

February 16, 2007

## **Q. & A.: Iranian Weapons in Iraq**

By **DOUGLAS JEHL**

In recent days, American officials, including President Bush, have asserted that the Iranian government has been playing a role in providing lethal weapons to Shiite militants in Iraq that have been used in deadly attacks against American troops. Here some of the questions that have arisen about the American assertions, and some of the evolving answers.

### **1) What are these weapons, and why does the United States government describe them as so alarming?**

Iraq is awash with weapons, and increasing numbers of those recovered by the American military there, including some shoulder-fired missiles, are of Iranian origin, American military officials said. But they have become most concerned about the weapons known as “explosively formed penetrators,” are a particularly lethal type of roadside bomb. Triggered by infrared sensors, the bombs propel a nearly-molten ball of metal at a speed that can penetrate most American vehicle armor. Overall, they account for only a small fraction of attacks in Iraq and of overall American deaths since 2003. But American military intelligence officials say the casualties inflicted by E.F.P.’s are disproportionately high. They have been used almost exclusively by Shiite militias, particularly in Baghdad. Since 2004, the weapons have killed more than 170 American soldiers and wounded 620 more since June 2004, the officials say. The number of E.F.P. attacks has increased substantially, particularly in Baghdad, where it reached an all-time high in December 2006.

### **2) On what basis does the United States claim that these weapons are linked to Iran?**

The claims are based on information that ranges from near-conclusive to the circumstantial, American officials say. The strongest evidence is forensic, based on an examination of intact E.F.P.’s intercepted as they are shipped into Iraq from across the Iranian border. Similarly, some weapons parts recovered after attacks have borne Iranian markings or other indicators characteristic of Iranian manufacture.

Other information is based on human intelligence. American officials note that the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah used similar weapons extensively in southern Lebanon, and say they have intelligence that Lebanese Hezbollah forces provided training to Shiite militants. They say that Iranians and Iraqis detained in recent American raids on an Iranian office in Baghdad and another site in Erbil have provided information linking the weapons shipments to the Quds Force, an elite branch of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Other claims appear to be analytical conclusions based on inference rather than hard evidence. For example, American officials say they do not believe there are facilities in Iraq capable of manufacturing

the weapons but cannot prove that one does not exist. Similarly, they say they have been no evidence that the weapons are available on the black market.

American officials say they possess other, detailed information linking the weapons to Iran that they remain unwilling to publicly disclose. Some of that information, including details about the weapons' manufacture and their effectiveness, is being withheld by The New York Times at the request of American military and intelligence officials, who argue that its public disclosure would compromise intelligence sources and methods and could endanger American lives.

### **3) Why has the Bush administration made its assertions public only recently?**

In fact, American military and intelligence officials have expressed private concerns about Iranian links to E.F.P.'s for well over a year. An Aug. 6, 2005, article in The New York Times attributed to American military and intelligence officials growing concerns among American military and intelligence officials about more sophisticated roadside bombs that could be traced to Iran. Since then, American commanders and Bush administration officials have periodically expressed general concern about what they described as Iran's support for Shiite militants.

Nevertheless, the American assertions have become much more direct and vocal in the past month. The timing appears to be part of a cycle related to the sharp increase of attacks using the weapons against American forces in 2006. Those attacks prompted deep concern among American military commanders in Baghdad, and they sought authorization for a more vigorous response.

In response, American officials now say, President Bush late in the year secretly authorized American military forces in Iraq to raid Iranian facilities in Iraq suspected of playing a role in the weapons shipments. Those raids were not publicly announced, but resulted in the detention of some Iranian diplomats, and when that fact became known it prompted the Iraqi government, the press, and others pressed the White House and military commanders in Baghdad to justify the aggressive American actions.

On Feb. 2, the administration made public portions of a new National Intelligence Estimate that said Iran was providing "lethal support" to Shiite militias in Iraq, but described the conflict in Iraq as largely self-sustaining. An article in The New York Times on Feb. 10, based on weeks of reporting, provided the first extensive account of the American assertions, which it said represented a consensus view among American intelligence agencies. That article was based on interviews with a broad range of civilian and military officials in which The Times solicited views from agencies that had been skeptical about the extent to which Iran was responsible for attacks in Iraq. A day after the article was published, three American military and intelligence officials outlined the assertions to a large group of reporters at a briefing in Baghdad that had been postponed

for several weeks while the administration debated how much information to make public.

The most specific, public assertions by the United States came on Feb. 14, when President Bush, at a news conference in Washington, and Maj. Gen. William Caldwell, the American military spokesman in Baghdad, both presented detailed accounts of the American claims.

#### **4) What role has the Iranian government played?**

Iran has denied all knowledge of any weapons transfers to Iraqis and accused the United States of trying to provoke a confrontation.

American officials have generally stopped short of directly blaming the Iranian government for any weapons transfers. They say that the question of high-level Iranian culpability remains the weakest link in their intelligence chain, and that their views are based primarily on supposition. Most notably, Mr. Bush said on Feb. 14 that he did not know whether the actions had been specifically directed Iran's leaders.

Nevertheless, the American message has often been contradictory, helping to fuel skepticism of those who suggest that the Bush administration is overstating its case. At the Feb. 11 background briefing in Baghdad, officials asserted, without providing direct evidence, that Iranian leaders at the highest levels had authorized smuggling those weapons into Iraq for use against the Americans. Within two days, Gen. Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had back away from that claim, saying that he did not believe the evidence "does not translate that the Iranian government, per se, for sure, is directly involved in doing this."

American intelligence officials say they believe it is highly unlikely that weapons transfers by Quds Force operatives to Shiite militias would occur without authorization from senior Iranian officials. But they describe this conclusion as an assessment, and acknowledge that it is primarily inferential. ""

#### **5) Hasn't anyone learned from the fiasco involving prewar intelligence on Iraq?**

This is exactly the question being posed by many people skeptical of the administration's claims. They say the fact that prewar conclusions about Iraq's weapons arsenal proved to have been so wrong should make American intelligence agencies cautious about reaching hard judgments based on limited facts.

American military and intelligence officials say they have learned many lessons, and they say their assertions about Iran were subjected to intensive internal vetting. Stephen J. Hadley, the national security adviser, has said the briefing in Baghdad was postponed at one point because of concern that a draft presentation would have overstated the American case. American intelligence officials say the conclusions have been embraced by representatives all 16 intelligence agencies, under the supervision of the director of national intelligence, a post created after the Iraq intelligence fiasco in part to help subject future judgments to more intense scrutiny. In conducting interviews, The New York Times has found a consensus

of support for the American assertions, even among officials whose agencies had previously been skeptical that Iran was playing a significant role in arming Shiite militants.

### **6) Is the Bush administration preparing for war with Iran?**

The United States has begun to respond, in the form of the raids in December and January that resulted in the detention of a number of Iranians in Iraq. Some of those detained are still in American custody, and Mr. Bush has vowed that the United States will take additional action against individuals or networks in Iraq involved in the weapons shipments.

But there have also been repeated indications that American action is being tightly constrained. A top official of Iran's Quds Force who was captured in a December raid was released by American forces after it was determined that he had diplomatic status. American officials have said any actions against Iranian targets will be confined to Iraqi territory and will not extend across the border into Iran. Both Robert M. Gates, the new defense secretary, and Mr. Bush have said repeatedly in recent weeks that they were not seeking to lay the groundwork for military action against Iran.

Democrats and other critics of the administration have nevertheless expressed skepticism about those claims, with some saying they believe Mr. Bush is using the exercise as a provocation in order to seek a military confrontation with Iran. Iran's nuclear program remains a major concern to the United States. The Bush administration has used diplomacy as its primary tool to try to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear activities, but the administration has said it will not rule out the eventual use of military action.