
Geopolitical Diary : Iran's View of the Surge.

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U.S. forces raided an Iranian consular office on Thursday in the Iraqi city of Arbil and captured several people. This is the second operation of this kind in a month against Iranians in Iraq, but this one took place shortly after the end of U.S. President George W. Bush's speech announcing a new "surge" of troops into the country. The Iranians, obviously, objected strenuously to the raid, which they argued was carried out without the approval of the Iraqi government -- diplomatically important since it was an office of the Iranian Consulate. The United States did not comment directly, but clearly couldn't care less.

We have been talking about the psychological and political dimension of Washington's new strategy. Obviously, the increase in troops, rather than the drawdown expected after the Democratic victory and the Iraq Study Group report, was a surprise to the Iranians. It seems that the Bush administration is now trying to increase the pressure. The Israeli discussion of using nuclear weapons against Iraq, the report that the CIA has been authorized to act against Hezbollah (which is Iran's asset in Lebanon), attacks on Iranian offices in Iraq, and statements by various Bush administration officials warning Tehran, taken together, point to a concerted effort to intimidate Iran.

The question, of course, is whether Iran finds itself intimidated.

Certainly, the world has changed since November 2006, when the Iranians reasonably felt they were on the verge of the strategic triumph of dominating Iraq. Washington has now taken the game to extra innings. But extra innings do not mean victory. From the Iranian point of view, it would seem, the fundamentals have not changed much. The United States is still in the game with too little, and too late; Israeli nuclear strikes would create an interesting political dynamic for Iran, even more interesting than having nukes; Hezbollah can take care of itself against the CIA; and the U.S. raids in Iraq are pinpricks.

At the same time, the Iranians are also aware of American resiliency and American deviousness. They recall how the Iraqi invasion of Iran bogged down the revolution for a decade and how the United States quietly manipulated the situation. They watched the Soviet Union collapse after the United States seemed to be a declining power in the 1970s. There are leaders in Iran who remember that the Americans have enormous reserves of power and resources and a very unpredictable political process.

Things always look better on the other side of the hill. From the Iranian point of view -- as opposed to the gloomy American view -- the United States is resourceful and treacherous. As events diverge from the expected path, the Iranians, at least some of them, have to be wondering whether they have made another major miscalculation. So, just as the Americans are gloomily trying one last gambit, the Iranians are wondering if their strategic hopes are going to fade.

There are interesting developments in Iranian politics that have been discussed here before. With Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei apparently ill, and impeachment moves in the works against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, one wonders how much of this apparent instability is due to unease over the possibility that the Iranians are more vulnerable than they might appear. Iranian politics are opaque, and it is not clear whether any of

this is serious; but still, it is there and has arisen at the same time that the United States has shifted policy and defied expectations.

Obviously, this is Bush's hope. He hopes that he can force Iran to re-evaluate its position in light of his unexpected moves. That might seem unlikely from an American point of view, but we have to wonder whether the Iranians see things as Americans do. Pessimism and exaggerated fears could well be endemic in this situation.

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