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Hezbollah Trains Iraqis in Iran, Officials Say

By MICHAEL R. GORDON
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BAGHDAD — Militants from the Lebanese group [Hezbollah](#) have been training Iraqi militia fighters at a camp near Tehran, according to American interrogation reports that the United States has supplied to the Iraqi government.

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An American official said the account of Hezbollah's role was provided by four Shiite militia members who were captured in [Iraq](#) late last year and questioned separately.

The United States has long charged that the Iranians were training Iraqi militia fighters in [Iran](#), which Iran has consistently denied, and there have been previous reports about Hezbollah operatives in Iraq.

But the Americans say the reports of Hezbollah's role at the Iranian camp offer important details about Iranian

assistance to the militias, including efforts Iran appears to be making to train the fighters in unobtrusive ways.

Material from the interrogations was given to the Iraqi government, along with other data about captured Iranian arms, before it sent a delegation to Tehran last week to discuss allegations of Iranian aid to militia groups.

It is not known if the delegation confronted its Iranian hosts with the information, or how the Iranians responded.

Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#)'s government announced Sunday that it would conduct its own inquiry into accusations of Iranian intervention in Iraq and document any interference.

"We have experienced in the past that Iran interfered and has special groups in Iraq, but Iran also had evidence that they were participating in positive ways in security," Ali al-Dabbagh, a senior Iraqi government spokesman, said in an interview.

"We would like the Iranians to keep their commitment, the commitments they made in meetings with the prime minister and with other groups that have visited them," he said. "They had made the promise that Iran would be playing a supportive role."

There has been debate among experts about the extent to which Iran is responsible for instability in Iraq. But President Bush and other American officials, in public castigations of Iran, have said that Iran has been consistently meddling in Iraq and that the Iranians have long sought to arm and train Iraqi militias, which the American military has called "special groups."

In a possible effort to be less obtrusive, it appears that Iran is now bringing small groups

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of Iraqi Shiite militants to camps in Iran, where they are taught how to do their own training, **American officials say**.

The militants then return to Iraq to teach comrades how to fire rockets and mortars, fight as snipers or assemble explosively formed penetrators, a particularly lethal type of roadside bomb made of Iranian components, **according to American officials**. The officials describe this approach as “training the trainers.”

The training, **the Americans say**, is carried out at several camps near Tehran that are overseen by the Quds Force of the **Islamic Revolutionary Guard** Command, and the instruction is carried out by militants from Hezbollah, which has long been supported by the Quds Force. **American officials say** the Hezbollah militants perform several important roles for the Iranians.

First, **they say**, the Iranians believe it is useful to have Arabs train fellow Arabs. Second, Hezbollah has considerable experience in planning operations and using weapons and explosives in Lebanon.

According to American officials, the four Shiite militants who provided the information on Hezbollah’s role were captured between last September and December after they had returned from training in Iran. They were questioned individually and provided similar accounts, **the American officials said**.

The captured men described themselves in the accounts as part of a class of 16 militants who crossed into Iran from southern Iraq and were taken to a camp near Tehran, where they studied in a classroom and in the field. Some had been in Iran several times as part of a program that **American officials said** was aimed at turning them into “master trainers” and which could last several years.

According to their interrogation reports, the militiamen believed that militants from other countries were also being trained at the camp, an impression based on hearing snippets of conversations in other dialects and languages. But the group was kept separate and was not allowed to mingle with others.

American officials say that they believe that similar classes have been arranged for other groups of Iraqi militants, but that the effort appears to be compartmentalized to ensure security.

An American official said that an Iraqi who facilitated the militiamen’s travel to Iraq was also captured and confessed that he had been paid by an Iranian. **The official summed up** the information from the **interrogation reports** but did not make them available. He declined to be identified because the information had not been released publicly.

Other evidence of Iranian involvement that **American officials** have provided to Iraqi officials involves details of captured Iranian arms, like 81-millimeter mortars and 107-millimeter rockets that **American officials say** bear markings indicating that they were made this year. The weapons have a particular type of fuse and are painted in a way that **American experts say is** unique to Iran.

The Iraqi military also seized Iranian-made weapons with 2008 markings during their offensive last month in the southern port of Basra, **according to American officials**.

The reports of Iran’s training program and the discovered weapons caches are politically very significant. When Mr. Maliki visited Iran in August, the Iranians sought to reassure the Iraqis that they were not intervening in Iraq’s internal affairs.

The Bush administration, which has sought to draw attention to Iran’s support for militias, has cited the interrogation reports and evidence of recently made Iranian arms as an indication that the Iranian officials were not keeping their word.

“We don’t want to be at war with Iran, and we will not allow anyone to settle their scores with Iran on Iraqi soil,” Mowaffak al-Rubaie, the national security adviser to Mr. Maliki,

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said Saturday in an interview. "But at the same time, we don't want Iran to settle their scores with the United States on Iraqi soil."

Discussing the delegation's recent visit to Iran, Mr. Dabbagh, the government spokesman, and close associates of Mr. Maliki familiar with details of the trip said the group did not meet with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#), but met with leading officials from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the intelligence agency.

Jalaluddin al-Sagheer, a prominent member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a major Shiite political party, asserted that the Iraqi Shiite politicians would be loath to take any position that would alienate Iran.

"Iran is not an easy country for us," he said. "We have a long border with them; we have a long history of relations with them; we have strong commercial ties with them and we cannot hurt that because of copies of documents."

There have been earlier indications of Hezbollah involvement. Ali Mussa Daqduq, a senior Lebanese Hezbollah commander, was captured in Iraq in March 2007. At first he refused to talk, presumably to avoid giving away his Lebanese accent. As a consequence, he was initially dubbed Hamid the Mute **by American officials**.

According to American officials, Mr. Daqduq eventually acknowledged under questioning that he had come to Iraq to evaluate the performance of Shiite militias that the organization had played a role in training. He was making his fourth trip to Iraq when he was captured. After his detention, Hezbollah militants appear to be less visible in Iraq, **American officials say**.

Alissa J. Rubin and Qais Mizher contributed reporting.

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