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As US fades, Iran ups the ante in Iraq

By Shahir Shahidsaless

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In the chaos following the disputed June presidential elections in Iran, journalist Spencer Ackerman reported that the administration of United States President Barack Obama "insisted that it would not interfere with the struggle for power between regime-backed President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and the thousands of demonstrators who contend the election was stolen".

It didn't take long, however, for the world to learn that this policy was quickly fine-tuned and adjusted to Iran's expanding socio-political crisis.

Four days after the election, according to a report released by Reuters, the US State Department admitted that "it had contacted the social networking service, Twitter, to urge it to delay a planned upgrade that would have cut daytime services to Iranians who are disputing their election".

The New York Times also confirmed that the so-called "Twitter Revolution" was helping supporters of defeated reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, and claimed a Twitter account was responsible for "online attacks" with the aim "to crash government websites by overwhelming them with traffic".

Following the instructions posted on Twitter, and in conjunction with a relentless 24-hour effort led by some Iranian-run websites based in the US, almost all major government websites in Iran were down for several days.

The Iranian government battled back by filtering websites affiliated with Mousavi, blocking popular Western social and political sites and electronically jamming the BBC, the Voice of

America and Iranian opposition TV channels broadcast from Los Angeles.

Confronting the censorship of what one senator called a "cruel regime", the US Senate passed The Victims of Iranian Censorship Act, known as VOICE, which provides US\$50 million "to support the Iranian people as they seek, receive and impart information ... through any media without interference". VOICE is the first move by a foreign government to openly challenge the Iranian government's filtering of websites and its heavy censorship of TV stations.

During and after the post-election crackdown on the protests, the Iranian government constantly claimed there were links between the riots and foreign powers. Most observers considered this to be baseless; a claim manufactured to repress the protesters. But on August 9, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton broke ranks with the administration's official stance - to stay out of the dispute between the protesters and the Iranian government - and said the US was "doing a lot behind the scenes" to help the protesters.

This statement caught many observers by surprise, and gave credibility to the Iranian government's claim. Suddenly, US interference was no longer just a conspiracy theory. The ultra-conservatives in Iran immediately picked up the statement and repeatedly used it to justify their heavy-handed clampdown on dissent.

In his speech delivered on August 26, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused the "enemies" and "the main plotters" who "used all their media and electronic capabilities and intensified the presence of their agents at the scene to destroy the glorious event [very high rate of public participation in the election]".

For almost two months, while the Iranian government was facing the rumblings of opposition and was busy stifling the voice of dissent, the US used the opportunity to step up pressure on Iran. Threatening statements underscoring the September deadline for Iran to respond to the US invitation of dialogue over the nuclear issue, took over Washington's line towards Tehran. The Iranian government didn't react.

Ahmadinejad fiercely attacked "enemy states" in a fiery speech before the Majlis (parliament). "The Iranian nation has for 30 years endured the actions of enemy states with magnanimity, but if you do not desist from your interference, [Iran] will slap you in the face so hard that you will not be able to find your way back home," he said on August 16, adding, "The 'sir' who speaks of change [Obama], what does he want to change?"

The Iranian political system and Khamenei's credibility have been damaged locally and internationally by the post-election events. Still, the ruling bloc has been able to contain the unrest, albeit at a relatively high cost. Although the atmosphere remains tense, the mass street protests and the severity of the pro-reform threat have faded.

To view the existing situation in Iran as an opportunity and to build policies based on this perception, experts believe, may lead to unpredictable consequences.

David Ignatius, a renowned American political writer, concluded in his article, "Creative

Opportunism on Iran", that the current situation in Iran was a "golden moment". If this assessment influences policymakers in the US, however, aggressive moves could push the Iranian government past restraint and things could get out of control.

This is where the situation in Iraq comes in. Recent bombings at the Iraqi Finance and Foreign ministries killed 100 people and wounded hundreds more. This was just one of many bombings that has deteriorated Iraq's security in the past two months. In several of these incidents, Iran's involvement has been alleged.

There are contradicting reports about the perpetrators of these attacks. In a televised statement, an ex-member of dictator Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party confessed to organizing the Finance Ministry attack but did not mention anything about the Foreign Ministry bombing. Later, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki blamed an alliance between the Ba'ath Party and al-Qaeda.

Events took a striking turn last week when the powerful Iraqi intelligence chief (Mokhaberat), Mohammed Al-Shahwani, resigned in the wake of the bombings. An article by Ignatius in the Washington Post claims Shahwani quit last week "because of what he viewed as Maliki's attempts to undermine his service and allow Iranian spies to operate freely". Ignatius also quotes an unnamed Iraqi intelligence source that "forensic evidence points to a possible Iranian role".

The Iraqi newspaper al-Zaman also claimed that Shahwani's resignation was because he submitted information to Iraqi officials regarding the involvement of Iranians in the bombings, but was ignored. These accusations are being leveled while tension is rising between Syria and Iraq over the handover of two ex-members of the ousted Ba'ath party who have alleged links to the attacks. Syria has stated that the allegations are fabricated for "political goals".

In another development, a new Iranian-backed Shi'ite coalition of five major fundamentalist parties, some other small parties and some independent individuals, has been created to pave the way for a win in January 2010 elections. This coalition is named The Iraqi National Alliance.

Observers believe that if Maliki doesn't join this group, he will have little chance at re-election. Whether Maliki's Da'wa Party, which has close ties to Tehran, will also join the coalition is not yet clear. In either case, 2010 will almost certainly mark the official rise of Iran as a foreign power in Iraq.

According to the Washington Post, a top Iraqi intelligence officer said that in five years, absent the US military, Iraq would be a colony of Iran. This is an exaggeration, but it is true that while US forces are increasingly becoming spectators in Iraq, Iran is systematically increasing its influence.

If Washington, as many analysts believe, has decided to take advantage of Iran's internal unrest to push the government on the nuclear issue, there is a crucial point to be considered: the arena of confrontation won't be picked by the US alone. When push comes to shove, the

Iranian government will expand confrontation to multiple fronts, and Iraq will be its first choice.

In its latest issue, Sobhe Sadegh, the official press organ of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, responded to Obama's engagement policy with Iran by claiming, "We don't think globally and act locally. We think and act globally."