

Coercive Engagement

A Security Analysis of Iranian Support to Iraqi Shia Militias

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ACCORDING TO the *US Air Force Posture Statement 2008*, at any given moment the USAF has more than 26,000 Airmen deployed to fight the global war on terrorism.¹ Of those deployed, over 6,200 directly support the land component commander by filling “in lieu of” taskings with the US Army.² While deployed to the Central Command area of responsibility, our Airmen face a growing tactical threat from increasingly hostile and deadly attacks from Iraqi Shia militia groups such as the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade. These groups are directly and indirectly supported by Iran. Iran’s support to the Shia militias in Iraq has both tactical- and strategic-level implications to US security policy. This article addresses the issue in earnest and provides the reader with increased knowledge and understanding of this complex relationship in addition to providing sound policy prescriptions to deal with this growing security threat.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union were crumbling, the United States found itself in the unique position of being a lone superpower in an international system that was quickly shifting from bipolarity to unipolarity. This did not mean, however, that US preeminence would be forever guaranteed, and events in the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium brought new security challenges as the country faced the growing threat of terrorism from abroad. Today, the United States finds itself engaged in the Middle East as never before, fighting dual wars in Afghanistan and Iraq while simultaneously attempting to maintain its unipolar status in the international system.

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Increasingly, however, other states across the globe are seeking to balance the power of the United States and establish themselves as regional power bases. Iran is one such state. Its prior history with the United States, its nuclear ambitions, its proclivity to support terrorism, and its proximity to a fragile Iraq make it a growing security concern that the United States must address.

Clearly, Iran's historic ties to terror and its active support of Iraqi Shia militias today present the United States with a security challenge that must be addressed. At the same time, however, the recent invasion and occupation of Iraq limit US response options. The United States now faces a tactical problem regarding Iranian support to hostile Shia militias in Iraq and a strategic problem in how to deal with the disruption in the balance of power in the region. Seymour Hersh comments that "the crux of the Bush administration's strategic dilemma is that its decision to back a Shiited government after the fall of Saddam has empowered Iran and made it impossible to exclude Iran from the Iraqi political scene."³ It is against this strategic context that this article analyzes and addresses Iranian support for Iraqi Shia militia groups and appropriate US security policy responses.

The security challenge posed by Iran has many fronts that need to be dealt with collectively as part of an integrated security strategy. However, when looking at the aggregate security challenge it is easy to misassess or misanalyze fundamental aspects of individual security issues such as Iranian nuclear efforts or Iranian support for terror. To better understand these issues, one must temporarily separate them from the aggregate and analyze them in depth, looking for root causes, courses of action, and possible policy prescriptions before returning to the big picture. As part of this effort, this article focuses on the security challenge posed by Iranian support for terrorism, specifically its support of Iraqi Shia militias. In doing so, it poses the following research questions: *What causes the Iranian government to provide material and economic support for Shia militias in Iraq? What is the most appropriate US security policy response?*

To answer these questions, the article is divided into three sections, each centered on a sub-question or analytical area:

1. What explains the variation in the degree and strength of Iranian (and presumably Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) support for armed groups like the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army?

2. In what ways, or through which vehicles, would Iran be most likely to lend its support to Iraqi Shia militia groups?
3. Regarding Iran, what is the most appropriate US security policy response?

These questions frame the overall article and provide theoretical and analytical insight into this complex issue.

The security challenge posed by Iranian support of Iraqi Shia militias cannot be viewed as simply a tactical problem that can be addressed through military and intelligence means alone. A kinetic-only approach will not be sufficient to solve this challenge. To gain an accurate understanding of the greater security picture, one must look at three interrelated forces at work: the US-Iranian relationship and related policies; *the Iranian-Iraqi relationship* and resulting support/influence in Iraqi affairs; and the security and strategic implications of Iraqi Shia groups (both violent and nonviolent) on the United States. For example, the turbulent history between the United States and Iran creates mutual feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. Changes in the regional balance of power affect this relationship. Furthermore, these factors have a direct effect on the strength of Iranian support for Iraqi Shia militias and must be accounted for when considering the overall security challenge. It must be stressed, however, that Iranian actions must also be viewed as partly independent of the US-Iranian relationship. Iran has strong internal rationale for some of its policy actions and may choose certain courses of action *independent* of US or Iraqi actions. In short, its security policy should *not* be viewed as wholly reactive to US or Iraqi action.

One must also consider the nature of support that Iran lends to various Shia groups in Iraq. This support can best be categorized as *direct* and *indirect*. Direct support consists mostly of funding, weapons, intelligence, and training that flow almost exclusively to Iraqi Shia militias such as the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army. This type of support represents a significant tactical security threat to the United States and its forces deployed in the region. While direct support is widely discussed and debated in military and security policy circles, it is not the only type of support being offered by Iran. Iran also provides indirect support, which consists of funding, social work projects, and religious/political influence. It is mostly nonviolent and represents the bulk of Iranian soft power in the region. As such, it flows not only to the Iraqi Shia militias but also to numerous

social and civil Shia organizations in Iraq. As opposed to the tactical threat of direct support, this indirect support represents a strategic challenge to the United States as Iran attempts to gain more power and influence in Iraq and the region.

Causes of Iranian Support

What explains the variation in the degree and strength of Iranian (and presumably Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) support for armed groups like the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army? It is important to note that this question seeks to determine causation in levels of *varying* support, not whether there is any support at all. Established international relations (IR) theory and empirical evidence show that Iranian support is both likely and currently occurring, and it is assumed that realistically this support cannot be terminated altogether. As such, this question seeks to find the variables that will cause *changes* in *degrees* of support. With this in mind, I present the following hypothesis: *Increased levels of Iranian support are primarily caused by Iran's perception of the balance of power in the region and the perceived threat to its own security.*

Cause #1: Perceived Changes in the Balance of Power

Iran's support for Iraqi Shia militias is partially explained by its perception of changes in the balance of power in the region. Iran desires to be, and sees itself as, a growing regional power. US efforts to stop this power growth are causing Iran to counter with increased support of the Shia militias inside Iraq. This causal factor draws heavily on the IR theory of structural realism, pioneered by Kenneth Waltz, as well as balance of threat theory by Stephen Walt. Using this construct, Waltz determines that in a unipolar system, such as exists today with US dominance, other states will engage in power-balancing activities in attempts to push the system away from unipolarity and to maximize their own powers.⁴ He argues, "Aside from specific threats it may pose, unbalanced power leaves weaker states feeling uneasy and gives them reason to strengthen their positions," and "balances disrupted will one day be restored."⁵ In this regard, Iranian support of Iraqi Shia militias can be seen as a logical attempt to balance what Iran sees as the unchecked power of the United States in the region. Iran's support of these militias is likely to increase if it sees an opportunity to take advantage of declining US power in the region and advance its own.

Stephen Walt builds on Waltz's argument and introduces the concept of balance of threat theory, which explains that a state is more likely to engage in power-balancing actions against states it sees as overtly threatening. This theory, in particular, offers insight into why Iran is offering support to Iraqi Shia militias. In a unipolar system, Iran sees the United States as a threat to its security interests in the region and will take actions to balance its power. One such action is to increase support to Iraqi Shia groups opposing the US presence in Iraq. Furthermore, Iran sees US presence and influence in Iraq as overtly threatening to its own security and will take actions, perhaps aggressively, to balance this threat.

By looking through the lens of structural realist theory, it becomes increasingly clear that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq opened up a strategic opportunity (and necessity) for Iran to balance US power in the region. Its support of Iraqi Shia militia groups, such as the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army, is a relatively high-benefit, low-cost method of increasing its own power at the expense of US power. Ted Carpenter and Malou Innocent argue that "America's removal of Saddam Hussein as the principal strategic counterweight to Iran paved the way for an expansion of Iran's influence. The United States now faces the question of how it can mitigate potential threats to its interests if Iran succeeds in consolidating its new position as the leading power in the region."⁶ They note that "prior to the Iraq War, traditional balance-of-power realists predicted that Iran would act to undermine America's position in occupied Iraq and be the principal geostrategic beneficiary from Iraq's removal as a regional counterweight. Neoconservatives predicted the Iranian regime would probably collapse and, even if it did not, Tehran would have no choice but to accept US dominance. But as a result of Washington's policy blunders, Iran is now a substantially strengthened actor."⁷

The desire to balance what Iran perceives as hostile US power in the region in part explains why the regime uses direct-support options. However, in addition to direct support, there is also strong evidence of indirect support to other social, civil, and political organizations in Iraq that serve a similar purpose.

In this regard, Iranian support is the result not only of its desire to balance US power, but also to *gain* power amongst its regional neighbors through the spread and influence of the Shia sect of Islam. Iran is the largest Shia country in the world with over 70 million people, 90 percent of whom are Shiite.⁸ In contrast, many of its Muslim neighbors are Sunni.

To understand the potent difference between Sunni and Shia, one must look back to the early days of Islam and the confusion that reigned after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. After Muhammad died in AD 632, he was succeeded by Abu Bakr, the first of many caliphs chosen to lead the growing *ummah*, or Islamic community.⁹ At the time, however, there was great debate about who should be the chosen successor to Muhammad; should it be a close relative that shared his divine characteristics or should it be a close friend and confidante who could ensure the *ummah* would be taken care of? This basic difference of opinion started in AD 632 and eventually grew to define the distinction between Sunni and Shia Islam. Karen Armstrong explains that “some believed that Muhammad would have wanted to be succeeded by Ali ibn Abi Talib, his closest male relative. In Arabia, where the blood tie was sacred, it was thought that a chief’s special qualities were passed down the line of his descendants, and some Muslims believed that Ali had inherited something of Muhammad’s special charisma.”¹⁰ In AD 680 the Shiah i-Ali, or the “Partisans of Ali,” claimed that the second son of Ali ibn Abi Talib was the next rightful caliph. His second son, Hussain, traveled from Medina to Kufah with his army to take his place as the next rightful caliph but was slaughtered in Karbala along with his followers.¹¹ The Partisans of Ali soon became the core of Shia Islam and to this day remember the murder of Hussain in the deeply emotional ritual of Ashoura. Armstrong notes, “Like the murder of Ali, the Kerbala [*sic*] tragedy became a symbol for Shii Muslims of the chronic injustice that seems to pervade human life.”¹² This sentiment still echoes in today’s Shia and gives important insight into why Iranian Shia and Iraqi Shia are making such efforts to gain a voice in the politics of the region and to gain power. For example, Heinz Halm notes, “With the overthrow of the Ba’ath regime in Iraq through US-British military intervention in April 2003, the Iraqi Shi’ites are now drawing public attention to themselves; they demand their share of power hitherto withheld from them, and want a strong say in reshaping Iraq.”¹³

In his book, *The Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr explains the Sunni-Shia conflict that is shaping events in the region and gives us another lens with which to view Iranian support of Iraqi groups. He argues that an underlying reason for Iranian support is the desire to spread the “Shia revival,” which is identified “by the desire to protect and promote Shia identity.”¹⁴ This revival is based in Iran, as it is historically the primary bastion of Shia Islam in a Muslim world dominated by Sunni power. In the early sixteenth century,

the Safavid Empire established itself in what is now modern-day Iran and for the first time put the Shia in a position of power. Commenting on this, Armstrong notes that “for the first time in centuries, a stable, powerful, and enduring Shii state had been planted right in the heart of Islamdom.”¹⁵ Furthermore, “The establishment of a Shii empire caused a new and decisive rift between Sunnis and Shiis, leading to intolerance and an aggressive sectarianism that was unprecedented in the Islamic world.”¹⁶

Today, Nasr explains, “The Shia revival rests on three pillars: the newly empowered Shia majority in Iraq, the current rise of Iran as a regional leader, and the empowerment of Shias across Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Pakistan.”¹⁷ Through the concept of an Iranian-led Shia revival, it is clear that Iran’s support of Iraqi Shia militias as well as other social and civil organizations is another attempt to balance power in the region. This power, however, is ideological and is directed just as much at neighboring Sunni influences as at the United States. Iran’s ideological ties to the Shia faith are strong. As a telling example of Iranian self-image and identification, a 2007 World Opinion Poll found that only 27 percent of Iranian respondents reported seeing themselves primarily as “a citizen of Iran,” while 62 percent reported seeing themselves primarily as a “member of my religion.”¹⁸ While Iraqi Shia militias can and do pose a security threat to US forces, it would be a mistake to merely assume that their creation and Iranian support of their operations are designed solely to counter US power in the region. As Nasr explains, “Iran’s position also depends on the network of Kalashnikov-toting militias that form the backbone of Shia power represented by the web of clerics and centers of religious learning. . . . Shia militias project Shia power and enforce the will of the clerics.”¹⁹ Thus, to understand Iran’s support of these militias from a balance-of-power perspective, one must also take into account the ideological aspect of the “Shia revival.”

Cause #2: The Perceived Security Threat (The Security Dilemma)

Iran’s support for Iraqi Shia militia groups is also partially explained as the natural result of Iranian perceptions of the security threat it faces. In Iran’s eyes, the large number of US forces in the region, increasingly hostile US rhetoric, the arming of its proximate neighbors, and the lack of security for Shia groups in Iraq, all constitute significant threats to its security. In the face of such threats, Iran seeks to increase its own security by arming and supporting Iraqi Shia groups in hopes that this will decrease

its vulnerability. This causal factor draws heavily on Robert Jervis' concept of the security dilemma which can develop between two actors. Jervis describes the security dilemma as a cyclic process in which actions taken by one actor to increase its security may be perceived by the other actor as aggressive or threatening, causing that actor to take actions to strengthen its own security.²⁰ A point to emphasize about the dilemma is that it is based not only on objective events and actions but also on *subjective perceptions* by each actor. Jervis writes, "Decision makers act in terms of the vulnerability they feel, which can differ from the actual situation; we must therefore examine the decision maker's subjective security requirements."²¹ In this light, US actions and policies should be viewed not only from the objective standpoint of how they alter Iran's actual security situation but also by how they affect Iran's subjective perceptions of its own security and vulnerability.

From an Iranian point of view, what might be perceived as a threat requiring additional security actions? Iran faces threats on three distinct fronts: large numbers of forward-deployed US forces in the region, increasing arms procurement by its neighboring states, and Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict in Iraq threatening its ideological foothold in that state. While the United States is slowly drawing down its forces in Iraq, it is likely that 150,000 forward-deployed, combat-capable soldiers in Iraq in close geographic proximity to Iran's western border are perceived as a legitimate security threat to the Iranian leadership.²² For example, a January 2007 World Public Opinion Poll found that 73 percent of Iranians interviewed viewed US bases in the Middle East as a threat to Iran, with 44 percent responding that it was a "major" threat. Furthermore, 47 percent of respondents viewed bases in the region as US attempts to "achieve political and military domination to control Middle East resources." Only 10 percent of respondents viewed US bases and forces in the region as efforts to protect America from terrorists.²³

The second threat Iran faces is from increasing arms procurements by its neighboring countries. US efforts to contain Iran have resulted in a steady and increasing flow of weapons and financial support from the United States to a number of Iran's geographic neighbors and rival Sunni states. In his January 2007 speech announcing the start of "surge" operations in Baghdad, President Bush announced that he would deploy an additional aircraft carrier group to the Persian Gulf and extend the deployment of Patriot antimissile batteries reportedly stationed in Kuwait and Qatar.²⁴ Along the same line, Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh note that in May of 2007,

Vice President Dick Cheney announced a new direction of US foreign policy when he declared that “we’ll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating this region.”²⁵ As part of this new strategy, the US has provided a \$20 billion arms package to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirate states with the primary objective of enabling “these countries to strengthen their defenses and therefore to provide a deterrence against Iranian expansion and Iranian aggression in the future.”²⁶ In addition, the United States has sold the Saudis a number of sophisticated weapons systems, such as Apache helicopters, upgraded PAC-3 Patriot missiles, guidance systems, and theatre cruise missiles.²⁷ From an Iranian point of view, the rapid arms procurement by neighboring Sunni states must be perceived as an increased threat to its security.

Finally, the Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict raging in Iraq presents Iran with an ideological threat as it attempts to increase the spread and influence of the Shia sect of Islam in the region. Viewed in this light, Iran’s arming and support of Shia militias in Iraq can be seen as having two objectives: to counter US forces in the region and to protect and foster the growth of Iran’s ties to Shias in Iraq. In a sense, the Sunni-Shia conflict in Iraq is itself a smaller, *internal* security dilemma. Since Iraq’s government is extremely weak, little or no state security outside of American forces exists to control the sectarian violence.²⁸ With no government-provided security, it stands to reason that Iran would want to fund and support Shia militia groups to protect Iraqi Shia from Sunni insurgents. On this, Vali Nasr notes that “anger and anxiety also deepened distrust of the United States, which was seen as pressing Shias to disband much needed militias while failing to protect ordinary Shias from ex-Ba’athist and Sunni extremist violence.”²⁹ Commenting further on the relationship between security and Shia militias, Lt Gen Michael Maples, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, noted in a February 2007 briefing to the Senate Armed Services Committee, “Insecurity rationalizes and justifies militias—in particular Shi’a militias, which increase fears in the Sunni-Arab community. The result is additional support, or at least acquiescence, to insurgents and terrorists such as al-Qaeda in Iraq. Shi’a militants, most notably Jaish al-Mahdi, also are responsible for the increase in violence.”³⁰ In this regard, it is most likely that Iran’s arming and support of these Shia militias would tend to increase with a decreased security situation in Iraq. Likewise, improvements in the security situation of Iraqi Shias would most likely cause a decreased need for Shia militia groups and encourage Iran to shift support

to other areas (i.e., indirect-support avenues). Graphical evidence of this argument can be seen in figure 1, which depicts levels and trends in ethno-sectarian violence in Baghdad from December 2006 to August 2007.

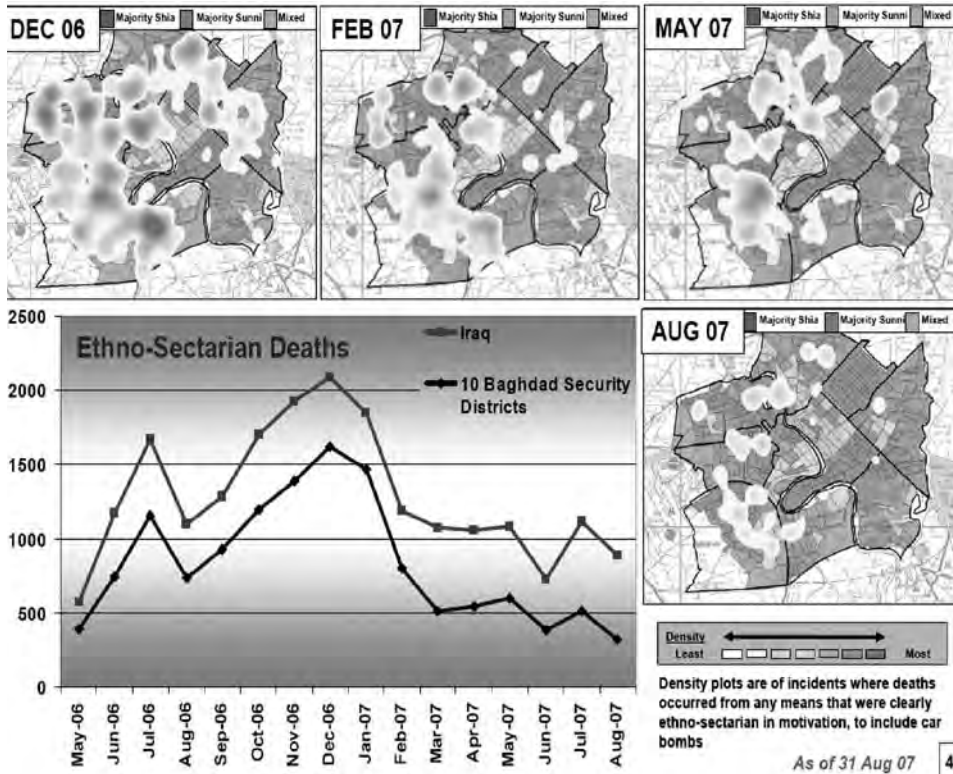


Figure 1. Ethno-sectarian violence. (Reprinted from *Annual Threat Assessment*, Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, 27 February 2007, http://www.odni.gov/testimonies/20070227_transcript.pdf.)

The graph depicts two significant findings. First, it shows the clear self-separation of Iraqi Shia and Sunni groups across Baghdad, a characteristic not present before 2003. Second, it shows a steadily decreasing trend in ethno-sectarian violence that is coincident in timing with the US surge operation in January 2007 and heightened US counterinsurgency efforts in the city. While, correlation does not necessarily equal causation, the coincidental timing of an increased security situation in Baghdad and lower levels of ethno-centric violence suggest that, as the security dilemma predicts, there is a connection between central government security and the arming and use of independent militias.

In sum, both theory and real-world observations show that Iranian support for Iraqi Shia militias is partly explained as a rational reaction to its

perceived security situation. This support challenges US military dominance and supports Iran's overall goal of regional power growth.

Thus far, I have identified two major variables that I argue will affect levels of Iranian support to Iraqi Shia militias: balance of power and security threat. But how will these variables work to affect overall levels of support—what will cause these levels to change over time? Figure 2 shows the predicted interaction of the two variables and the resulting change in direct and indirect support levels.

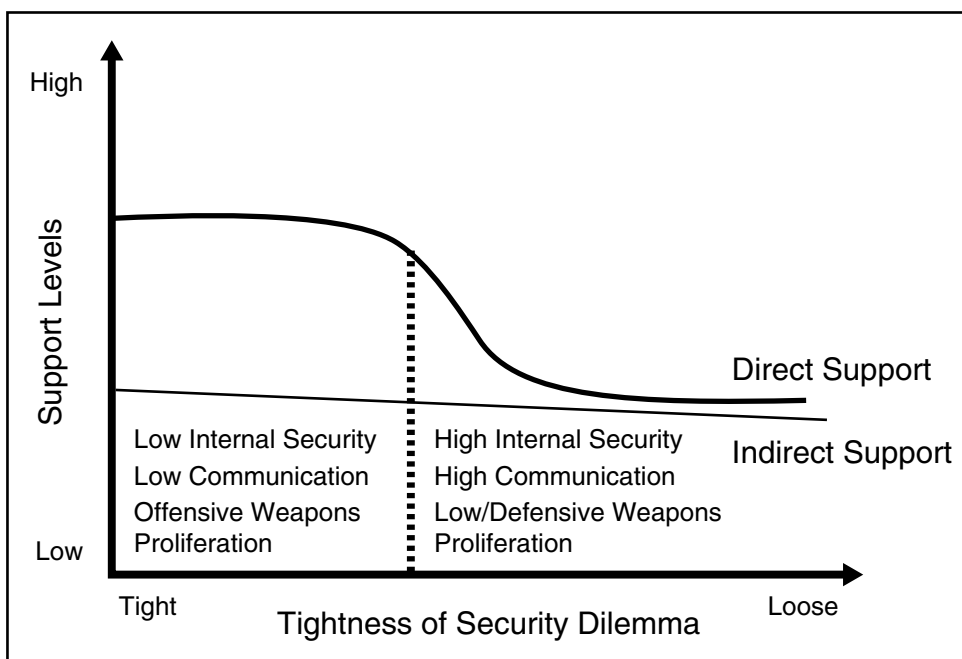


Figure 2. Iranian support level

Regarding the balance-of-power variable, Iran is most likely to increase levels of support when it sees a strategic opportunity to balance US power. Furthermore, due to Iran's *internal* desire to become a strategic and ideological power in the region, it is evident that, to some degree, there will be continuous indirect support of various Iraqi groups, violent and nonviolent. In addition to baseline indirect support, Iran is also making a logical cost-benefit decision to provide direct support to Iraqi Shia militias to increase its security situation in the face of multiple perceived threats. Key factors that would cause Iran to *increase* this support are based on the three main threat categories detailed above (US troop presence, arming of its

neighbors, and lack of Iraqi internal security). Higher levels of aggressive rhetoric combined with heightened US force postures in the region cause Iran to feel more vulnerable to US attack, thus prompting Iran to increase support to anti-US Shia militias in Iraq.³¹ Likewise, as Iran sees its neighbors gaining weapons and increasing their security, it feels compelled to increase its own security and make more asserted attempts to establish a Shia stronghold in Iraq. Finally, if Iran perceives that Iraqi Shia groups are increasingly vulnerable to Sunni attack due to a lack of internal security, it will increase its arming and support of Shia militias. By combining the two variables, balance of power and security threat, one can see that aggregate Iranian support levels are subject to degrees of variance (fig. 2), but that this variance occurs against a baseline support level that can only minimally be changed through outside influence, such as changes in US security policy. The policy implications of this finding will be further discussed later. Now armed with a detailed analysis of the *causes* of Iranian support, it is necessary to detail what types of support are being offered and to which Iraqi organizations the support is going.

Types and Methods of Support

The State Department's *Country Report on Terrorism 2006* labels Iran as the "most active state sponsor of terrorism."³² Indeed, Iran has held this dubious distinction for many years as it has actively supported Hezbollah, HAMAS, and other terrorist groups as part of its foreign policy. In addition, Iranian activity inside Iraq predates the current Iraqi conflict and has its roots in the Iran-Iraq war, which gave birth to the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) as well as other splinter groups seeking to destabilize Iraq. For the purposes of analysis, however, I focus only on the relevant groups operating inside Iraq today. While Iran provides both direct and indirect support, this article is primarily concerned with direct support, as this constitutes the largest and most direct security threat to the United States. However, an analysis of indirect support is also relevant, as it provides further evidence of Iran's desire for regional power growth and its ideological desires to expand Shia Islam into Iraq. In the end, the empirical data provides evidence of both types of support. Of note, however, specific details of Iranian direct support and the linkages to government knowledge and assistance in providing that support are weak and wanting of hard data points for analysis. At the same time, there is enough

relevant evidence available to draw the conclusion that Iran's support and influence in Iraq is substantial and worthy of concern to US security interests in the region.

Direct Support: Recipients

The two primary recipients of Iranian direct support are the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade. These two groups are the most influential and largest Iraqi Shia militias operating today. The Mahdi Army is led by the Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. From the start, al-Sadr organized his political party and his militia to combat US forces in Iraq and to gain power for the Shia. Commenting on the branding of al-Sadr's militia, Nasr writes that "after the fall of Saddam in Iraq the firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr names his militia the Mahdi Army (Jaish al-Mahdi), clearly implying that his cause was that of the Twelfth Imam, and those who fought him were the enemies of the promised Mahdi who went into occultation over a millennium ago."³³ This type of branding is not lost on the Shia of Iran and Iraq and provides al-Sadr with a potent historical symbol of Shia power and faith. Reference to the Mahdi harks back to AD 874 when the 11th Imam, Hasan al-Askari, died and his son was said to have gone into hiding to save his life, thus becoming known as "the Hidden Imam." In AD 934 it was announced that the Hidden Imam has gone into "occultation" in a transcendent realm and will only reveal himself when the time of justice has begun.³⁴ This event gave rise to the "Twelver Shias" who believe that the 12th Imam, or Mahdi, will reveal himself and lead the Shia to power once again. Heinz Halm further explains that "the occultation of the twelfth Imam presented the Shi'a with a difficult question: namely, who should lead the community until the return of the Imam Mahdi?"³⁵ Furthermore, he notes that in Islamic history it is not uncommon for Shia extremists to use the lore of the 12th Imam for their own interests and power.³⁶ This is clearly what al-Sadr is trying to accomplish with the Mahdi Army.

Beginning in 2003, al-Sadr used the Mahdi Army effectively to shape events in Iraq and even waged limited direct firefights with US forces. In a 2007 Congressional Research Report to Congress, Kenneth Katzman provided a detailed summary and analysis of these events. He wrote:

The December 6, 2006, Iraq Study Group report says the Mahdi Army might now number about 60,000 fighters. The Mahdi Army's ties to Iran are less well-developed than are those of the Badr Brigades because the Mahdi Army was formed by

Sadr in mid-2003, after the fall of Saddam Hussein. U.S. military operations put down Mahdi Army uprisings in April 2004 and August 2004 in “Sadr City” (a Sadr stronghold in Baghdad), Najaf, and other Shiite cities. In each case, fighting was ended with compromises under which Mahdi forces stopped fighting in exchange for amnesty for Sadr himself. Since August 2004, Mahdi fighters have patrolled Sadr City and, as of August 2007, are increasingly challenging SICI, Iraqi government forces, and U.S. and British forces for control of such Shiite cities as Diwaniyah, Nassiriyah, Basra, and Amarah. In order not to become a target of the U.S. “troop surge” in Baghdad, Sadr himself has been in Iran for much of the time since March 2007.³⁷

As the above text demonstrates, previous actions by the Mahdi Army show that not only is it a threat to US interests in Iraq but that Iran also holds sway over al-Sadr himself and has provided sanctuary and support when necessary.

The other significant Iraqi Shia militia group is the Badr Brigade. This militia group, led by brothers Baquer and Abdul-Aziz Hakim, is the military arm of SCIRI and has significant historical ties to Iran. These two brothers are the sons of one of Iraq’s leading ayatollahs in the 1960s and fled to exile in Iran in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war. They took sanctuary in Tehran and Qom, where they formed the terrorist group SCIRI under the watchful eye of Iranian clerics. During the war, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) formed and trained the Badr Brigade.³⁸ Now, the Badr Brigade falls under control of Iraq’s newly powerful Shia political party, the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SICI). Of note, SICI is the direct descendent of SCIRI, and many authors use these terms interchangeably. Katzman wrote:

SICI controls a militia called the “Badr Brigades” (now renamed the “Badr Organization”), which numbers about 20,000 but which has now purportedly burrowed into the still fledgling Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), particularly the National Police. The Badr Brigades were trained and equipped by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, and politically aligned with Iran’s hardliners, during the Iran-Iraq war. During that war, Badr guerrillas conducted forays from Iran into southern Iraq to attack Baath Party officials, although the Badr forays did not spark broad popular unrest against Saddam Hussein’s regime. Badr fighters in and outside the ISF have purportedly been involved in sectarian killings, although to a lesser extent than the “Mahdi Army” of Moqtada Al Sadr.³⁹

While the Badr Brigade may have a lower profile in terms of attacks on US forces in Iraq, its ties to Iran are significantly stronger, and it can be assumed that any outside support it receives is the result of Iranian actions.

While these two groups represent the bulk of Iranian direct support recipients and together pose one of the larger security threats to US forces in Iraq, it is also important to understand their differences. Each group receives some level of funding and support from Iran but in different ways. Iranian support of al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army consists mostly of political influence and sanctuary (with some reported arms transfers as well). Iranian support for the Badr Brigade, however, is more closely tied with actions taken by the IRGC and thus can be assumed to be mostly military in nature. While both groups are run by Shia leaders, each has its own sphere of influence in Iraq and its own idea of what a future political solution in that country should look like. Al-Sadr primarily rules from the poorer areas of Baghdad (where “Sadr City” is located) and tends to push for the creation of a loose federal Iraqi government. SICI and the Badr Brigade, however, are entrenched in the south of Iraq, in Basra. Commenting on this, Nasr notes that “while Sadr was exploring his prospects by throwing his poorly trained militia into pitched battles with U.S. troops, SCIRI was making up for the time lost to its twenty-year Iranian exile by rapidly assembling support in the Shia south, with Iranian and Hezbollah help. A special focus of SCIRI’s interest was Basra, where the Badr Brigade quickly became the *de facto* government.”⁴⁰ While in Basra, SICI (aka SCIRI) consolidated its political power, won six of eight Shia-majority governorates, and even came in first in Baghdad with 40 percent of the vote.⁴¹ The SICI’s idea of an Iraqi political solution, however, is for separate autonomous zones, thus firmly establishing its (and Shia) power in the south of Iraq. Understanding the similarities and differences of these Shia militia groups and their aligned political parties is important because it demonstrates that Iran has multiple options when choosing to allocate its support. The type and strength of support (or potentially non-support) may vary based on Iran’s assessment of how best to achieve its goals of power growth in Iraq and the region.

Direct Support: Methods and Vehicles

Iran provides direct support through a number of vehicles. Some of these vehicles transmit financial funds to the militias, such as the Iranian Bank Saderat. Other vehicles such as the IRGC and its special operations branch, the Qods Force, provide military arms, training, and intelligence. Iran also provides persistent ideological and political support. Of all these vehicles, however, perhaps the most pervasive and effective method of

support is through the IRGC. The IRGC, which also controls the Iranian *Basij* volunteer militia, is fiercely loyal to the political hardliners and enforces strict Islamic customs inside Iran. Outside of Iran, the IRGC operates as the primary force dedicated to training, equipping, and supporting various foreign terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and the Badr Brigade.⁴² As part of Iran's overall military capabilities, the IRGC essentially stands as an autonomous mini-military force within the larger force structure. Iran's total military force equals roughly 545,000 troops, with the IRGC accounting for one-third of the total, or 182,000 troops. The IRGC, however, has its own navy, air force, ground forces, and special forces units that parallel the conventional military. Its special operations Qods Force numbers roughly 3,000 troops and has been especially active in the training and support of Iraqi Shia militias.⁴³ IRGC and Qods Force ties to Iraqi Shia militias exist on many levels—militarily, ideologically, strategically, and politically. For example, in September of 2001, the commander in chief of the IRGC was replaced with a close ally of the Badr Brigade, Muhammad Ali Jafari. The reason given for the unexpected job change was simply that it was due to “US threats,” and Jafari shortly followed the announcement with the claim that “an attack by the regime's enemies is possible and the IRGC is ready to meet it with asymmetric warfare.”⁴⁴

Indirect Support: Recipients

In addition to direct support of the militias, there is a parallel path of support to other social, civil, and political organizations inside Iraq. Combined, these two branches of support target Iran's main objectives inside Iraq; namely, to tie down US and coalition forces and coerce them to leave the country and to deepen Iranian political, economic, and ideological influence.⁴⁵ As such, Iran uses direct support to accomplish the first objective and indirect support to accomplish the second. The recipients of indirect support are varied, but some of the more significant organizations are political parties and civil institutions in Iraqi Shiite cities. On the political front, Iran supports the two largest Shia parties in Iraq, SICI and the Dawa party.⁴⁶ On the civil, social, and ideological front, the recipients of Iranian support are more varied but remain tightly clustered around the main Shiite cities in Iraq of Najaf, Karbala, and Basra. Some of these ties are the natural result of a shared Shia faith and the ingrained, traditional practices of Iranian pilgrimages to some of Iraq's holiest Shia cities. Hersh notes that “last year, over one million Iranians travelled to Iraq on

pilgrimages, and there is more than a billion dollars a year in trading between the two countries. But the Americans act as if every Iranian inside Iraq were there to import weapons.”⁴⁷ The Iraqi city of Najaf stands as an example of Iranian support to a Shia stronghold. The city is the home of the sacred Imam Ali Shrine and is run by Abdul Aziz Hakim, leader of the SICI party.⁴⁸ Still, it is clear that Iran’s natural geographic proximity and ideological ties to Iraq create the situation in which some level of indirect support is inevitable.

Indirect Support: Methods and Vehicles

While direct support was conducted mostly through military and intelligence vehicles, indirect support methods are more varied and comprise the extension of Iranian *soft* power in Iraq. In this manner, one of the main vehicles of support lies in the statements, visits, and behind-the-scenes influence of Iranian clerics as they communicate with Iraqi Shia clerics. Another such vehicle is the funding of civil projects in key Iraqi Shia cities and increased economic trade in Shiite-dominated zones. An example of increased economic trade with Shia zones in Iraq can be found in Basra, where Iran has established a free trade zone. According to Katzman, “Iraq is now Iran’s second largest non-oil export market, buying about \$1 billion worth of goods from Iran during January–September 2006 (\$1.3 billion on an annualized basis).”⁴⁹ Finally, the large network of Iranian-sponsored work projects, reconstruction projects, and technical experts across Iraq comprise the last broad category of support vehicles. Commenting on this last category, Carpenter and Innocent offer this assessment:

While Bush remains committed to Iraq, American military might may not be enough to compete with Tehran’s “hearts and minds” campaign. Iran provides hospital treatment and surgery for wounded Iraqis, supplies Iraq with 2 million liters of kerosene a day, and provides 20% of Iraq’s cooking gas. Kenneth Katzman, a Middle East specialist for the Congressional Research Service, calls Iran’s wide-ranging leverage within Iraq “strategic depth,” making the Iraqi government and populace acquiescent to Iranian interests.⁵⁰

It is this “hearts and minds” campaign that embodies the core of Iranian indirect support.

In summary, Iran does indeed provide support to Iraqi organizations and has deep ties to many of the military, social, civil, and political groups operating there today. It becomes clear that levels of Iran’s direct and indirect support will vary based on two factors: (1) the extent to which they

can exploit opportunities to advance their regional power and balance that of the United States, and (2) the extent to which Iran perceives its security is threatened by the United States or other regional actors. Thus Iran primarily uses indirect support to pursue its goal of regional power growth and direct support as a reaction to its perceived security threat by the United States and its neighbors. Furthermore, there is likely to be some degree of continuous Iranian indirect support. While levels of this type of support will vary to some extent, the magnitude of its variation will be significantly smaller than that of the direct support. This should be considered a baseline level of support, and since it is comprised primarily of Iranian *soft* power, does not constitute an immediate security threat. Against this baseline, however, is Iran's direct support, which is subject to greater degrees of variance based on Iranian perceptions of its security threat and the tightness of the security dilemma. Levels of direct support are likely to be highest when there is little communication between the United States and Iran, when aggressive rhetoric is passed from one side to the other, when the presence of patently offensive weapons systems in the region are highest (thus representing an increased threat to the Iranians' own security), and when the internal security situation in Iraq is weak. However, direct support levels will likely decline if the security dilemma is loosened, the United States and Iran engage in increased communication, offensive weapons proliferation is limited, and Iraq's internal security is strong. This is a significant finding, since Iranian direct support is comprised of military arms and other support that is violent in nature and constitutes a much larger tactical and strategic security threat to the United States. This implies that US security policy should aim to reduce the security dilemma by leading Iranian engagement with communication, scaling back its military containment by decreasing the flow of patently offensive weapons systems to Iranian neighbors, and pushing hard for internal Iraqi security requirements. At the same time, however, the policy should be mindful of the baseline level of indirect support and prepare to accept and manage some level of Iranian interaction in Iraq.

Security Policy Recommendations

In analyzing US strategy and policy actions to date, three critical insights emerge: coercive instruments such as sanctions may be successful, as such actions have had limited success in the past; applying one-size-fits-all

coercive pressure without understanding the root causes of support reduces chances for success; and coercive bargaining used by itself is a costly and risky strategy. Regarding the potential for coercion to yield successful results, recent examples can be found in decreasing levels of Iranian support to Hezbollah. Commenting on this decreasing support, Byman notes that “over time, however, the cumulative effects of sanctions and isolation—and, more importantly, the risk that additional attacks would lead to increased pressure—led Iran to reduce its direct involvement in terrorism.”⁵¹ At the same time, however, the coercing state’s actions are only one part of the overall process causing a state to reduce its support—other reasons are internal to the target state itself, according to Byman.⁵² With this in mind, one can see that while coercion may affect direct support, which is heavily influenced by security and vulnerability concerns, coercive tactics will likely be ineffective at reducing indirect support. The reasons for this type of support are *internal* to Iran, and coercive tactics to reduce this could in fact have negative effects if applied improperly.

The current policy approach applies a seemingly limited understanding of the overall dynamic situation and the specific reasons that cause Iran to support Iraqi Shia in the first place. To ignore these factors is to significantly decrease the chances for successful coercion. Byman emphasizes that the type of coercion must be tailored to the specific dynamics in the target state and that “undifferentiated pressure almost always fails. The motivations of the supporting state, the type of support provided, and the dynamic of the group it supports, all will affect whether coercion succeeds or fails.”⁵³ Adding to this is the temptation for the administration to view *all* types of Iranian influence in Iraq as a security threat. As has already been shown, there are many Iranian activities inside Iraq that are nonlethal and even nonviolent that must be accounted for in the overall scenario.

So what are the implications of continuing the current strategy? As noted above, one of the more likely outcomes is that over time, US efforts to maintain the status quo balance of power in the region will result in further erosion of American political, economic, and military capacities and will not prevent a rise in Iranian power and influence. If security gains in Iraq are not capitalized on, it is likely that the state will once again see an increase in sectarian warfare and a corresponding increase in Iranian direct support to the Shia militias. Furthermore, by seeking a strategy of containment and aggressive rhetoric, the United States will likely cause Iran to feel more vulnerable and insecure. As a result, Iran will

likely increase its levels of direct and possibly even indirect support as a counter move. The cumulative result of these actions will be a tightening of the security dilemma and increased chances for a hostile confrontation between the United States and Iran. *Paradoxically, the current strategy will most likely result in degraded US power in the region and a greater security threat from Iran.* It is clear that the time for a new strategy is now.

A New Security Strategy: Engagement and Enlightened Coercive Bargaining

As previously stated, this new strategy has three main goals: (1) reduce overall levels of Iranian support inside Iraq, (2) reduce support of Iraqi Shia militias specifically, and (3) use coercive bargaining to push the remaining levels of support from direct to indirect methods. The desired end state of this strategy is a reduction in the tightness of the security dilemma between the United States and Iran; lower levels of Iranian support to Iraq, especially direct support; and a stable balance of power in the region. This strategy is less costly for the United States to pursue, increases overall US security in the region, and offers the potential long-term benefit of a more stable Iraq.

The first two goals are interrelated and address policies that should be taken to reduce levels of support. While it is important to reduce the aggregate level of support, targeted reduction of direct support is vital to increasing US security, and this is a central focus of the policy. Direct support levels are most likely highest when the security dilemma is tightest (reference fig. 2). Furthermore, results above show that the primary rationale for Iranian direct support is the perceived threat from the United States, its regional neighbors, and Iraqi Sunnis. Therefore, the first part of the policy seeks to loosen or dissolve the security dilemma, thus reducing Iranian threat perceptions from the United States and other regional states. In order to loosen the security dilemma, Jervis argues that offensive actions must be distinguishable from defensive actions. To accomplish this, a number of things must occur—most importantly, the United States must engage in clear communication with Iran and cease its efforts toward diplomatic isolation. It must communicate directly and clearly to Iran what it considers offensive actions by the regime. Once the appropriate intelligence is obtained, the United States should confront Iran with the accumulated evidence and further communicate that the United States sees such actions as offensively hostile. In a similar assessment, Patrick Clawson

argues that “it would be prudent for the Administration to produce more evidence of direct military training—or produce fighters captured in Iraq who had been trained in Iran.”⁵⁴ These actions should give Iran pause as to the costs of direct support and possibly trigger a reduction. Furthermore, the United States should severely limit the offensive weapons and funding it is providing to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar and instead emphasize the procurement of defensive weapons (Patriot missiles, early warning radars, etc.). It should further discourage the forward deployment of such weapons by all states in the region, as this will only heighten Iranian perceptions of an impending attack.

If Iran and the United States can successfully loosen this aspect of the security dilemma, it is likely that levels of Iranian direct support will decrease. However, if the security situation remains haphazard and Iraqi Shia groups are vulnerable to rival Sunni groups, it is likely that direct support may not decrease as much as predicted. In this case, it is likely that Iran will *increase* support to Iraqi Shia militias to protect vulnerable Shia groups when the state cannot. To remedy this, the United States must push for greater advances in Iraqi security institutions such as the national police and the newly formed military, even if this means accepting greater Shia, and potentially Iranian, influence in Iraq.

Finally, to further reduce overall levels of Iranian support to Iraqi Shia militias and to foster a more stable security environment, the United States should recognize that some degree of Iranian rise to power is inevitable and should attempt to manage this rise through purposeful engagement. Emphasizing this point, Carpenter and Innocent argue that “like it or not, Iran is now a major player in the region. Accepting this rather than reflexively seeking to confront and isolate Tehran would be the most effective policy. A countervailing coalition, with all its disadvantages, would be an inferior substitute for diplomatic and economic engagement.”⁵⁵ Nasr and Takeyh also recommend that “instead of focusing on restoring a former balance of power, the United States would be wise to aim for regional integration and foster a new framework in which all the relevant powers would have a stake in a stable status quo.”⁵⁶ If the United States engages Iran in a more cooperative manner and accepts its gradual rise in power, the regime would likely see a decreased need for high levels of support to Iraqi Shia militias and may also decrease indirect support levels. Combining the two approaches—loosening the security dilemma and applying heightened diplomatic engagement—Iran is likely to determine that the

cost of providing direct support (which is clearly seen as a hostile action by the United States) greatly outweighs its benefits and that it should seek opportunities for growth and security through more cost-beneficial (and less risky) avenues. Cooperative engagement must be at the forefront of any new policy change.

The third and final goal of the strategy is to use coercive bargaining to push remaining levels of support from direct to indirect methods. In many respects, the United States is already conducting some level of coercive bargaining with Iran; however, the proposed new strategy recognizes that support cannot reasonably be expected to cease altogether and instead seeks to use coercive bargaining to persuade Iran to move any remaining support to less threatening indirect activities.

This coercive bargaining strategy contains two elements that work in tandem to increase perceived costs and minimize perceived benefits of Iranian support. The first element of the strategy uses traditional coercive instruments and mechanisms to threaten Iran with limited military strikes on IRGC and Qods Force targets *if* evidence of ongoing high levels of direct support is found. The second element uses nontraditional methods of coercion to persuade Iran from continuing direct support and instead switch any remaining support to indirect methods.


The first element, coercion through the *threat* or limited use of actual force, lends itself to traditional coercive theory. The key difference between a threat used in coercive bargaining and simple hostile rhetoric is that a coercive threat is based on solid communication between the actors, relays a concrete action that will be taken as the result of a specified action, and is seen as credible. Much of this concept is grounded in Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman's concept of coercive bargaining strategy. In this case, the preferred instruments of the coercion are US air strikes and, to a lesser degree, US special operations raids along the Iranian border. The chosen mechanism is "denial," and the desired outcome is a decrease in the level of Iranian direct support to Iraqi Shia militias. Air strikes and special operations raids are the chosen instruments, since these actions offer the greatest potential for success, are relatively "surgical" in nature, and are areas where the United States has relative "escalation dominance" (this occurs when a coercer can increase costs on the target but deny the target's attempts to increase costs in return.)⁵⁷ As part of a denial strategy, IRGC and Qods Force facilities and infrastructure sites would be targeted for destruction. In this manner, Iran would see that the potentially high costs of providing this le-

thal support, namely the credible threat or physical destruction of key IRGC and Qods Force facilities, outweigh the potential benefits of support to Iraqi Shia militias and abandon this avenue of support in favor of less costly activities. While not without risks, theory indicates that denial mechanisms are more successful than punishment mechanisms and that “aerial bombing is most likely to work when demands are limited, military vulnerability can be effectively exploited, the attacker enjoys a unilateral nuclear advantage, and aerial attacks are coupled with military action by other forces.”⁵⁸

The second element of the coercive bargaining strategy does not rely on military threats of force but uses the same cost-benefit model to persuade Iran to seek alternative methods of support through indirect activities. If Iran is threatened or sustains military strikes as the result of direct support, it is likely to seek other low-cost methods of providing support. Since it is assumed that there will always be a baseline level of support, it is likely that Iran will look for alternative methods and support vehicles. When it does, the US policy should encourage indirect support over direct support, as this will funnel any remaining support to less threatening activities. Specifically, if funding can be pushed to the Iraqi Shia political parties and social institutions instead of the militias, prospects for long-term direct support may further decline. For example, Byman notes that “Iran’s support for Hezbollah changed for several reasons: a decline in Iran’s revolutionary ardor; Hezbollah’s increased awareness of, and responsiveness to, Lebanon’s political and geostrategic realities; and growing costs from outside pressure.”⁵⁹ As Byman alludes, this element is best accomplished in tandem with coercive threats of military force. Through engagement, the United States can communicate the benefits to be attained through indirect support instead of direct support. Finally, Paul Lauren offers a closing piece of advice regarding coercion strategies, arguing for the importance of communication throughout the process. He writes, “To achieve its objectives, this strategy must effectively communicate the coercing power’s demands for a resolution of the conflict and those threats of unacceptable costs. Communication is thus of essential importance.”⁶⁰ Thus, the new strategy emphasizes engagement first, then coercive bargaining.

Conclusion

With more than 150,000 American men and women stationed in Iraq and thousands more in the region, the United States has a very real and immediate interest in increasing its security and promoting stability in the region. The

2008 presidential election offers the country a chance to change course from previous policy actions if they are in error. It is in this context that this article seeks to answer the proposed research question in earnest. There are no easy choices, and the road ahead is perilous and uncertain. However, in this high-stakes security environment, America cannot afford to get this wrong and must pursue a thoughtful, purposeful policy guided by theory, history, and pragmatic common sense. 

Notes

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8. Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 212.
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10. Ibid., 25.
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15. Armstrong, *Islam*, 117.
16. Ibid.
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18. World Public Opinion Poll, *Poll of the Iranian Republic 16 January 2007*, http://www.usip.org/iran/iran_presentation.pdf.
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20. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," in *Offense, Defense, and War*, eds., Michael E. Brown et al., (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 10.
21. Ibid.
22. Ilan Berman, *Regional and Global Consequences of U.S. Military Action in Iran*, Statement before the US House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 14 November 2007.
23. World Public Opinion Poll, *Poll of the Iranian Republic*.
24. Kenneth Katzman, *Iran's Influence in Iraq*, CRS Report for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 9 August 2007), 6.
25. Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, "The Costs of Containing Iran: Washington's Misguided New Middle East Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (January/February 2008): 85.
26. Ibid., 86.

27. Carpenter and Innocent, "Iraq War," 73.
28. While still fragile, it must be noted that the security situation in Iraq is much improved at the time of printing of this article. Should these gains in security persist, it is likely that Iran's direct support to the Shia militias will decrease from previous levels.
29. Nasr, *Shia Revival*, 263.
30. Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Annual Threat Assessment, 27 February 2007, http://www.odni.gov/testimonies/20070227_transcript.pdf.
31. Given the large disparity in military capabilities between the United States and Iran, the most cost-effective and least risky strategy for Iran to balance US power is through arming proxy groups, such as the Shia militias in Iraq.
32. US State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2006*, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2006> (accessed 15 Dec 2007).
33. Nasr, *Shia Revival*, 130.
34. Armstrong, *Islam*, xix.
35. Halm, *Shiism*, 34.
36. *Ibid.*, 112.
37. Katzman, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," 2.
38. Nasr, *Shia Revival*, 192.
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40. Nasr, *Shia Revival*, 194.
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