

Engaging Iran on Iraq: At What Price and to What End?

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Brief Analysis

In its report due out on December 6, the Iraq Study Group (ISG), often referred to as the Baker-Hamilton commission, will presumably recommend reaching out to Iran to seek its involvement in stabilizing Iraq. To evaluate the prospects for success, it is useful to look at the history of efforts to hold such talks, as well as at how Iranians look at current developments in Iraq.

The U.S. and Iranian Positions on Iraq Talks

The United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran have a long history of direct bilateral talks. For example, during the Taliban days, the two sides met often about Afghanistan, though always with at least one outside representative present to maintain the official cover that the talks were not bilateral. Iranian and American officials also met before and during the United States' entry into Iraq, convening at least three times in 2003—in January, March, and May—to discuss the Iraq situation. While a UN official opened each meeting to preserve the fiction that they were not bilateral sessions, the official soon left the two delegations on their own.

Direct U.S.-Iranian talks ceased in 2003. On October 19, 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced, “We have considered whether contacts that are specifically related to Iraq might be useful between Ambassador [to Iraq Zalmay] Khalilzad and his counterpart on the same basis that we had them, essentially, in Afghanistan.”

Administration officials later clarified that such talks were in fact authorized. Khalilzad is a native Persian speaker who conducted pre-invasion talks with Iran about Afghanistan. On October 20, 2005, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi stated that Iran saw no reason to talk to the United States until it “revises its behavior and attitude,” a view repeatedly echoed by other Iranian officials in the following months.

On March 16, 2006, five months after Rice made the offer for talks, Iranian National Security Council secretary Ali Larijani accepted the offer, saying, “We agree to talk to the Americans,” while emphasizing that Iran was acting because of a request by Abdalaziz al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). However, that position was reversed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, who stated on April 24, “By God’s will, we think that right now, because of the presence of a permanent government in Iraq, there is no need” for talks with the United States.

The current Iranian position is to leave the possibility of talks open if the United States makes a sufficiently attractive offer. On November 17, former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani stated at Friday prayers in Tehran, “America should not assume that we are interested in talks and that is a concession that they are giving us.” That same day, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki stated, “Just words by Americans about a change of their policies in Iraq is no solution to problems. . . . We will first study the practical and new attitude of the United States in terms of talks over Iraq and then decide [whether to hold such talks].”

Washington has often repeated its willingness to discuss Iraq with Iranian officials. After a confusing statement by State Department spokesman Sean McCormack on November 20, Rice clarified on November 23, “I made it clear months ago that Zal [Khalilzad] may do that,” referring to direct talks with Iran on Iraq.

A very different issue is whether the United States should hold negotiations with Iran on its nuclear program. Britain, France, and Germany have refused to negotiate with Iran on this issue until Iran resumes the suspension of its uranium enrichment program. Such a suspension was ordered in UN Security Council Resolution 1696, which “calls upon Iran without further delay to take the steps required by the IAEA Board of Governors [and] demands, in this context, that Iran shall suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities.” Javier Solana, the European Union high representative for the common foreign and security policy, has held preliminary discussions with Iran about whether it will resume the suspension, but this experience did not leave Europe eager for renewed talks. Strikingly, some who castigate the Bush administration for its unilateralism call for Washington to ignore the Security Council demand and the European condition; indeed, they call for the United States to conduct bilateral negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue, bypassing—and thereby undercutting—the European-led multilateral process.

Iranian Views on the U.S. Situation in Iraq

The ISG report has not featured prominently in the Iranian press, which has been preoccupied by the December 15 elections for municipal governments and the Assembly of Experts, which selects the Supreme Leader in the case of a vacancy. When the issue is mentioned, the general attitude is, to quote the November 30 Keyhan (a Tehran newspaper close to the Ahmadinezhad government), “The conceited and ignorant rulers of the U.S. may under the mounting domestic pressure start their diplomatic efforts to enter into serious talks with the Iran-Iraq-Syria axis, but undoubtedly the real objective will not be resolution of the Iraqi crisis but exit from that Islamic country in a more face-saving and less costly manner.”

In his November 17 sermon, Rafsanjani—usually described as a moderate and realist—argued that there was little reason for Iran to help the United States in Iraq: “They are gradually sinking in this swamp and now they cannot help themselves out. It would take us a lot of effort to tow them out of the bottom of the swamp.” Americans are seen as the source of the problems in Iraq. As Hossein Shariatmadari—said to be close to Supreme Leader Ali Hossein Khamenei—wrote in the November 27 Keyhan, “To justify their presence, the occupiers need insecurity in Iraq. Accordingly, they fan insecurity and instability.”

Radical forces in Iran argue that the United States has become so weak that it should be ignored, and that Iran could defeat America in any confrontation. Typical is Mehdi Mohammadi’s editorial in the November 2 Keyhan, which stated, “The Americans have lost not only their ability to bite but also to bark. . . . They should think what they should do so that Iran—an Iran which has the historical qualification to defeat the U.S.—would not threaten them. . . . Iran as the biggest regional contender of the U.S. has strengthened itself as regards war plans and morale incredibly. . . . Now it has put all the U.S. military moves in the region under its complete oversight and knows well how it can be put out of action.” Both radicals and moderates take pleasure in what they see as U.S. acknowledgement of Iran’s natural role as a great regional power. In the November 27 Keyhan, Shariatmadari wrote, “As the biggest regional power with strong ties with the Iraqi nation, we can play a major role in establishment of stability and security in Iraq. And the

Americans are not denying this prominent role.”

Some have suggested that Iran shares a common interest with the United States in preventing chaos in Iraq and therefore has reason to work with the United States. Although that may be how the issue appears to Washington, Tehran has a longstanding policy of its own in Iraq. Presumably, Iranian officials think that the policy they have adopted advances their national interest. The idea that Washington could persuade Tehran that the United States knows better than Iran how to advance Iranian national interest is implausible. Much more likely is that Iran will demand a price for any cooperation—as Iran’s UN ambassador Mohammad Javad Zarif is reported to have told James Baker and Lee Hamilton during a private dinner on October 5. It is unclear what the United States could offer that would move Iran, but presumably the regime would ask for a softer stance on the nuclear issue, among other matters. That would be a heavy price indeed.

Iran’s Limited Ability to Stabilize Iraq

U.S. officials say Iran has had a major and direct role in Iraq’s security problems. In November, CIA director Michael Hayden told Congress that “the Iranian hand is stoking violence” in Iraq. He described how he had been skeptical of Iran’s purported role until he reviewed the intelligence reports, stating, “I have come late to this conclusion, but I have all the zeal of a convert as to the ill effect that the Iranians are having on the situation in Iraq.”

According to U.S. intelligence, Iran has provided explosives and trigger devices for roadside bombs and training for several thousand fighters inside Iraq. To date, however, these efforts seem to have given Iraqi fighters the means to better carry out what they intended to do anyway. Those Iraqis who accept Iranian support may not be as willing to accept Iranian orders that involve changing their course of action. It is by no means clear that Iran has the ability to dissuade the fighting groups it supports from continuing their violent attacks. Rather, the violence in Iraq seems to be increasingly led by local leaders who do not respond well to outside orders. A discouraging consideration is that when the radical Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr ordered some commanders in the Mahdi Army to stop their random killing of Sunnis, they ignored him. As New York Times reporter Sabrina Tavernise wrote, “As many as a third of [al-Sadr’s] militiamen have grown frustrated with the constraints of compromise and have broken off.” If the charismatic al-Sadr cannot control the Mahdi Army, which extols his leadership, it is perhaps unrealistic to think that Iran can order around fighters with whom it has often had a difficult relationship.

Iran’s role in Iraq is asymmetrical: it can cause trouble, but it cannot bring peace. Just as it is more effective to pull on a string than to push on it, so Iran can do more to destabilize Iraq than to stabilize it. For example, an RPG-29 advanced antitank weapon—of the type Hizballah used in the summer war against Israel—was used a few months ago in Iraq. Were more of such weapons to show up in Iraq, they could pose an increased threat to lightly armored U.S. vehicles, such as Humvees and some Bradleys. Similarly, U.S. officials have suggested that Iran provided Hizballah with machine tools for making sophisticated shaped-charge explosives designed to penetrate armor. Were large numbers of such machine tools to show up in Iraq, the improvised explosive devices used there could become more deadly.

In sum, Iran has shown little interest in talks with the United States on Iraq, and, in any case, could do little to advance stability in Iraq. Counting on Iran to help improve security in Iraq is an exercise in extremely optimistic thinking.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director for research at The Washington Institute and coauthor (with Michael Rubin) of **Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos** (<http://www.palgrave-usa.com/Catalog/product.aspx?isbn=1403962766>) (2005). ❖

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