

# Iraq Is the Best Option to Mediate Between Iran and the United States

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### Brief Analysis

**A**fter the June 13 meeting between Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and Japanese Prime Minister Abe failed to yield fruitful results, it has become clear that the United States and Iran have reached a deadlock without much of a solution on the horizon. Nevertheless, it is widely agreed among observers that the status quo is unsustainable. This conflict will have one of two outcomes: either full escalation and war or dialogue and peaceful resolution. The choice of a third-party to manage negotiations is crucial to determining which outcome occurs. While there are a few viable options, Iraq, which has both the relations and deep interest in maintaining peace between the two sides, is the best candidate to help build dialogue between the two states.

In the past few weeks, the United States and Iran have both continued to engage in escalatory actions. The downing of the American spy drone on June 20 by the Iranians and United States imposing new sanctions on the Supreme leader and several IRGC generals on June 24—along with President Trump's July 18 announcement that the United States has shot down an Iranian drone—has firmed up the deadlock.

It is clear Iran is hurting; their capacity to export oil has been reduced to below 500,000 bpd, while the minimum export requirement for keeping the economy afloat requires approximately 1.5 million bpd. Iranian officials have responded by stating in clear terms that if they are not able to export oil, others in the region should not be able to do so either. A missing Emirati oil tanker in the strait of Hormuz during the past week has increased the likelihood that this is not an empty threat. Meanwhile, the United States is playing the long game by continuing to apply 'maximum pressure' to Iran's economy through sanctions. The U.S. administration knows that these are having devastating effect on Iran's economy, and appear slated to maintain and enforce them by all means available.

Despite these developments, the United States has repeatedly reiterated a willingness to negotiate with the Iranians. Iran has generally rejected all calls for dialogue, though in the past few days Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has [indicated \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/18/iran-nuclear-deal-trump-mohammad-javad-zarif-sanctions\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/18/iran-nuclear-deal-trump-mohammad-javad-zarif-sanctions) that Iran would be willing to negotiate with the United States on nuclear inspections if sanctions are permanently lifted. Iran has characterized its unwillingness to negotiate on the basis that there is no guarantee the United States will respect any agreed-upon resolution or signed agreement after Washington walked away from the

JCPOA deal. Even so, both sides are still showing a willingness to compromise if the right circumstances are in place, as long as certain guarantees are put in place to placate both sides.

The main question then is in choosing an entity that both sides can work with to reach a compromise. Despite the failed Japanese attempts to act as a negotiator, there are two parties who are capable of playing this role: Iraq and Russia.

On the one hand, Russia could be well-positioned to serve as a negotiator. President Putin is well respected by both President Trump and the leadership in Iran. Russia is also an important ally of Iran, and has backed it in the face of many adversaries in the past. Iran listens and works closely with Russia on several strategic issues such as Syria and the JCPOA. And while Putin is not universally liked in the United States, President Trump has not shied away from showing admiration for President Putin and discussing their good working relationship. It is likely that President Trump would be open to listening to and working with President Putin were the Iranians brought to the negotiation table.

However, the Russians would not handle the negotiations without expecting something in return. Russia competes with the United States in arms and ballistic sales, they clash in pursuing energy policies and domination of geopolitics in the region, and the United States has also imposed sanctions on Russia over the Crimea conflict. As a result, Russian mediation would come at a hefty price tag that may prove more than President Trump is willing or able to pay.

This downside highlights the benefits of Iraqi mediation: the fundamental difference between Iraqi and Russian mediation is that a peaceful resolution of the conflict is in line with Iraq's interests. In fact, Iraq has the most to lose in the escalation of this conflict and most to gain from its peaceful settlement.

More broadly, Iraq's current administration—led by President Barham Salih and followed by Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi—have been pushing to put Iraq back on the diplomacy map for the Middle East and worldwide. Each leader has made multiple state visits to neighboring countries and has developed a number of trade deals regionally and with parts of Europe. The latest state visit by President Salih to the United Kingdom, where he met with both Prime Minister Theresa May and the Queen, is a notable declaration to the increasing status of Iraq in the arena of global diplomacy. Iraq also possesses unique influence inside of Iran through Najaf. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has millions of followers inside of Iran and cares a great deal for the plight of the Iranian people, could give Iraqi diplomacy a major boost by giving his blessing to such a mediation process.

Furthermore, Iraq has a strategic partnership with both countries, as both have major interests in Iraq that they need to protect and preserve. Iraq buys large amount of gas and electricity from Iran, in addition to many commodities such as food, construction material, car parts, and other goods. The trade level between the two countries has reached \$12 billion a year, with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani suggesting that this could rise to \$20 billion. The United States has operated as a strategic partner of Iraq in the fight against ISIS, and major U.S. companies such as Boeing, GE, and Exxon Mobil are significantly involved in Iraq; Exxon Mobil is supposed to sign a major deal with the Iraqi government worth \$53 billion. Moreover, the United States provides large-scale aid in the development of the technical ability of Iraqi armed forces and contributes immensely in stabilization and reconstruction of liberated areas from ISIS.

Since the eruption of the conflict between Iran and the United States, Iraq has managed to tread carefully in order to maintain an independent stance despite the enormous pressure applied by both sides. The Iranians have asked the Iraqi government on numerous occasions to take measures in reducing the effect of sanctions, such as reducing Iraq's oil production, but the Iraqi government has refused. In the same vein, the Americans have pushed Iraq to cease purchasing gas and electricity from Iran, but the Iraqi government has made it clear that it needs to continue

to purchase those commodities and maintain its trading ties with Iran.

Iraq's efforts to remain neutral are in line with the Iraqi government's new policy based on the concept of "Iraq first." This strategy is possible due to the working relationship and full cooperation between the country's three presidencies, the President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker. They have formed a formidable force in the middle of political chaos that usually dominates Iraqi politics and have been able to distance themselves from the daily political wrangling, and work diligently to execute the mandate given to them by the people of Iraq. They also work hard to maintain Iraq's sovereignty and strengthen its independence from any influence by either side.

This new administration in Baghdad will also be an asset to negotiations, as it is clearly in Iraqi interests to help the two sides engage in dialogue and, ultimately, successful negotiations. For this reason, both Iran and the United States are well advised to allow Iraq to adopt the role of mediator in order to bring about the peace needed by all sides. ❖

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