats alike argue that engagement encourages reform within Iran's governing clique. But, the Islamic Republic's main concern is not the dichotomy between hardliners and reformers, but rather the challenge a free Iraq poses to the religious legitimacy of the Iranian regime.

On April 10, Grand Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri, former deputy to Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, declared that Muqtada al-Sadr had no legitimacy. "Although the supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr have chosen the name Mehdi Army for themselves, Imam Mehdi would never be content to initiate disunity, division and factionalism in his name," Montazeri said in a statement faxed to Reuters. Significantly, Montazeri called on Iraqis to support Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Iraqi Shii community's most widely respected religious leader. "It is rational that under Ayatollah Sistani's direction and through a union of Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds who are all Muslims, a stable government should be established in Iraq," Montazeri said. Shii religious leadership spans political boundaries. By implicitly endorsing Sistani, Montazeri undercut the legitimacy of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who seeks to be the region's most preeminent political leader. It is ironic that, while even Iran's religious community struggle for freedom from Iran's clerical regime, American and British diplomats inadvertently empower the region's most populous dictatorship.

The devil may be in the details but, in the Middle East, details are important. There is a fierce competition between Qom, the spiritual center of Iran, and Najaf, the spiritual center of Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr may be holed up in Najaf, but Iraqis question why Washington would show such insensitivity to Iraqi nationalist inclinations by reaching out to Iranians rather than the Iraqis themselves. After all, Najaf's community leaders have twice before since liberation expelled Muqtada al-Sadr from their city without U.S. assistance. While Sistani speaks of his opposition to the theological concept upon which Iran's clerical regime is based, London and Washington undercut his and our interests by lending the Iranian government legitimacy in Iraq which even the Iraqi population is not willing to offer. Rather than fulfill the president's policy of supporting Iraqi liberals and democrats, our Iraqi allies are standing by while we reward their antagonists.

There has been great progress in liberated Iraq. Electricity has rebounded. The Coalition, in partnership with Iraqis, has started reconstructing the educational infrastructure after years of Baathist neglect. More affluent individuals among the silent Iraqi majority have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in new businesses, confident that the age of dictatorship has ended. Iraqi families, long uncertain as to the fate of their loved ones, now have closure as mass graves are

uncovered and remains processed. Students no longer need join the Baath party to attend university. According to the *Guardian* of London, one-out-of-six Iraqis fled during the reign of Saddam Hussein; now, many return to restart their lives. The Islamic Republic continues to hemorrhage her best and brightest who, unwilling to partake in the charade of Iranian elections, vote instead with their feet. The United States should not be embarrassed of its principles, nor should we compromise them.

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