Building on a Vacuum:

Ways Forward after the U.S.-Iranian Meeting

by David Pollock **(/experts/david-pollock)**

May 30, 2007

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Brief Analysis

The May 28 meeting between the U.S. and Iranian ambassadors to Iraq was mostly notable for its length -- four hours -- and the lack of anything to show for all that time together. And the very next day, Iran announced that three detained Iranian Americans visiting their homeland, including renowned scholar and women's rights advocate Haleh Esfandiari, were being formally charged with espionage -- charges that would be merely laughable if they were not so tragic.

Wide Differences on Iraq

Equally regrettable is that the Baghdad meeting, which focused on U.S. and Iranian activities in Iraq, yielded no progress in making that country safer -- either for the Americans serving there or for the Iraqis living there. Both sides reiterated their formal positions of support for Iraq's security and stability, and each blamed the other for causing problems in that regard.

For example, U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker claimed to have "solid evidence linking Iran to the support of armed militant groups that are attacking our soldiers." He emphasized how the Quds (Jerusalem) Force -- a unit within Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) -- has been supporting "radical elements in the Jaish al-Mahdi" who might even be out of the control of their nominal leader, Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Iranian ambassador Hassan Kazemi Qomi, reportedly a former senior official in the Quds Force, countered that the United States had destabilized Iraq, "destroyed" its infrastructure, and defaulted on its duty to reconstitute Iraq's security forces.

Nevertheless, Ambassador Crocker told reporters that he was not disappointed by the meeting, if only because his expectations had been set so realistically low. Some commentators had hoped for more from the Bush administration's renewed acceptance of diplomatic discussions with Tehran. The parley was widely previewed in the press as the first official meeting since just after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

But this characterization ignores the useful U.S.-Iranian discussions, mostly in multilateral settings, held on the subject of Afghanistan from 1999 through 2002, both before and after the U.S.-led intervention against the Taliban following the September 11 attacks. It also ignores a less successful episode: the various high-level, initially secret "Iran-Contra" meetings held in Washington and Tehran in 1985-1986, during a critical juncture in the Iran-Iraq

War. Those meetings ended up trading shipments of Israeli HAWK missiles to Iran in exchange for American hostages held by Iranian-aided Hizballah terrorists in Lebanon -- only to find new hostages taken on Iranian orders once the first weapons were delivered.

Was the Baghdad meeting a case of deja vu all over again? Not exactly. For one thing, as Ambassador Crocker was at some pains to explain afterward, the meeting was not strictly bilateral, since Iraqi officials also participated. More important, the meeting was held openly, and no questionable deals were made. The flip side, unfortunately, is that very little was accomplished beyond the potentially valuable step of breaking the intermittent taboo on U.S.-Iranian negotiations.

Possible Next Steps

Realizing the potential of such negotiations -- while avoiding all the pitfalls of previous attempts to deal with Iran -- depends on the next steps taken through what is, thus far, merely a tiny opening. The following are a few practical suggestions for testing and perhaps expanding this opening.

Keep talking. This means that both the United States and Iran should stop hinting that they may set preconditions for further meetings about Iraq: in Ambassador Crocker's words, "Watching to see what action is taken" by Iran; or as Iranian foreign minister Manoucher Motaki would have it, waiting for an American admission of wrongdoing in Iraq. Instead, the United States should strive to keep this channel open unconditionally -- but without offering anything else unless that offer is to be reciprocated in some real fashion.

Keep in mind that while our leverage in Iran due to the U.S. presence in Iraq is low, it is not negligible. On any given day, Iran controls thousands of intelligence agents, tens of thousands of pilgrims, and millions of dollars of vital goods moving across its border with Iraq. Moreover, at the very moment when the United States is trying to put additional economic pressure on Tehran, Iranian and Iraqi officials are talking about joint oil and gas projects. They are even talking about opening an Iraqi branch of Iran's Bank Sepah -- the same bank against which the United States has just managed to impose international financial sanctions.

Yet, these issues can cut both ways: the United States could better coordinate with Iraq to use several of these connections as bargaining chips to promote improved Iranian behavior. Something similar could be done with the one concrete suggestion offered by Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki at the Baghdad meeting: an assurance that "the country would not be used as a launching ground for a U.S. attack on a neighbor." And Iraq's Kurdish regional government, which is still very grateful for past U.S. support and eager for more, could be prevailed upon to crack down harder on Iranian influence in its territory, even as the handover of formal security responsibility to local authorities is completed today.

Keep the Iranian nuclear issue firmly out of these bilateral discussions and on its separate, UN-driven track. Tehran may try to use its own leverage in Iraq to split the international consensus against its uranium enrichment program -- just when that consensus at last appears to be gaining ground. But there is simply too much at stake here for Washington to succumb to that temptation, or even to talk about it.

Keep regional reactions under close consideration. Arab friends of the United States are understandably nervous about such meetings with Iran, as their sparse official statements suggest. Arab media commentary generally views the Baghdad meeting as a sign of Washington's weakness in confronting Tehran's troublemaking in Iraq. The Saudi press, however, has been much more nuanced, for a change. It featured one piece welcoming Muqtada al-Sadr's newfound tolerance for Sunnis. Another, remarkably self-critical column argued that Arabs should finally come around to supporting the Maliki government in order to counter Iranian influence in Baghdad. One way to help manage this perceptual problem would be, as Iraqi vice president Tareq al-Hasimi has hinted, to include at least one prominent Arab Sunni politician in an Iraqi delegation to future U.S.-Iranian discussions about that country.

Consider a hostage swap. It is a fact, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice again asserted yesterday, that Iran's latest American prisoners and the Iranian agents under detention in Iraq are "not related." But another fact, to quote the May 29 edition of Tehran's hardline Hamshahri daily, is that "Iranian society expects its abducted diplomats to be released at the first stage of Iranian-U.S. talks." Washington could tell Iran that the "Irbil Five" Iranian agents, and the two others picked up elsewhere in Iraq, might have been released long ago had Iran not taken British sailors hostage in February. Those Iranians might also have been released a bit after that crisis, had not Iran then thrown innocent American citizens in jail. If those innocents are freed, there would be no reason to hold the Iranians -- whose intelligence value has likely lapsed by now -- any longer.

Those concerned about the "revolving door" or "frequent hostage program" that emerged during the Iran-Contra scandal may take some comfort in knowing that, today, the United States could play this game as well. After all, there are thousands more Iranian agents in Iraq, whose vulnerability might deter Tehran from pursuing this vicious cycle much longer.

Consider a "less-than-grand" bargain on mutual security. In return for real Iranian cooperation in Iraq, which must be the most urgent U.S. priority, President Bush might repeat previous assurances by other officials that he seeks a change not in the regime but in the behavior of Iran. If cooperation continued, the United States could conceivably make adjustments in the status of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) camp of anti-Iranian-government terrorists in Iraq, which is currently under U.S. guard. But Washington should not yet recast its democracy programs or any other such activities inside Iran -- even though, by Tehran's logic, such programs are a threat. This would not be a very pretty bargain, but it would add some substance to the potentially vital, but currently vacuous, bilateral discussions with Iran begun in Baghdad.

David Pollock is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, where he is completing a monograph on Iraq and its neighbors. Previously, he served as a senior advisor on the Middle East at the State Department. ❖

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