

Friend or foe?

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TEL AVIV - With the outcome in Iraq uncertain and the absence of a firm U.S. hand, some of Iraq's neighbors are becoming bolder in their efforts to shape the emergent government in Baghdad.

While it is expected that Iran would seek a Shiite-dominated regime led by pro-Iranian Shiite clerics and that Turkey would seek to limit Kurdish independence in northern Iraq, it has recently been reported - surprisingly, in the wake of 9/11 - that Saudi-supported Sunnis in Iraq have been attacking U.S. troops and recruits to new Iraqi forces in the country's "Sunni triangle," particularly around Fallujah.

Saudi Arabia is an ally of the United States and was supportive during the invasion of Iraq; it had no love for Saddam Hussein. Moreover, it was eager to prove its support for the United States after it became clear that 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudi and that money for al-Qaida flowed freely from the kingdom, including from members of the royal family.

But the Saudis live in fear of a Shiite-dominated Iraq. The kingdom has a large Shiite minority concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province, which has at times been susceptible to radical Iranian influences. This influence led to major riots after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, to confrontations at the annual pilgrimage in Mecca and, in 1996, to the bombing of U.S. barracks at the Khobar Towers complex near Dhahran.

Although the Saudis have developed good relations with the Iranians since that bombing (partly because they fear a recurrence), they view a Shiite-dominated Iraq with trepidation, for it would serve as a forward base for elements wishing to undermine the nervous regime via its Shiite minority.

It seems that for this reason, elements in Saudi Arabia, government-supported or otherwise, have teamed up with al-Qaida-influenced Iraqi Sunnis, overseas Islamist volunteers and underground Sunnis supportive of Saddam Hussein to attack U.S. troops in Iraq.

Just as "charitable" Saudi organizations funneled money to al-Qaida in the United States and abroad, similar organizations are at work in Iraq. While these organizations are engaged in Islamic propagation of the state-supported Wahhabi variety and the supply of food and medicine, given the history of such activity, it may be serving as cover for more nefarious anti-U.S. activities.

Washington sources with access to unpublished intelligence told The Washington Times that Wahhabi agents were responsible for some attacks on U.S. soldiers in Iraq. A senior U.S. official in Baghdad added that "we realize there is some Saudi activity and involvement, and we've basically told them to cut it out."

U.S. officials have gone to tremendous efforts to track down and stop Saudi funding of al-Qaida. The Saudis say that they are cooperating; after all, they say, al-Qaida has struck in Saudi Arabia as well. The Saudis have cooperated somewhat, but apparently not enough.

Just as was the case before 9/11, the funding of Wahhabi activity abroad serves as a safety valve for Islamic opposition at home, deflecting attention from the Saudi government's own problems with its economy, overpopulation, corruption, lack of political participation and an Islamic opposition that threatens to undermine the Islamic-based regime. Now, in the case of Iraq, there is an added motive for this activity: to halt the emergence of a Shiite state on Saudi Arabia's northern border.

Saudi-U.S. relations have traveled a rocky road since 9/11. There are many reasons to foster this alliance, but it cannot stand if the regime either aids or turns a blind eye to attacks on U.S. troops and their allies in Iraq. To this end, it is hoped that the administration is doing a lot more than telling the Saudi royal family to "cut it out."

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