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NEWS ANALYSIS

Iran Was on Edge; Now It's on Top

The war in Iraq has bolstered the regime's influence in the region and made it bolder.

By Megan K. Stack and Borzou Daragahi, Times Staff Writers
February 18, 2006

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BAGHDAD — The Islamic government in neighboring Iran watched with trepidation in March 2003 when U.S.-led troops stormed Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime and start remaking the political map of the Mideast.

In retrospect, the Islamic Republic could have celebrated: The war has left America's longtime nemesis with profound influence in the new Iraq and pushed it to the apex of power in the region.

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Emboldened by its new status and shielded by deep oil reserves, Tehran is pressing ahead with its nuclear program, daring the international community to impose sanctions. Iran is a Shiite Muslim nation with an ethnic Persian majority, and the blossoming of its influence has fueled the ambitions of long-repressed Shiites throughout the Arab world.

At the same time, Tehran has tightened alliances with groups such as Hamas, which recently won Palestinian elections, and with governments in Damascus and Beijing.

In the 1980s, Iran spent eight years and thousands of lives waging a war to overthrow Hussein,



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whose regime buffered the Sunni Muslim-dominated Arab world from Iran. But in the end, it took the U.S.-led invasion to topple Iraq's dictator and allow Iranian influence to spread through a chaotic, battle-torn country.

Now Iraq's fledgling democracy has placed power in the hands of the nation's Shiite majority and its Kurdish allies, many of whom lived as exiles in Iran and maintain strong religious, cultural and linguistic ties to it. The two groups sit atop most of Iraq's oil, and both seek a decentralized government that would give them maximum control of it. A weak central government would also limit Sunni influence.

The proposed changes have aggravated ancient tensions between the two branches of Islam, not to mention Arabs and Iranians. Neighboring countries have historical and tribal links to Iraq's Sunnis.

"A weak Iraq is now sitting next to a huge, mighty Iran. Now the only counterpart to Iran is not a regional power, but a foreign power like the United States," said Abdel Khaleq Abdullah, a political analyst and television host in Dubai. "This is unsustainable. It's bad for [Persian] Gulf security. It's given Iran a sense of supremacy that we all feel."

Fear of a Shiite Iraq has helped shape the Sunni Arab world's view of the insurgency in that country. Although many revile the violence, there is also a quiet sense that the insurgents are fighting on behalf of Sunnis, standing up for their sect in the face of American and Iranian attempts to dominate Iraq.

Some Sunni extremists, jihadis from Yemen to Morocco, have been drawn to Iraq to attack symbols of Shiite power.

"When they attack the Shiites, they think they are attacking the Iranian influence," said Mustafa Alani, a counter-terrorism expert at the Gulf Research Center in Dubai. "They think they're attacking Iranian agents. To them, it's a legitimate target."


Though Iran owes much of its newfound strength to the war in Iraq, that's not the only event that has benefited it. The U.S. eliminated another foe, the Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan, in 2001.

Meanwhile, hard-liners in Tehran centralized their power and quashed dissent after winning control of the government in elections that brought President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to office last year. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asked Congress this week to increase 2006 spending on promoting democracy in Iran, to \$85 million from \$10 million.

Rising oil prices have deepened Iran's value as a strategic partner and dramatically increased its assets.

Keenly aware that it is playing with a strong hand, Iran is working to establish itself as a power to be reckoned with beyond Iraq. The government's increasing confidence can be seen in its aggressive insistence on the right to a nuclear program.

In 2003, when the secret program first became an international controversy, Tehran sought to calm concerns with a conciliatory, soft-spoken tone. Now talks with three European powers have failed, and it is pressing ahead with uranium enrichment and even hinting that it might pull out of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. It also has sharpened its rhetoric.

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At a news conference in January, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi unleashed a torrent of sarcasm and taunts at Europe. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was "ignorant," he said, and French President Jacques Chirac "doesn't understand democracy."

The possibility that Iran will develop nuclear weapons is another worry for the Sunni-dominated Arab world.

When Jordan's King Abdullah II warned a year ago with uncharacteristic bluntness that the emergence of a new government in Iraq could create a "Shiite crescent," Shiites in Iraq reacted angrily and Jordanian officials insisted the king had been misunderstood.

But many analysts believe he meant exactly what he said: that a fortified Iranian influence now stretches throughout Iraq, through the Kurdistan region into Turkey, to an ever weaker Syria and down into Lebanon's Hezbollah-dominated south, on Israel's border. Iran's hand also stretches into the heart of the Arabian peninsula through Shiite communities scattered in the Persian Gulf countries.

The roots of distrust between Sunnis and Shiites are old, and Persian rulers have vied for centuries with Arab and Ottoman rivals. But until the invasion of Iraq, a solid bloc of Sunni Arab governments ruled the northern and western coasts of the gulf. Strong, oil-rich Iraq and Saudi Arabia were seen as counterweights to Iran.

For many gulf Arabs, Iran is a long-feared boogeyman, quietly coming to dominate Iraqi politics with an eye to controlling those vast oil fields.

"We fought a war together to keep Iran from occupying Iraq. . . . Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason," Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal told the Council on Foreign Relations in New York last year.

Sunni Arab leaders across the region worry about a lessening of their power, wonder whether they've fallen out of favor with the Americans, and fret over increasing threats to their dominance over Shiites at home.

"The U.S. knows everything and they're allowing everything to happen," said Adel Mawda, a Sunni sheik and legislator in Bahrain's parliament. "They know very well the Sunnis have lost a lot, and they are not defending them."

The example of Iraq has inspired many Shiites living under the rule of Sunni governments to become more outspoken in demanding their due.

In Saudi Arabia, the Shiite minority is concentrated in the east, the same turf that covers the kingdom's vast oil reserves. For Saudi Shiites, the war in Iraq has helped deliver increased political participation and unprecedented religious freedoms. For the first time, Shiites have been permitted to openly celebrate the Shiite holiday of Ashura with traditional processions.

Saudi Arabia is leery that Iran may diminish its importance as a regional power broker, analysts say. They cite Riyadh's involvement in trying to craft a compromise between Lebanon and Syria as evidence that Saudi Arabia is working overtime to establish its importance.

In tiny Bahrain, the example of Iraq has exacerbated tensions between a disadvantaged Shiite majority and the ruling Sunni minority. Shiites have taken to the streets in a series of increasingly volatile demonstrations in recent months, and sectarian fault lines have deepened.

"It's reached the point where the community wants to go to the street, to make uprising, to make a revolution," said Sheik Ali Salman, president of Bahrain's largest Shiite organization, Al Wefaq. "Nobody wants it to happen. But when the government doesn't want to deal with it, we can't promise it won't happen. It's not in our hands."

Iran is also showing a more overt interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nurturing its long-standing ties to the Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas militant groups. President Ahmadinejad, like those groups, has called for the destruction of the Jewish state.

The upset victory of Hamas in recent Palestinian elections also promises to boost Tehran's regional role. If the United States and the European Union back away diplomatically and withdraw funding from the Palestinians, some analysts think Iran will have an opportunity to fill in the void as a longtime supporter of Hamas, gaining an unprecedented foothold in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Syria, internationally alienated over suspicions that it has played a role in political assassinations in Lebanon, has also been embraced by Iran. Just days after the slaying of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri plunged Syria into deeper diplomatic distress, Tehran and Damascus announced a "united front" to meet any threats.

There is long-standing kinship between the Shiite state and Syria's ruling Allawite sect, an offshoot of Shiism. Analysts describe the two countries, along with Hezbollah, as a defiant coalition that finds common ground in its standoff with the international community.

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Stack reported from Bahrain and Daragahi from Baghdad.

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