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British Find No Evidence Of Arms Traffic From Iran

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Troops in Southeast Iraq Test U.S. Claim of Aid for Militias

By [Ellen Knickmeyer](#)

Washington Post Foreign Service
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ON THE IRAQ-IRAN BORDER -- Since late August, British commandos in the deserts of far southeastern [Iraq](#) have been testing one of the most serious charges leveled by the United States against [Iran](#): that Iran is secretly supplying weapons, parts, funding and training for attacks on U.S.-led forces in Iraq.

A few hundred British troops living out of nothing more than their cut-down Land Rovers and light armored vehicles have taken to the desert in the start of what British officers said would be months of patrols aimed at finding the illicit weapons trafficking from Iran, or any sign of it.

There's just one thing.

"I suspect there's nothing out there," the commander, Lt. Col. David Labouchere, said last month, speaking at an overnight camp near the border. "And I intend to prove it."

Other senior British military leaders spoke as explicitly in interviews over the previous two months. [Britain](#), whose forces have

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had responsibility for security in southeastern Iraq since the war began, has found nothing to support the Americans' contention that Iran is providing weapons and training in Iraq, several senior military officials said.

"I have not myself seen any evidence -- and I don't think any evidence exists -- of government-supported or instigated" armed support on Iran's part in Iraq, British Defense Secretary Des Browne said in an interview in Baghdad in late August.

"It's a question of intelligence versus evidence," Labouchere's commander, Brig. James Everard of Britain's 20th Armored Brigade, said last month at his base in the southern region's capital, Basra. "One hears word of mouth, but one has to see it with one's own eyes. These are serious consequences, aren't they?"

They are. Allegations that Iran or its agents are providing military support for Iraqi Shiite Muslim militias and other armed groups is one of the most contentious issues raising tensions between Washington and Tehran. Most gravely, U.S. generals and diplomats accuse Iran of providing infrared triggers for special explosives that are capable of piercing heavy armor.

Evidence of Iranian armed intervention in Iraq is "irrefutable," one U.S. commander in Iraq, Brig. Gen. Michael Barbero, told Pentagon reporters in August. The lead U.S. military spokesman in Iraq renews the allegation almost weekly in Baghdad.

Iraq's remote Maysan province is "a funnel for Iranian munitions," said Wayne White, who led the State Department's Iraq intelligence team during the war and now is an adjunct scholar at the Washington-based Middle East Institute. White said that in the first year of the occupation a well-placed friend had seen "considerable physical evidence of it, and just about everyone in al-Amarah knew about it." Al-Amarah is the commonly used name of Maysan province.

Here in Maysan, Jasim Alawa Salum, an Iraqi father of 10 whose home is in a warren of thatched farmhouses near the border, agreed. "All troubles come

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from Iran," he said, bending his head to show a wound from the 1980s Iran-Iraq war.

But Maj. Dominic Roberts of the Queen's Dragoons said: "We have found no credible evidence to suggest there is weapons smuggling across the border."

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