

Saving Darfur

Seductive Analogies and the Limits of Airpower Coercion in Sudan

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BY ANY measure, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur is a tragedy. In 2003 an unexpected rebellion in the remote states of Darfur drove the Sudanese government in Khartoum to initiate a brutal counterinsurgency campaign destroying thousands of villages and killing hundreds of thousands of Darfuris, many of them women and children.¹ In a region of over 6 million people, nearly 2.7 million Darfuris remain “internally displaced persons” with an additional quarter of a million eking out their existence in refugee camps across the border in Chad.² Thousands of humanitarian workers risk hijacking, abduction, and attack from armed assailants to care for and feed those affected by the conflict.³

Although the level of violence has declined drastically since 2004, attacks on villages in Darfur by *janjaweed* militia and government forces continue. Campaigns in the region have been especially brutal, with the government using helicopter gunships and Antonov cargo aircraft to terrorize civilians with bullets and “barrel bombs” filled with explosives and metal shards.⁴ The atrocities and tactics of the government of Sudan have received significant attention from the media, humanitarian organizations, and a plethora of Hollywood celebrities, yet the international community remains focused on diplomacy rather than decisive actions.⁵ Many of the community leaders in al-Fashir, the capital of Northern Darfur, have shaken the hands of more than a dozen heads of state, yet the United Nations (UN) struggles to provide half of the 26,000 authorized peacekeepers for the embattled region.⁶

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Figure 1. Sudan. (Reprinted from <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/sudan.pdf>.)

Unilateral sanctions and engaged diplomacy were the primary methods used by the Bush administration to confront Sudan's president Omar Hassan al-Bashir, but America's involvement may escalate due to the election of Pres. Barack Obama. Like Pres. George W. Bush before him, President Obama has called the actions of the Sudanese government in Darfur "genocide" but added that the United States should set up a "no-fly zone" over the area.⁷ Members of the former Clinton administration and foreign policy advisors for the Obama campaign have also compared the intransigence of al-Bashir to the actions of former Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic. In 2006 Susan Rice (the current US ambassador to the UN) argued that al-Bashir's refusal to accept UN peacekeepers called for the destruction of the Sudanese air force and likened the proposed air campaign to the 1999 victory in Kosovo.⁸ A coalition of NATO countries did establish no-fly zones and conduct air strikes for humanitarian operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, but are those conflicts helpful analogies for the current situation in Darfur? How should the air campaigns in the former Yugoslav republics guide the new administration's strategy in Darfur? Wars, specifically the most recent wars, have traditionally dominated the minds of political leaders.⁹ The purpose of this analysis is to examine America's most recent humanitarian interventions where no-fly zones facilitated peacekeeping operations and to explore how they could shape courses of action, theories of success, and potential policy options for Darfur.

After a brief introduction to the history of the Darfur crisis and the role of analogies, airpower, and coercion in humanitarian interventions, this article compares the presumptions, likenesses, and differences of the current conflict to three seductively similar humanitarian operations in the 1990s: Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq, Operation Deny Flight in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Operation Allied Force in Kosovo. Not unlike the atrocities initiated by Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, the actions of al-Bashir from 2003 to 2004 are truly horrific. Unless there is an immense shift, however, in the nature of the Sudanese conflict and the overarching geopolitical landscape, a no-fly zone and air strikes are unlikely to provide the justice or response desired by the Obama administration. On the contrary, military actions under current conditions have the potential to drastically increase the level of human catastrophe in the region and implicate the United States in a conflict it will find difficult to escape.

The Darfur Crisis

Darfur's massive political, security, and humanitarian crisis is the complex product of armed factions from Chadian civil wars, the civil war between Arab Muslims in North Sudan and African Christians in South Sudan, and local conflicts over dwindling resources due to overpopulation and desertification. The flashpoint for the conflict occurred in April 2003 when an alliance of Islamic rebel movements and African tribes led coordinated attacks on an air base and other military outposts in Darfur. The rebels blew up government transport aircraft and helicopters, captured the base commander, and executed 200 Sudanese army prisoners despite their surrender.¹⁰ The timing of the attacks was deliberate and costly for the predominantly Arab Sudanese government, which was negotiating a power-sharing agreement with the liberation movement in South Sudan after two decades of civil war. The African movement in Darfur hoped to gain its fair share of national wealth and security after decades of cyclical drought, years of neglect from the central government, and violent encroachment of farmland by former Chadian rebels and Arab herders.¹¹ The government did not anticipate the threat from its poor Western relatives, and the repression of the uprising was brutal and swift. Al-Bashir's regime could not rely on the Sudanese army to crush the insurrection because most of the recruits and noncommissioned officers were from Darfur.¹² Instead, the government made a deal with armed bands and Arab tribes in the region. The camel-herding tribes could pursue their territorial ambitions in Darfur in return for suppressing the rebellion.¹³ What followed was an ethnic-cleansing campaign or "counterinsurgency on the cheap."¹⁴ From 2003 to 2004, *janjaweed* militia routinely surrounded and burned rebel villages after Sudanese aircraft had bombed and strafed the inhabitants. In the process of clearing villages, militiamen often raped girls and women, killed livestock, and tossed small children back into burning houses.¹⁵

Nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and the international community reacted with horror to the atrocities, but a response to the outbreak in violence was difficult to coordinate. Many feared the conflict could derail peace negotiations for the civil war in the South, which had killed over two million people over the previous two decades.¹⁶ The United States and NATO countries could not commit the large number of troops or accept the casualties and commitment necessary for a ground operation in Darfur because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, so the international community pursued a wide range of diplomatic initiatives targeting al-Bashir's regime

from 2004 to 2007.¹⁷ Major efforts included improving the access of humanitarian organizations, orchestrating the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between North and South Sudan, negotiating the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement between the government and rebel factions, seeking the prosecution of leaders for war crimes in the International Criminal Court (ICC), and deploying underequipped, outnumbered African Union (AU) and United Nations peacekeeping forces.¹⁸ Executing a clear and coherent strategy in Darfur was difficult given the sheer size of the region, scope of the conflict, and the multiplicity of actors and objectives.

Similarities of the Darfur Crisis with Dominant Analogies

The conflict in Darfur is a problem that regional experts, policy makers, and humanitarian organizations have struggled with for years. Understanding and describing the underlying context of the crisis is difficult. Gérard Prunier, a prolific author, historian, and expert on East Africa, warns readers in his book on Darfur that “*everything* does not *make sense*.”¹⁹ As President Obama begins to shift his focus from domestic to international issues, his administration will attempt to make sense of the situation in Darfur. Public comments from his foreign-policy advisors suggest that his administration will use historical analogies to facilitate analysis of the conflict and to advocate forceful action.²⁰

Unfortunately, there are identifiable and systematic biases in the use of historical analogies.²¹ In many cases, decision makers fail to analyze key presumptions behind historical analogies and are predisposed to “plunge toward action” and advocate misguided policies that administrations could have avoided with closer inspection.²² Operations Provide Comfort, Deny Flight, and Allied Force are irresistible and dangerous analogies for the Darfur crisis because the conflicts have many similarities, some of which are inherent to humanitarian interventions. The campaigns in northern Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo addressed grievances common to many intrastate conflicts in the 1990s: the rebellion of marginalized peoples denied their share of political power and wealth of the state. They also featured incompetent governments that used racial or ethnic divisions to divide and suppress the rebellion, with the United States and its allies using airpower and military force to confront the suppressors.²³ In 1997 the Clinton administration called this type of humanitarian intervention

“complex contingency operations” and specifically distinguished the campaigns in Bosnia and northern Iraq from other low-level military actions like hostage rescues, counterterrorism missions, or interventions due to natural disasters.²⁴

Common Coercive Challenges

Coercion was a major component of these “complex contingency operations,” yet the characteristics of humanitarian interventions made coercion difficult.²⁵ Coercion is the use of force, either threatened or actual, “to induce an adversary to change its behavior.”²⁶ Coercion was necessary in northern Iraq and the Balkans to deter belligerents from disrupting aid organizations and to compel the oppressive governments to remove underlying causes of the conflict. To be successful, the enforcement of a no-fly zone in Darfur would have to overcome three common challenges of executing a coercion strategy during humanitarian operations: low strategic interest, competing coalition objectives, and nonstate actors.

Low Strategic Interest. One of the major challenges for a military intervention in Darfur is that the United States has little or no strategic interest in the region, which could result in tentative domestic support for a prospective military campaign. Sudan is no longer a terrorist threat. The government of Sudan once welcomed Osama bin Laden to its country, but since the 9/11 attacks, the regime has cooperated with intelligence agencies and supported US counterterrorism efforts.²⁷ US interests in Darfur are predominantly humanitarian, and an intervention in Sudan must overcome the stigma of America’s experience of another humanitarian operation in Somalia. That intervention killed 18 service members, compelled the administration to remove US forces from the country in six months, and affected the administration’s calculus of subsequent interventions in the Balkans.²⁸ Obtaining broad public support for an intervention in Darfur will be difficult because of the lack of strategic interests in the region and the potentially high political cost of military operations in Africa.

Competing Coalition Objectives. If the United States is to intervene militarily in Darfur, it will most likely participate as a member of a coalition to provide the legitimacy, ground troops, and donors necessary for military action and humanitarian support. While the participants in the operations in northern Iraq and the Balkans were primarily from NATO countries, the UN peacekeeping forces in Darfur consist of soldiers provided by member states of the African Union and combat engineers from

China.²⁹ The overextension of the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan increases the imperative to obtain broad international support for additional operations in Darfur. The United States will have to manage the competing interests and objectives of potential donor countries if the campaign is to be as effective as Operation Provide Comfort and the NATO campaigns in the Balkans.

Nonstate Actors. The nature of the belligerents was also a major factor in the Balkan conflicts and is especially important in Darfur. Many of the perpetrators in intrastate conflicts are nonstate actors and have loose connections with governments that may or may not sanction their tactics. Due to the disintegration of the Yugoslav army, Milosevic's regime and political leaders recruited gang members, soccer hooligans, and criminals to help government forces ethnically cleanse Balkan communities.³⁰ In Darfur, *janjaweed* militias provide a similar service. The word *janjaweed* originated in the 1960s as a pejorative term used to describe poor vagrants from Arab tribes.³¹ Now it describes a makeshift organization of more than six different armed groups that receive support from Sudan's military intelligence agency. Few agree on the precise makeup of the *janjaweed*, and the organization is difficult to locate and identify, especially from the air in an area the size of France. Limits on the use of force during humanitarian operations combined with lax ties between the central government and perpetrators make coercion difficult, even when the culprits are easy to find.

Common Coercive Mechanisms

An effective strategy in humanitarian operations requires coercive mechanisms or processes by which threats generate concessions from the adversary.³² Common mechanisms include eroding the powerbase of the targeted government, creating unrest within the population, decapitating leaders of the regime, weakening the strength of the country as a whole, and denying adversaries the ability to accomplish their objectives. The challenges of humanitarian operations invalidate many of these options, however. The campaigns in the Balkans and northern Iraq successfully used two: denial and powerbase erosion. Both mechanisms could play a large role in the enforcement of a no-fly zone in Sudan.

Denial. Nullifying an opponent's strategy by reducing its ability to accomplish its objectives is denial. Some denial strategies "thwart the enemy's military strategy for taking and holding its territorial objectives, compelling

concessions to avoid futile expenditure of further resources.”³³ This was the case for Operation Deny Flight, which tried to deny Bosnian Serbs the ability to terrorize and conquer Bosnian Muslim and Croatian villages during the Bosnian war. After Bosnian Muslims and Croats voted to secede from the Yugoslavian Federation in 1992, Bosnian Serb irregulars attacked Bosnian Muslim and Croat villages with air support from the Yugoslavian air force.³⁴ The Bosnian Serbs hoped to force Muslim and Croat civilians out of Serb-controlled territory and establish a Serbian Republic of Bosnia. Operation Deny Flight established a no-fly zone over the battlefield to prevent the Bosnian Serbs from using their ground-attack fighters and helicopter gunships to support their ethnic cleansing campaign. Sudan also has fighters, bombers, and helicopter gunships, and as late as May 2008, the Sudanese government used an Antonov medium bomber to strike a village in North Darfur.³⁵ A robust no-fly zone over Darfur could prevent such attacks and enforce a 2005 UN Security Council resolution forbidding “offensive military flights in and over the Darfur region.”³⁶

Powerbase Erosion. The other common mechanism used by the United States and its allies in northern Iraq and the Balkans is powerbase erosion. This mechanism attempts to undercut the control and leadership of a regime by attacking the political elites and cliques that support it.³⁷ During Operation Provide Comfort, Saddam Hussein was extremely sensitive to air strikes against high-value targets in Baghdad, and the coalition maintained a squadron of long-range attack aircraft in Turkey to act as a credible threat to his regime.³⁸ In Operation Allied Force, NATO attacked military-related industries, utilities, and other targets in Belgrade to foster elite discontent and erode popular support of Milosevic. Some argue that mounting pressure from political elites, civilian oligarchy, and army leadership contributed to Milosevic’s yielding to NATO demands.³⁹ Obama’s advisors suggest similar threats could coerce Sudan’s leadership and that the “credible threat or use of force” is the “one language Khartoum understands.”⁴⁰

Common Coercive Instruments

The United States has numerous tools at its disposal to trigger coercive mechanisms and to begin the process by which threats generate adversary concessions. Examples include air strikes, invasion, nuclear retaliation, economic sanctions, political isolation, and insurgency support.⁴¹ The high cost of many of these instruments makes them unsuitable for

humanitarian operations, however. The strategies for Operations Provide Comfort, Deny Flight, and Allied Force relied primarily on three: airpower, economic sanctions, and political isolation.

Airpower. No-fly zones and air strikes are common military instruments for US humanitarian operations because of their flexibility and relatively low cost. As Eliot Cohen remarked, "Air power is an unusually seductive form of military strength, in part because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment."⁴² US air strikes, including the northern Iraq and Balkans conflicts, rarely result in friendly casualties. The air campaign for Operation Allied Force lasted 78 days with zero battlefield casualties. Airpower can also contribute to denial and powerbase-reduction strategies and has the ability to expand or contract the level of destruction to suit the needs of the coercer. Because airpower is cheap, flexible, and seemingly successful, air strikes have become a standard form of intimidation for the United States. Former Clinton advisors Susan Rice and Anthony Lake cite the administration's 1998 cruise missile strike in Khartoum as a primary reason why al-Bashir's regime cooperates with the United States on counterterrorism.⁴³ Airpower is a seductive component of many analogies for the Darfur crisis because of perceptions that it is effective and easy to use.

Economic Sanctions and Political Isolation. Coalition air forces in northern Iraq and the Balkans did not operate in isolation from other coercive instruments. Sanctions and diplomatic measures reinforced air threats by imposing costs and denying benefits for the regimes of Saddam and Milosevic. A comprehensive economic embargo of Iraq and an international coalition of countries that included Arab nations completely isolated Saddam during Operation Provide Comfort.⁴⁴ The UN passed a series of economic sanctions against Bosnia and Serbia during the Balkan conflicts, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia indicted high-level Bosnian Serbs and Milosevic during the respective air campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo.⁴⁵

If applied for Darfur, airpower in Sudan will also operate within the context of economic sanctions and indictments by the International Criminal Court. In 1993, the United States designated Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism, which subjects the country to restrictions on foreign assistance. UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 1556 and 1591 prohibit the transfer of arms to the government of Sudan in Darfur as well as to rebels in the area.⁴⁶ UNSCR 1672 targets sanctions against four individuals:

two rebel leaders and two representatives of the Sudanese government.⁴⁷ In 2007, President Bush expanded the 1997 sanctions imposed by the Clinton administration. Both regimes applied unilateral restrictions on imports and exports, restricted financial transactions to and from Sudan, and froze assets of the Sudanese government. The ICC also indicted several mid-level antagonists in the conflict for genocide and recently issued a warrant for al-Bashir's arrest for war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁴⁸ Any military action in the Darfur crisis will have to operate in conjunction with a myriad of economic and diplomatic measures attempting to coerce the government of Sudan.

Differences of the Darfur Crisis from Dominant Analogies

The surface similarities between Operation Provide Comfort, the Balkan conflicts, and Darfur suggest possible airpower solutions to the crisis, prospects for success, and anticipated challenges. However, "more often than not, decision-makers invoke inappropriate analogues that not only fail to illuminate the new situation but also mislead by emphasizing superficial and irrelevant parallels."⁴⁹ The remainder of this article anticipates irrelevant parallels between the analogous conflicts and the Darfur crisis and examines key presumptions that sustain them. Figure 2 (p. 91) summarizes the findings.

Operation Provide Comfort

Operation Provide Comfort was one of the most successful humanitarian operations in history. After the Iraq War, a Kurdish uprising and subsequent government repression drove over 400,000 refugees into the mountains along the Turkish-Iraqi border.⁵⁰ In response, coalition forces successfully defended the Kurdish refugees from Iraqi forces, aided their return to a safe zone in northern Iraq, and airlifted massive amounts of humanitarian supplies to the region. A key presumption emerges from the campaign: a similar operation could aid Darfuri refugees in Chad and "save Africans." The circumstances surrounding Operation Provide Comfort were exceptional, however, and the United States will find it difficult to recreate two conditions that made the return of Kurdish refugees in Iraq a success: a strong strategic interest to solve the refugee crisis and a demonstrated ability to apply force in the region.

Differences in International Interests. Unlike Darfur, the return of refugees to their homeland in Iraq was of vital interest to the United States and key allies. The Kurds are a large, disgruntled minority in Turkey, and an influx of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees was a significant security threat. Turkey publicly invited the allies to intervene in the crisis and closed its borders, trapping the refugees in the mountains in the middle of winter.⁵¹ A month earlier, Pres. George H. W. Bush had urged the Iraqi people to “take matters in their own hands” and “force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside.”⁵² Material support of the subsequent rebellion by the United States was nonexistent, however, and the Iraqi military crushed Kurdish guerrillas with the help of helicopter gunships and fixed-wing fighter bombers flying in defiance of UNSCR 686.⁵³ The security needs of an important ally and media images of Kurdish suffering compelled the administration to respond with air-dropped supplies only seven days after the crisis began. Within weeks, coalition forces established a security zone in northern Iraq. Within seven weeks, the humanitarian operation completely repatriated the Kurds from the Turkish border region.⁵⁴

In contrast, the motivations for intervention in Darfur are almost completely humanitarian. The 250,000 refugees on the border with Chad are only a security threat for the region itself, and media coverage of the human suffering is light. Ninety-six percent of the deaths in the Darfur crisis occurred between 2003 and 2004, and news of the genocide almost disappeared after North and South Sudan signed the CPA in January 2005, ending 21 years of civil war.⁵⁵ There was an uptick in coverage prior to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and the 2008 presidential elections, but the most recent coverage focused on the impending indictment of al-Bashir by the ICC.⁵⁶ The population of refugee camps has stabilized, but the security associated with them remains an issue. Since January 2008, bandits and assailants have killed 11 humanitarian workers, abducted 170 staff members, and hijacked 225 vehicles in Darfur.⁵⁷ Despite the violence, major powers have not committed military resources to secure refugees and humanitarian personnel in the region. Perhaps the lackluster support of the one million Kurdish refugees who fled to Iran instead of Turkey is more revealing. Iran received just over half the total international assistance for Kurdish refugees despite its protection of a refugee population almost triple that of Turkey.⁵⁸

Differences in Credibility. One primary reason why Operation Provide Comfort was able to deter Saddam’s regime from disturbing the return of Kurdish refugees was because the United States and its allies credibly

demonstrated the “skill and will” to apply force.⁵⁹ The operation began only two months after Operation Desert Storm, which included a devastating air campaign that crippled Saddam’s forces. Many of the weapons, soldiers, and procedures were still in place to threaten the regime. Ground forces were also available to distribute supplies, provide security, and expand the safe zone for the eventual return of Kurdish refugees. The United States inserted 5,000 troops into the region, and the commander of the combined task force, LTG John Shalikashvili, met personally with Iraqi military representatives positioned along the border of northern Iraq to dictate the terms of the intervention and the scope of the safe zone.⁶⁰ A day after the meeting, Marines on the ground directed mock air strikes on Iraqi positions and compelled Iraqi forces to leave the area.⁶¹ NATO aircraft and 2,500 troops on alert in southeastern Turkey also provided a deterrent when UN agencies and NGOs assumed responsibility for delivering humanitarian aid.⁶² The weakness of the Iraqi military and the credible integration of air and ground forces by the United States and its allies against a conventional foe were critical to the success of Operation Provide Comfort.

The history of military intervention and coercion in Darfur does not include skill and resolve in the application of force, especially against the myriad of nonstate parties to the conflict. Twice the UN has authorized peacekeeping forces for the Darfur crisis. In June 2004, a UN Security Council resolution created the AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS), a force of 7,500 soldiers and police from African nations tasked to monitor a verbal cease-fire agreement and to “provide a safe and secure environment for the return of internally displaced persons and refugees.”⁶³ Unfortunately, the mission’s mandate, rules of engagement, and numbers were completely inadequate to complete the task. Outgunned and underresourced, the mission could not even challenge rebel roadblocks as they tried to protect 34 refugee camps, some with over 120,000 inhabitants, in an area the size of France. The UN approved a second “hybrid” peacekeeping force of 20,600 AU and UN forces in August 2006 to augment AMIS with greater numbers and a stronger mandate, but the group had difficulty protecting itself, let alone refugees.⁶⁴ In September 2007, AU forces ran out of ammunition as hundreds of rebels in trucks overran their base in eastern Darfur, seizing tons of supplies and heavy weapons.⁶⁵ For future military instruments to be successful in Darfur, they will have to overcome pessimism created by years of unwillingness by the international community to move beyond neutral peacekeeping and mediation in Sudan.

Operation Deny Flight

UN peacekeeping operations in Bosnia also suffered from a deficit in credibility, but the United States and NATO were able to overcome the impotence of Operation Deny Flight with Operation Deliberate Force. Beginning in the summer of 1992, Serb aggression and support of an ethnic cleansing campaign by Bosnian Serbs inspired the UN to impose comprehensive sanctions against Serbia, deploy UN peacekeepers, and task NATO to enforce a no-fly zone within Bosnian airspace.⁶⁶ The use of force, however, even in defense of UN peacekeepers, was “highly circumscribed” during Operation Deny Flight, and Bosnian Serbs took advantage of the UN’s indecisiveness to gain territory and terrorize the civilian populace.⁶⁷ The fall of Muslim safe area Srebrenica, use of UN hostages to deter NATO reprisals, and potential for a UN withdrawal from Bosnia prompted the United States to lead an escalated air campaign against the Bosnian Serbs from August to December 1995.⁶⁸ Covert supply of Bosnian Muslims and air strikes strategically timed with Bosnian Muslim and Croatian ground offensives shifted the balance of territory in the region. Territorial losses and the prospect for removal of sanctions compelled Milosevic to negotiate terms to end the conflict.⁶⁹ The indictment of Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic for war crimes also enabled a US envoy to isolate the Bosnian Serb “spoilers” from cease-fire talks, which helped Americans negotiate and employ the Dayton peace accords.⁷⁰

A key presumption that emerges from Operations Deny Flight and Deliberate Force is that timely air strikes and the indictment of war criminals can facilitate negotiations and the development of a viable cease-fire agreement. Two differences in the Darfur conflict make this generalization unlikely if the United States uses a similar strategy against the Sudanese government. For one, the Darfuris seek security guarantees and a greater share of national wealth, not independence from a greater Sudan. Second, a coercer must factor the related and potentially more destabilizing North-South conflict into any strategy for peace in Darfur.

Differences in Objectives. Independence was the objective of the parties in the Bosnian conflict. On 1 March 1992, a parliamentary majority of Muslim and Croatian delegates followed the lead of Slovenia and Croatia and voted for independence from Yugoslavia. Bosnian Serbs rejected the referendum and, dreading subjugation by Bosnian Muslims and Croats, executed their contingency plan for self-determination and seceded.⁷¹ The expansion of regional boundaries and control of territory became the

primary goal of the three belligerent groups. The United States and its allies successfully coerced the Bosnian Serbs into accepting the terms of the Dayton accords, because combined air and ground offensives denied them the ability to achieve their goal. The effects of economic sanctions and indictments by the International Criminal Tribunal also isolated the Bosnian Serbs from their primary source of military strength, Serbia, and compelled Milosevic to act as a third-party coercer.⁷² The objectives of independence and the control of territory were important aspects in the dynamics of coercion in the Bosnian war.

The objective of the Darfuris is not independence but physical protection, political access, and a greater share of national wealth. The rebellion is a reaction to the negligence of the Sudanese government, which failed to secure Darfuris from violent abuse by Arab tribes even before the government's tacit support of the *janjaweed*.⁷³ This negligence and "the hegemony of the northern and central elites to keep Darfur and other peripheral regions marginalized" form the core of Darfuri grievances.⁷⁴ Darfur, landlocked and overpopulated, has few natural resources and cannot survive as an independent country without significant help. Some argue the region is poorer today than it was in the late 1800s due to years of drought and overgrazing.⁷⁵ Ruling Arabs in North Sudan do not favor an independent Darfur because they need the predominantly Muslim population in the North to balance the Christian population in the South. The international community fears an independent Darfur because of the massive amount of aid and sponsorship it would require to sustain the region. Independence is not a viable option for major players in the Darfur conflict. Ultimately, the long-term survival of Darfuris depends on the cooperation and support of the Sudanese government, making it difficult to apply pressure to the ruling regime.

If the United States seeks to coerce al-Bashir's regime with airpower, the impending indictment of the Sudanese president for war crimes is also problematic.⁷⁶ The International Criminal Court's arrest warrant gives Sudan's president additional incentive to consolidate power and to resist demands that remotely threaten the stability of his regime. Since his indictment by the court, al-Bashir has expelled 13 aid organizations he accuses of abetting the international case against him.⁷⁷ The leader of Sudan's intelligence service recently called for the "amputation of the hands and the slitting of the throats" of Sudanese people who support the charges.⁷⁸ Al-Bashir's loss of control or his apprehension by a UN

operation could result in prosecution and humiliation at The Hague. The objective of al-Bashir is to remain in power, and the source of his power and influence—oil—is not susceptible to airpower.⁷⁹ In the case of Darfur, criminal indictment by the ICC conflicts with coercion strategies that seek concessions by al-Bashir and his government.

Differences in Priorities. Regional issues were certainly important factors in the negotiations to end the Bosnian war, but a resolution to the Bosnia conflict remained the priority of the United States and international community. Richard Holbrooke, the lead US negotiator at Dayton, was sympathetic to the plight of Albanians in Kosovo but believed addressing the topic was counterproductive to achieving a peace agreement.⁸⁰ Granted, Croatia's 1995 offensive in Krajina played a large role in America's strategy to end the Bosnian conflict. Territorial gains "strengthened Croatia as a strategic counterweight to Serbia" and helped NATO "forge a Croatian-Muslim alliance as a military counterweight to the Bosnian Serbs," but the United States directed its coercive efforts against Serbia for a resolution in Bosnia, not satellite conflicts in Croatia or Kosovo.⁸¹

In contrast, the Darfur conflict has historically been subordinate to the civil war in Sudan. In 2004, despite the violence and atrocities in Darfur, the policy of US, British, and Norwegian negotiators was to proceed with the CPA between North and South Sudan while the Darfur crisis remained unresolved.⁸² The 2005 agreement established a "confederal system" of two regional governments: one in North Sudan dominated by al-Bashir's National Congress Party and a semiautonomous government in South Sudan controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement.⁸³ The agreement includes a timetable for multiparty elections in 2009 and a referendum on southern independence in 2011.⁸⁴ The agreement also requires an equal distribution of oil revenues from the North to the South, which controls the vast majority of oil-producing territory. Last year, skirmishes along the border and the suspension of oil-revenue payments almost sparked a full-scale war, but cooler heads prevailed.⁸⁵ Upsetting the military balance between North and South Sudan with an intervention in Darfur could result in a larger, more deadly civil war with even greater humanitarian repercussions. Perhaps an aspect of the Bosnian conflict that is more enlightening is how the Dayton peace process and perceptions of neglect by the Kosovo Albanians led to violence in Kosovo and Operation Allied Force.⁸⁶ Military solutions for the Darfur crisis risk reigniting the North-South civil war.

Operation Allied Force

The third and final analogy examined for the Darfur crisis is Operation Allied Force, which for many is one of the most successful air campaigns in history. In response to the violent persecution of Albanians in Kosovo, NATO initiated the air operation to coerce Milosevic into accepting the terms of failed negotiations at Rambouillet. The terms were “the Serbs out; NATO in; the refugees home; a cease-fire in place; and a commitment to work for a peace settlement.”⁸⁷ The operation lasted much longer than expected, and NATO aircraft were unable to stop the Serbs’ ethnic cleansing campaign; yet, after 78 days of air strikes, Milosevic succumbed to NATO’s demands. NATO was ultimately successful because air strikes demonstrated an ability to threaten the powerbase of Milosevic’s regime, and the Serbians were unable to inflict any substantial costs on the United States or its allies. The Kosovo conflict is a seductive analogy for proponents of military intervention in Darfur, because the United States led the operation “to confront a lesser humanitarian crisis” against “a more formidable adversary” and “not a single American died in combat.”⁸⁸ The key presumption is that it is possible for US airpower to extract concessions from an authoritarian regime with modest costs and without a strong commitment to ground forces. Two major differences between the Kosovo and Darfur crises make this presumption faulty: the source of power for al-Bashir’s regime is revenue from Sudan’s oil industry, not an industrialized economy, and international interest in Sudan’s oil reserves will make it difficult to isolate and coerce the regime.

Differences in Powerbase. To maintain order when under air attack and economic hardship, dictatorial regimes often use the media and repressive police and security forces to maintain order. Serbia’s leadership was no exception during Operation Allied Force, and Milosevic used Serbia’s political machine, media, and security forces to stoke Serb nationalism, eliminate independent media, and place disgruntled military leaders under house arrest.⁸⁹ The engine for Milosevic’s powerbase and influence was Serbia’s industrial economy, which was especially vulnerable to systematic air strikes by an advanced air force.⁹⁰ The economically advanced society suffered years of economic sanctions due to the Bosnian war, and the prospects for reconstruction were meager because of international isolation. After a NATO summit in Washington, where leaders of the organization celebrated its 50th anniversary and renewed their resolve to win the Kosovo war, NATO expanded its coercion strategy and targeted the powerbase of Milosevic’s regime.⁹¹ By the

end of April 1999, air strikes cut Serbia's economy in half, and on 28 May, 80 percent of Serbians lost electrical power due to the destruction of power facilities in Serbia's three largest cities.⁹² NATO's willingness to escalate the conflict and severely threaten Serbia's industrial economy played a large role in the coercion of Milosevic and the success of Operation Allied Force.

Al-Bashir's National Congress Party and northern elites also use an extensive party organization, politicized national civil service, and hundreds of thousands of agents and informants to maintain security and power in Sudan. A bureaucracy of over two million Sudanese control the day-to-day operations of the state, but unlike Milosevic in 1999, al-Bashir's regime uses billions of dollars in oil revenues to tend and influence its elite constituency.⁹³ Sudan's five billion barrels of proven oil reserves and potential for much more also insulate the country from international economic pressures.⁹⁴ Despite harsh unilateral sanctions by the United States, Sudan's economy grows almost 10 percent a year.⁹⁵ Since 1998, al-Bashir has focused on developing Sudan's oil wealth, and his vision has helped the regime accomplish its primary objective of staying in power. Sitting on top of a fortune while facing criminal indictment abroad and retaliation at home, al-Bashir's regime is "prepared to kill anyone, suffer massive civilian casualties, and violate every international norm of human rights to stay in power."⁹⁶ Unless strikes are concurrent with an oil embargo supported by the rest of the international community, the government of Sudan will prove extremely difficult to coerce with airpower, because air strikes and no-fly zones do little to threaten Sudan's most valuable natural resource.

Differences in Political Isolation. In addition to economic vulnerability, diplomatic isolation prevented Milosevic and his regime from executing an effective countercoercion strategy against NATO during Operation Allied Force. Despite the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Bosnian war, and years of economic sanctions, Milosevic probably expected the plight of Serbia to arouse sympathy in Russia, a fellow Slav and Orthodox country. To Milosevic's dismay, Russian president Boris Yeltsin never gave him anything beyond verbal support during the Kosovo war for several reasons. Yeltsin and other Russian officials did not personally like Milosevic. They were tired of his making promises he could not keep and never forgave him for his support of the 1991 coup against Yeltsin and Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev.⁹⁷ Russia's reputation and economy were also too weak to risk a costly confrontation with the West or provide Serbia with advanced anti-aircraft missiles to "massacre" NATO aircraft.⁹⁸ Both Yeltsin and Milosevic expected

the NATO coalition to fracture as the war dragged on, but NATO's resolve hardened, along with talk of NATO expansion. Three weeks into the air war, Yeltsin appointed Viktor Chernomyrdin, a former premier with strong ties with the United States, to negotiate an end to the war. He was not fond of Milosevic, and after negotiating a peace plan with the G-7, Chernomyrdin traveled to Belgrade and coldly told Milosevic to accept the proposal or air strikes would escalate.⁹⁹ NATO's growing strength and ability to attack Serbia with impunity compelled Milosevic's only ally to act as a third-party coercer on behalf of NATO. Russia's abandonment of Serbia and Serbia's isolation from the rest of the international community were critical to Milosevic's acceptance of G-7 demands.

Al-Bashir has stronger ties with the international community, primarily because of extensive foreign investment in Sudan's oil sector and the potential for billions of dollars in additional development. Despite extensive economic sanctions by the United States, numerous countries invest in Sudan, including Arab countries and several of America's allies. France, Jordan, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom all have equity stakes in Sudan's oil blocks.¹⁰⁰ India and Malaysia also have large investments in the country, but Sudan's most powerful political and diplomatic partner is China.

In 1959 Sudan was the fourth African nation to recognize the People's Republic of China. The countries have had a good relationship ever since, and in 1994, al-Bashir invited Chinese companies to develop Sudan's nascent oil sector.¹⁰¹ China accepted the offer and nurtured a relationship with Sudan beneficial to both countries. China used Sudan as a bridgehead for investments in the rest of Africa. Sudan rapidly developed its oil industry and used the proceeds to strengthen state security and procure weapons. China's \$8 billion in pipeline, refineries, and basic infrastructure is a substantial incentive to support a strong and stable Sudanese government. China uses its position on the UN Security Council to soften initiatives that could weaken al-Bashir's regime and to abide by Beijing's philosophy of noninterference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states.¹⁰²

Mismatches between the rhetoric and enforcement of UN resolutions after the Darfur atrocities highlight the difficulty of using economic sanctions and political isolation as instruments to erode al-Bashir's powerbase. The first UN resolution written specifically for Darfur is Resolution 1556 (30 July 2004), which required the Sudanese government to disarm the *janjaweed* in 30 days. The only enforcement mechanism in the resolution

was to impose an arms embargo against the Darfur region, not against Sudan itself. Little changed in March 2005 when the Security Council passed Resolution 1591, which applied travel bans against four antagonists on both sides of the conflict but did not condemn or extend sanctions to the Sudanese government or the oil industry.¹⁰³ China, Russia, and the Arab League opposed America's stronger proposals because of economic self-interests and skepticism of humanitarian arguments that the United States and others could use to encroach on their national sovereignty.¹⁰⁴ Unless the security and humanitarian situation changes drastically in Sudan, the United States will find it difficult to apply effective coercive measures against al-Bashir's regime, especially since the international community was unwilling to condemn the Sudanese government immediately after the height of atrocities in Darfur.

Policy Implications for Darfur

Operations Provide Comfort, Deny Flight, and Allied Force are seductive analogies for proponents of a humanitarian intervention in Darfur because these campaigns featured suffering refugees and the successful coercion of a malevolent dictator with a preponderance of airpower. Using these operations as analytical tools to determine the political initiative required for a humanitarian response in Darfur is imprudent, however. The wide range of actors, competing interests, relatively low priority of the Darfur crisis, and the unfavorable geopolitical landscape make it tough to generate the international consensus necessary for a legitimate military intervention. Several influential nations, including China, invest heavily in Sudan's oil industry and prefer a strong and stable Sudanese government to ensure a reasonable return on their investments. Compelling powerful China in 2009 to turn its back on its gateway to the African continent will be much more difficult than convincing the comparatively weak Russia to ditch Milosevic in 1999. The hypocrisies of US intervention in Iraq and its subsequent overextension in the Middle East also propel lesser powers and the Arab League to oppose international activism and the abuse of the "responsibility to protect" to justify interventions.¹⁰⁵ Still others are opposed to military solutions to the Darfur crisis because of potential damage to the North-South peace process and the threat to humanitarian aid operations. Due to conditions internal and external to the Darfur conflict, the United States will have to expend considerable amounts of political

capital, significantly more than in the 1990s, to secure UN or even NATO approval for a humanitarian intervention using military forces.

	Synopsis of Conflict	Key Presumptions	Likenesses to a Military Intervention in Darfur	Differences from Darfur Conflict
Operation Provide Comfort (Iraq)	A broad coalition of states defended Kurdish refugees from Iraqi forces and aided their safe return to Kurdistan.	A similar operation could aid Darfuri refugees in Chad.	The international coalitions confronted incompetent governments that used racial or ethnic identities to divide, control, and oppress their populations.	Return of Darfuri refugees is not a vital interest to the United States and its allies. The international community has not demonstrated the desire or ability to apply force effectively in Sudan.
Operation Deny Flight (Bosnia)	Economic sanctions, legal, indictments, and air strikes strategically timed with Muslim and Croat ground offensives compelled Milosevic to negotiate with NATO.	Timely air strikes and indictments could aid cease-fire negotiations in Darfur.	Low strategic interests, competing coalition objectives, and elusive nonstate actors posed significant challenges in the coercion of the targeted governments.	The objective of the Darfuris is not independence but physical protection, political access, and a greater share of national wealth. Concerns about the Darfur conflict are subordinate to the resolution of the North-South civil war.
Operation Allied Force (Kosovo)	While suffering zero combat casualties, a massive air operation compelled Milosevic to withdraw Serb forces from Kosovo.	Airpower can extract concessions with modest costs and without a strong commitment of ground forces.	The coalitions used two coercive mechanisms: denial and power-base erosion. The coalitions used three coercive instruments: airpower, economic sanctions, and political isolation.	Sudan does not have an advanced industrial economy that is sensitive to air strikes. Sudan in 2009 is not as politically isolated as Serbia in the 1990s.

Figure 2. Similarities and differences between Darfur and analogous humanitarian operations.

Theoretically, the United States could act unilaterally and hope a large portion of the international community or the UN blesses the operation retroactively, as in Kosovo. Perhaps President Obama and his secretary of state believe a true no-fly zone and nothing more is sufficiently benign to resist international criticism, yet is imposing it enough to prevent the

Sudanese government and its proxies from terrorizing villages in Darfur?¹⁰⁶ A small demonstration of American airpower compelled Iraqi security forces to leave Zakho in Kurdistan; why would not a similar demonstration work against the *janjaweed* in Darfur?¹⁰⁷ The problem in Darfur is that a no-fly zone would provide no compelling reason for the *janjaweed* to leave. The offensive advantages provided by explosive 50-gallon drums kicked out the back of a cargo plane are relatively minor, even against defenseless villages. It is easy enough for the local Arab tribes, militia, and Chadian rebels that comprise the *janjaweed* to remain where they are, with or without American aircraft flying overhead. Their only alternative is to become refugees themselves. A no-fly zone is not imposing enough to convince people to leave what they perceive to be their homeland.

Maybe the “no-fly zone” advocated by President Obama is more than that. Perhaps he intends to follow the advice of the US ambassador to the United Nations and sprinkle air strikes on Khartoum and on air bases to compel al-Bashir’s regime to reign in the destabilizing *janjaweed*.¹⁰⁸ The problem is who will do the reigning in? The regime enlisted the help of the *janjaweed* in 2003 to conduct its counterinsurgency campaign because it did not have the military forces to do so itself. There is no reason to believe it does now, either. Maybe the advocates of extensive air strikes believe that the devastation could be costly enough to compel al-Bashir to try a little harder. If so, their hopes are unfounded. Sudan’s extensive oil reserves are perfectly safe underground, and air operations targeting the *janjaweed*, when they can be found, will do little to threaten the regime. In addition, the indictment of al-Bashir for crimes against humanity and overtures for “regime change” fail to assure the president that the cost of capitulation is acceptable, no matter how devastating the air attacks. Unless it is prepared to remove al-Bashir with brute force using friendly ground forces or rebel proxies, the United States will have to offer the president a credible alternative to surrender for an air campaign to be successful.¹⁰⁹

In addition to the meager prospects of success, the costs associated with the employment of coercive airpower in Darfur could be enormous. The Sudanese will execute counterstrategies to neutralize threats and to create problems for the United States and opposing forces.¹¹⁰ The presence of thousands of humanitarian aid workers, two million displaced persons, a precarious peace with South Sudan, and extensive economic ties with China provide Sudan an excellent deterrent. If deterrence fails, the regime has numerous ways to create pandemonium and threaten the

efficacy and domestic support for the intervention. The recent expulsion of relief organizations that provide 40 percent of the aid in Darfur and lack of response by the United Nations is a relevant example.¹¹¹ The desire to recycle airpower strategies in Darfur and the execution of counterstrategies by al-Bashir's regime could spin Sudan out of control and put the Obama administration in the unenviable position of having to explain to the American public how a few good intentions led to a catastrophe.¹¹²

Instead of risking escalation and disaster to reconcile past injustices, America's strategy in Sudan should focus on the future. In accordance with the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Sudan will conduct multiparty elections in 2009 and a referendum in 2011 to determine whether South Sudan will secede. Should South Sudan split from the rest of the country, which most likely it will, North Sudan will lose 80 percent of its proven oil reserves, a vastly more credible threat to al-Bashir than air strikes.¹¹³ Blocking South Sudan's vote for independence, contesting the results, or suspending oil revenues is tantamount to war, and the subsequent carnage could dwarf that of the Darfur conflict. The United States needs to provide positive inducements and assurances that the 2009 and 2011 elections are in the best interest of the Sudanese government. Allowing China to pass a Security Council resolution to defer the indictment of al-Bashir is a good place to start. The indictment is counterproductive and does little to deter the parties in the conflict from conducting operations they deem necessary for their survival.¹¹⁴ The United States could also offset the losses in revenue anticipated by the secession of South Sudan by lifting sanctions, allowing Sudan access to US oil refining technology, and facilitating Sudan's exploitation of petroleum resources in the Red Sea.¹¹⁵ Incrementally, providing positive incentives for implementing the CPA and removing Sudan from America's list of state sponsors of terror will do more to alleviate the atrocities in Darfur than would any no-fly zone.

Conclusion

The international community should never forget the tragic events in Darfur, but the Obama administration should not let past atrocities and compelling historical analogies cloud its judgment on the efficacy of airpower coercion in Sudan. Operations Provide Comfort, Deliberate Force,

and Allied Force were highly successful in compelling Saddam and Milosevic to succumb to pressure from US airpower, but conditions internal and external to the conflicts were vital to their success. With Russia in decline and NATO expanding, conditions were favorable for the United States and its allies to apply pressure to Saddam, Milosevic, and their supporters. Today, Sudan's political ally, China, is in ascent, while the US military is busy conducting two full-scale occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite President Obama's campaign proclamations and his appointment of retired major general J. Scott Gration as special envoy to Sudan, the administration will find that generating the political momentum and consensus necessary for a legitimate military intervention will be a major challenge.¹¹⁶

International consensus aside, it is still doubtful a no-fly zone or air strikes could repeat the successes from northern Iraq and Serbia in Darfur. The source of power and influence of al-Bashir and his extensive state apparatus is oil, an underground resource that is resistant to the effects of airpower in the long term. When threatened, al-Bashir can use the tentative peace of Sudan's civil war, upcoming elections, and two million internally displaced persons as a deterrent. US military intervention and the failure of that deterrent could spark another civil war, and in the words of one African diplomat, "If the North and South return to war, it will unlock the gates of hell."¹¹⁷ This is hardly the objective of airpower for peace enforcement, and the United States does not have the desire or capability to play games of brinkmanship with al-Bashir. The United States needs to give al-Bashir tangible assurances that cooperation with the international community will result in his survival, a pledge that American airpower cannot provide. ■■■

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Saving Darfur

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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 Ali 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.

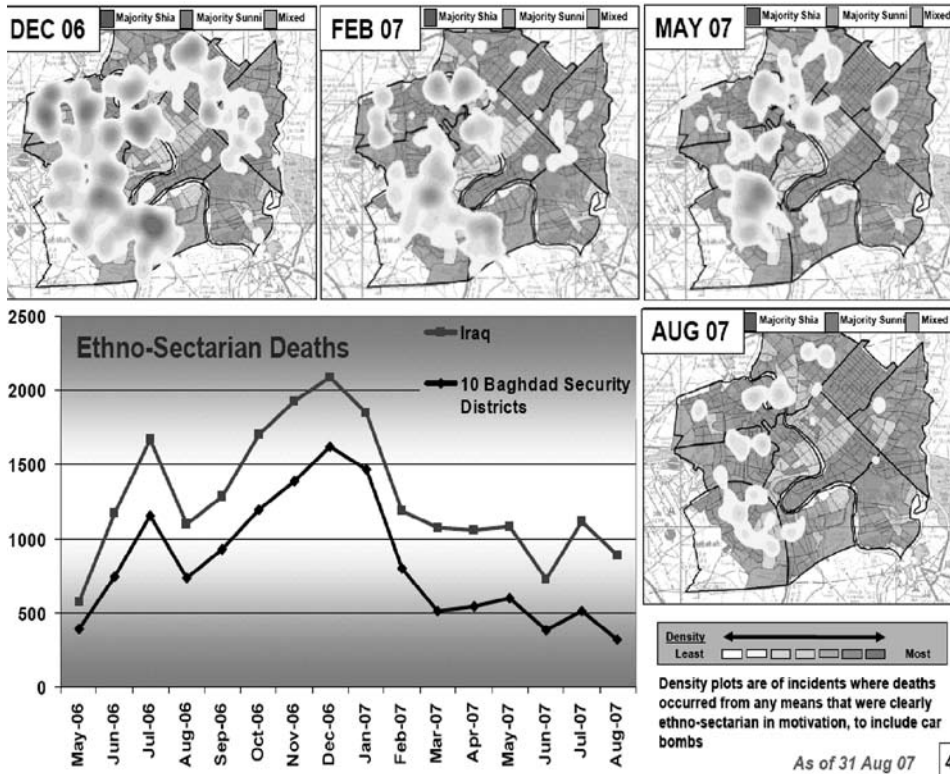


Figure 1. Ethno-sectarian violence. (Reprinted from *Annual Threat Assessment*, Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, 27 February 2007, http://www.odni.gov/testimonies/20070227_transcript.pdf.)

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.

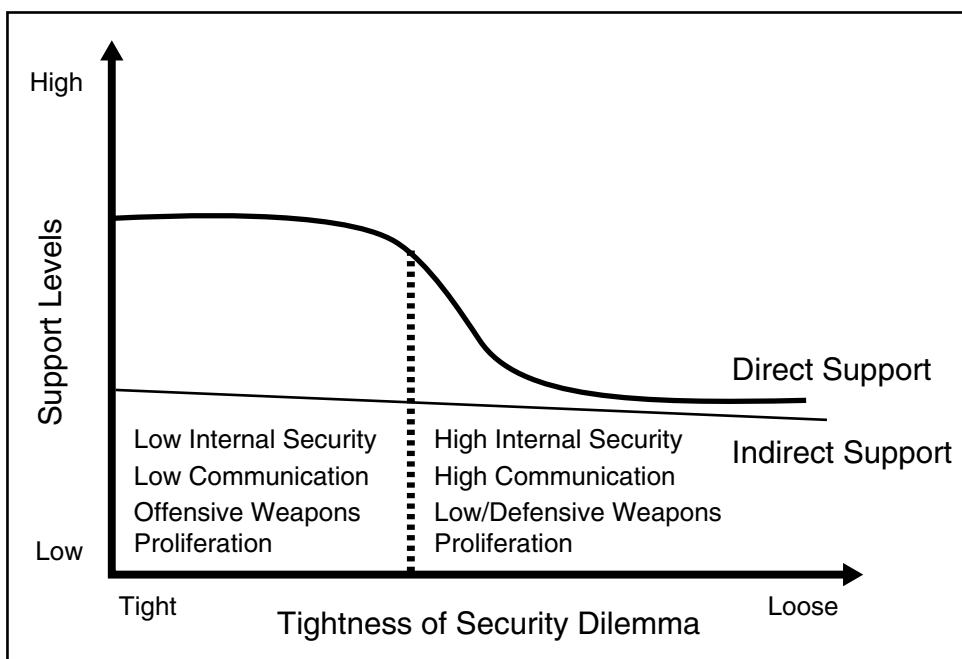


Figure 2. Iranian support level

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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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.
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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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