



Going Wide

(Published in *The New York Sun's*, February 13, 2007)

[Mark Steyn](#)

Colaboraciones n° 1492

February 14, 2007

Eli Lake had an interesting story the other day about various Iranian documents recently found in Iraq. According to a US intelligence official, the cache confirms that "Iran is working closely with both the Shiite militias and Sunni Jihadist groups."

Got that? In Iraq's alleged Sunni-Shia "civil war", Iran has checked the both-of-the-above box. On the face of it, that doesn't make a lot of sense - if, by "sense", you mean the wise old foreign-policy "realism" of the Iraq Study Group types. You may recall that Messrs Baker, Hamilton and co assured us that Iran had an "interest in avoiding chaos in Iraq". Apparently, Iran feels differently.

And what they're doing suggests a clearer headed view of the situation than the unreal realpolitik crowd in

Washington can muster. Why would Shia Iran support Sunni Iraqis who kill Shia Iraqis?

Because Iraq is not about Iraq. It's about America.

The mullahs get that, even if the entire Democratic Party and half the Republicans don't. It's in Iran's interest for the US adventure in Mesopotamia to end in a failure so chastening if not traumatizing that Washington withdraws from the region. So to that end they have arranged a proxy war. Once upon a time, every itchy-bitsy dust-up on the planet was a proxy war: the Soviets had their guy in North Wackistan, and the west had its man in South Wackistan, and they went at it and one of them came out on top. But, since the Cold War, we seem to have lost the knack of picking sides in

proxy wars so the Iranians saved us the trouble and picked both sides. For three years, the naysayers kept assuring us there was a “civil war” in Iraq, and the Iraqis kept declining to show up for it. Then the Iranians decided to get serious about it, and to them it doesn’t matter a whole lot whether Shia Iraqis kill Sunni Iraqis or vice-versa. Indeed, a straightforward “civil war” in Iraq would be over very quickly: There aren’t a lot of Sunnis and the Shia could deal with them swiftly and nastily. Hence, Tehran’s admirably bipartisan approach.

Iran appreciates what fewer and fewer Washington panjandrums grasp – that Iraq is but one front in a broader conflict. These days we spend an inordinate amount of time obsessing on micro-features of the Iraqi internal scene – the merits of this or that party over this or that militia, how such and such a parliamentarian brings leverage to bear on such and such a cleric. We ought to understand, as the Iranians do, that our strategy in Iraq has to advance our objectives in the wider war. So, for example, increasing troop numbers will be a waste of time if Washington, in effect, falls for the role in which the Iranians have cast it – the third party stuck in the middle of an unending sectarian struggle. You might stabilize Baghdad, but not for long. Increasing troop numbers would be useful only if it advanced our broader interests.

Colin Powell famously framed his advice on Iraq in Pottery Barn terms: you break it, you own it. But, as I point out in my book, after the

fall of Saddam our enemies concluded the opposite: we didn’t have the guts to break it; therefore, we didn’t own it. In being willing to supply Sunni terror groups with the wherewithal to bomb Shia mosques, Iran is demonstrating it does have the guts to break it - and may well end up owning it.

America, of course, cannot really “break” Iraq: it fights with one hand tied behind its back, constrained not only by the UN, the media et al but by its sense of itself as a civilized democracy. Therefore, any troop surge in the cause of a defensive policing operation will by definition be transitory. You cannot break this enemy fighting his stooges in Baghdad and al-Anbar.

At the risk of spending the whole column quoting myself, here’s another reprise. In the summer of 2002, Amr Moussa, Secretary-General of the Arab League, warned BBC listeners that a US invasion would “threaten the whole stability of the Middle East”. I wrote: “He’s missing the point: *that’s* the reason it’s such a great idea.” Invading Iraq made sense because it offered the best way to prick the puffed-up pustule of regional stability. We seem to have forgotten that. The Iranians haven’t. They’re at war with us, but they reserve the right to pick the kind of war that suits them. Tank battles, naval bombardments, air strikes would be a disaster for them: that kind of war they’d lose very quickly. But asymmetrical insurgencies suits them just fine: that kind of war grinds down the superpower.

I'm not advocating instant bombardments of Tehran. But Iran has plenty of proxies: some are strong, some aren't. Syria is a weak proxy which nevertheless has been allowed to subvert post-Saddam for almost four years. The argument made by George W Bush - we're fighting them over there so we don't have to fight them here - is a good one: it's always better to wage war

on foreign soil. But, psychologically, in the eyes of the world, Iraq for the moment isn't "foreign" soil: it's ours. So the Administration should follow its catchphrase to its logical conclusion: let's fight on the offense on enemy turf, so we don't have to play defense on ours. If Iran can arrange both sides of a "civil war" on our side of the border, why can't we cause some trouble on theirs?

©Mark Steyn, 2007