Meeting with Iraq's Neighbors:

A Confidence-Building Measure, or Much More?

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

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Brief Analysis

Does this week's surprise U.S. declaration of a new international conference on Iraq, scheduled for March 10, represent a major shift in U.S. policy or just a minor shuffle? Why is it happening now? And will it have any more of an impact than other recent international meetings on Iraq?

Shift or Shuffle?

Mid-level American, Syrian, and Iranian officials have sat together at an international meeting on Iraq as recently as September 2006 (albeit one focused on economic assistance and transparency issues). That meeting was in the framework of the International Compact for Iraq, hosted by the United Nations, which has held several such formal meetings in various locations since mid-2006. In addition, similar encounters have occurred at several Iraq donor conferences and related meetings in the past few years.

By far the most notable thing about any of these meetings is that they accomplished very little. And it is still far from clear whether the upcoming meeting will be much different. The success of such a conference typically depends on some combination of a rough international consensus, the exhaustion of the belligerent parties, and overwhelming outside force. Unfortunately, none of those factors is present in this case. Moreover, most experts agree that Iraq's problems are primarily internal in nature. If Iran or Syria could somehow be convinced to reduce their troublemaking in Iraq, that would certainly be of service. But it would not solve Iraq's problems -- and the price of such an approach could prove prohibitive.

Nevertheless, if Iran and the United States have a serious discussion at the upcoming conference, it will be the first since 2003. And if the proposed follow-up meeting does, in fact, take place at the ministerial level, it will be the first such occasion (outside of UN plenary sessions) since November 2004. Then, former secretary of state Colin Powell and his Iranian counterpart were uncomfortably seated side by side (at the initiative of their Egyptian hosts) during an international conference on Iraq in Sharm al-Sheikh. In a relationship as fraught and barren as that of the United States and Iran, the first ministerial meeting in nearly three years -- even in a multilateral setting -- would be of symbolic significance.

A similar point can be made about Syria, though with an interesting twist. The most urgent problem facing

Damascus is not its long-term ambitions in the Golan Heights or Lebanon, but the immediate fate of the UN investigation into its complicity in the assassination, almost exactly two years ago, of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Though it seems unlikely that any decision on this matter will be made at the Baghdad conference, it will be interesting to watch for any Syrian maneuverings.

Why Now?

Declarations of this nature almost always require weeks of advance planning, bureaucratic vetting, and consultation with the governments involved. For example, after months of refusal, the seemingly abrupt U.S. decision in May 2006 to join European talks with Iran on the nuclear issue -- pending suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment program -- was planned months beforehand.

The upcoming Iraq conference was almost certainly on the agenda during the recent high-level bilateral meetings of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. As far back as December 7, Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced a plan to hold "two crucial conferences" on the situation. According to one press report at the time, "The more international of the two conferences will be held in Baghdad within the next few months. . . . Countries in the region will participate, as well as groups such as the Arab League and the United Nations."

In ensuing weeks, even U.S. dismissals of diplomatic engagement with Iran and Syria left the door open for precisely this kind of international forum. In an interview published in Der Spiegel in mid-January, for instance, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repeated her Senate sound bite about such talks: "That's not diplomacy -- that's extortion."

Much less noticed was her preamble, which is (at least in retrospect) worth quoting at some length: "Well, let's remember that there's a lot of diplomacy going on. The Iraqis are running their own diplomacy, so they are going to talk to Iran, they're going to talk to Syria. The region has what they are calling the Arab Initiative for Reconciliation, which is an Arab League initiative. That includes everyone. The International Compact which Iraq and the UN run together is an opportunity for all of Iraq's neighbors to be there, including Iran and Syria. We had a meeting in New York. The Iranians were there. The Syrians were there. This was at the time of the United Nations General Assembly. So there are forums."

Meanwhile, the United States was busy amassing what several senior officials have called the "leverage" to support a switch to diplomatic engagement on Iraq. In particular, they point to the first UN Security Council sanctions on Iran's nuclear program, the movement of U.S. ships toward the Persian Gulf, and the imposition of serious unilateral sanctions on Iranian, Syrian, and Lebanese Hizballah financial institutions.

More important, however, is the one piece of leverage that has largely gone unspoken in this colloquy: the troop surge. Whatever the merits of sending more U.S. troops to Iraq instead of initiating a withdrawal, such a show of strength has clearly helped the U.S. administration decide that the time is ripe for opening a broad diplomatic dialogue on Iraq.

What Will Come of the Meeting?

While the Baghdad conference will by no means be the first international meeting on Iraq to bring U.S., Syrian, and Iranian diplomats together, it nevertheless has the potential to accomplish some useful things.

One simple yet significant way this conference differs from past ones is its location: Baghdad. If all goes according to plan, that in itself will be a useful symbol of greater deference to the Iraqi government's sovereignty, and greater confidence in its ability to deliver at least a semblance of security in its own capital. It is worth noting, however, that Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already voiced misgivings about holding the conference in Baghdad rather than Cairo. Moreover, Jordan remains the only Arab country that maintains a full-fledged ambassador in the Iraqi capital.

The conference also offers an opportunity to transcend America's obsessive preoccupation with Iran and Syria. What about Iraq's other neighbors, the "forgotten" U.S. friends in Amman, Ankara, Riyadh, and Kuwait City? Jordan is already hosting nearly a million Iraqi refugees -- proportionally about five times as many as Syria. Both countries have recently had to impose tough new restrictions on this massive inflow, which otherwise would show no sign of abating. Turkey continues to suffer from the crossborder terrorism of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is protected by its Kurdish hosts in northern Iraq.

Saudi Arabia fears spillover effects from Iraq, including the possible agitation of its own Shiite majority living around key oil fields -- which may explain why its pledges to aid the new Iraqi government remain unfulfilled. And Kuwait, for all its fabulous oil wealth, remains a net importer of cash from its struggling Iraqi neighbor -- the legacy of Saddam-era reparations for the brutal occupation of Kuwait more than fifteen years ago. If the Baghdad conference can do anything at all about any of these issues -- quite apart from dealing with Iran or Syria -- that alone would be worth the price of admission.

David Pollock, a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, previously served at the State Department as a member of the Policy Planning Staff and as a senior advisor for the broader Middle East. ❖

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