

No easing of US-Iranian tensions after Baghdad conference

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The much-vaunted international conference on Iraqi security took place in Baghdad on Saturday without any diplomatic breakthrough or thawing of relations between the US and Iran. Despite the urging of the Iraqi government, no direct talks took place between American and Iranian officials. Nothing was announced beyond the formation of several low-level regional working parties and confirmation that a further conference would be held at the foreign minister level at a date and place yet to be decided.

Formally the conference was called to discuss the disastrous situation in Iraq amid the “surge” of American troops to suppress anti-US insurgents and the country’s spiralling sectarian warfare. Convened by the US puppet government, the gathering included all of Iraq’s neighbours—Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Kuwait as well as Iran and Syria; the permanent UN Security Council members—the US, Russia, France, Britain and China; and representatives of the UN, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Arab League together with Egypt and Bahrain.

In opening the conference, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appealed for the assistance of neighbouring countries in preventing arms and insurgents flowing into Iraq. “Confrontation of terrorism, dear brothers, requires ceasing any form of financial and media support and religious cover, as well as logistical support and provision of arms and men.” He went on to warn: “[Iraq] needs support in this battle that not only threatens Iraq but will spill over to all countries in the region.”

In the course of the meeting, at least two mortar shells landed near the venue at the Foreign Ministry, despite massive security precautions. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari tried to downplay the incident, but only underscored the catastrophe that daily confronts ordinary Iraqis. “We assured them [the delegates] this was normal. I thought ‘This is bad targetting’. I was surprised there

weren’t more,” he told the media.

While the focus was on Iraq, all eyes were on the fact that senior US and Iranian officials were seated around the same table. The conference had been surrounded by a great deal of media speculation that US participation represented a “shift” in the Bush administration’s policy of refusing to negotiate with Iran. Among American commentators, US involvement was taken as an indication that a more pragmatic wing of the Bush administration, headed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was now in the ascendancy over the hard-line militarists led by Vice President Dick Cheney.

However, the signs emerging from the two closed-door sessions of the conference were that the US had not softened its belligerent stance towards Iran in the slightest. Senior State Department official David Satterfield used the opportunity to once again accuse Iran of supporting and arming Iraqi insurgents engaged in attacking US troops. At one point, Satterfield reportedly pointed to his briefcase and declared that it contained documents proving that Tehran was supplying weapons to Shiite militias in Iraq.

Satterfield’s comments provoked angry denials from Iranian representatives. According to one of the participants, Iran’s chief envoy Abbas Araghchi said: “Your accusations are merely a cover for your failures in Iraq.” Despite its repeated accusations, the US is yet to present any evidence that the Iranian regime is directly involved in providing material support to anti-American insurgents in Iraq. Nor, it appears, did Satterfield table any “proof” in the course of the meeting. A senior Iranian foreign ministry official, Rezi Amiri, told Associated Press: “They’re lying because it is just not true. Iraq’s borders with Iran are the most secure of Iraqi borders. The Iraqi government has not even once said Iran is interfering in its affairs.”

Iranian envoys expressed their concern over the

“kidnapping” of six of its diplomats, including five seized from its consulate in the northern city of Irbil by US troops in January. The US ambassador to Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, denied that the American military had “anyone in detention who is a diplomat” or that it targeted “individuals based on their country of origin”. The first statement is an evasion based on the US claim that the Irbil office had yet to be officially recognised as a consulate. The second is a flat lie: on the day before the consulate was raided, President Bush announced the American troop “surge” and declared that the US military would “seek out and destroy” Iranian networks in Iraq.

Both sides attempted to put the best possible complexion on the meeting. Khalilzad described the talks as “constructive and businesslike”. Iran’s foreign ministry spokesman, Mohammad Ali Hosseini, declared that the conference was a constructive “first step”. Behind this standard diplomatic language, however, nothing was resolved. Khalilzad warned that Iran’s pledges of assistance to Iraq had to be translated into deeds. “We will wait and see what changes on the ground... in terms of weapons coming across the border, support for groups, support for militia,” he told the media.

Iranian envoy Araghchi reiterated Tehran’s demand for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. “For the sake of peace and stability in Iraq... we need a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces. Violence in Iraq is good for no country in the region. Security of Iraq is our security, and stability in Iraq is necessary for peace and security in the region,” he said.

The conference took place against the backdrop of mounting US threats against Iran. The US military has two naval carrier groups stationed in the Persian Gulf for the first time since the 2003 invasion of Iraq and has stepped up air patrols along the Iran-Iraq border. While the conference was underway in Baghdad, US officials were in discussions in New York with the other permanent UN Security Council members and Germany, demanding the imposition of far tougher economic sanctions on Iran over its refusal to shut down its uranium enrichment and other nuclear programs.

Prior to the Baghdad meeting, the US administration made absolutely clear that private talks with Iran, if they did take place, would be strictly confined to Iraq’s security situation. Far from dousing its propaganda about Iran supplying weapons to Iraqi insurgents, Washington used the conference as a convenient forum to repeat its unsubstantiated allegations. Despite Washington’s denials, Iran’s “meddling” in Iraq, its alleged nuclear

weapons programs and its “sponsorship of terrorism” in the Middle East increasingly sound like the justification for war.

Even if one were to accept that the Bush administration has had a change of heart, its so-called diplomacy is a dangerous form of brinkmanship that could easily precipitate a military conflict with Iran. Far more likely, however, is that the White House, confronted with mass antiwar sentiment at home and resistance from even its closest international allies, is engaged in a diplomatic ploy. While escalating its demands against Iran, US diplomacy is aimed at appearing reasonable, unlike “intransigent” Iran.

In a speech to American Legion veterans last Wednesday, President Bush squarely put the onus on Iran and Syria to meet US demands, declaring that the Baghdad conference would be “a test of whether Iran and Syria are truly interested in being constructive forces in Iraq.” Underscoring the threat of a military attack, Bush emphasised that diplomacy would fail if not endorsed by military force. His comments confirm what Vice President Cheney told the media during last month’s visit to Australia—that “all options” remained on the table in dealing with Iran.

An editorial in the London-based *Financial Times* on Saturday reflected the pessimism in British and European ruling circles over the prospect of a diplomatic solution to the US confrontation with Iran. Entitled “How to make Baghdad conference a landmark”, it argued that the gathering could be the start of a regional diplomatic offensive “leading towards an *entente* between Iran and the US and Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbours, and between Israel and the Arabs...”

Summing up the prospects, the newspaper bleakly declared: “The likelihood that this administration headed by President George W Bush, which has done so much to destabilise the Middle East and destroy America’s reputation and credibility in the Islamic world, will seize this opportunity is admittedly not great. Nevertheless, this is a moment pregnant with possibility as well as peril.”

In the wake of the conference, one can only conclude that even this bleak assessment is based more on grasping at straws, than sound evidence.



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