

Iran and US to hold limited talks in Baghdad

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The announcement on Sunday of a meeting between Iranian and US officials in Baghdad in the next few weeks will do nothing to ease mounting tensions in the Persian Gulf. Washington has repeatedly made clear that any discussions with Tehran will be narrowly confined to Iraqi security, thus excluding the continuing confrontation over Iran's nuclear programs, the longstanding American economic and diplomatic blockade of Iran and other issues.

The talks were announced as US Vice President Dick Cheney was touring the region seeking to consolidate an anti-Iranian alliance with US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf states. Standing on the deck of one to the two US aircraft carriers in the Gulf, Cheney belligerently declared last Friday: "We'll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region."

US officials immediately emphasised the circumscribed nature of the talks, which will be at the ambassadorial level. "The president authorised this channel because we must take every step possible to stabilise Iraq and reduce the risk to our troops even as our military continue to act against hostile Iranian-backed activity in Iraq," National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johnroe told the media. "The purpose is to try to make sure that the Iranians play a productive role in Iraq."

For months, the Bush administration has been accusing Iran of supplying arms and training to anti-US insurgents inside Iraq. The only "proof" provided have been displays of captured arms, including armour-penetrating explosives, purportedly made in Iran and alleged remarks extracted under interrogation from detained Iraqis. US military spokesmen have been forced to admit the lack of any evidence linking the arms to the Iranian regime.

Some of the allegations border on the bizarre. In January, the US military claimed that highly trained operatives of the so-called Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard had entered Iraq and, posing as American soldiers with US-style weapons, ID cards and vehicles, captured and killed five US military personnel from a secure US facility in Karbala. By late April, the entire story had changed. According to US commander General David Petraeus, the

attack was carried out by Iraqis, not blue-eyed, blond Iranian super agents specially trained to speak American military English. While still insisting there was evidence linking the Iraqi group to Iran, Petraeus acknowledged that no Iranians were directly involved and declared it "very difficult to tell" if top Iranian officials authorised the raid.

Tehran has denied providing assistance to anti-US insurgents in Iraq. It has also demanded the release of five Iranian officials seized in January from an Iranian liaison office in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil. Washington insists, without providing a shred of evidence, that the Iranians were members of the Quds Force involved in supporting Iraqi militias. Iraqi ministers have pointed out that the office has been operating in Irbil for more than a decade, facilitating travel to Iran and other routine diplomatic tasks. The US military has ignored calls by the Iraqi government for the release of the five, who have been held incommunicado without charge for more than four months.

Under these circumstances, the prospect of reaching any agreement at US-Iranian talks in Baghdad appears remote. If the Bush administration had the slightest interest in substantive discussions, it could have shown a sign of good faith by freeing the five detained Iranian officials or perhaps indicating that negotiations on other contentious issues might be possible. The reverse has been the case. Commenting to "Fox News", Cheney bluntly declared that "the Iranians have been meddling in the internal affairs of Iraq and that subject will be discussed at the ambassadorial level" in Baghdad.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice delivered much the same message, telling the media that the most important issue would be "dealing with the dangerous technologies ... originating in Iran that are putting our soldiers at risk". At an international conference on Iraq in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh earlier this month, Rice touted the possibility of a high-level informal talks with the Iranian foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki, but took no steps to ensure such a meeting took place.

The Iraqi government, which is dominated by Shiite religious parties with longstanding links to Iran, appears to be the most enthusiastic proponent of US-Iranian dialogue.

Not wanting to be caught in the middle of a conflict between Tehran and Washington, Iraqi ministers pushed for contact between Rice and Mottaki at the Sharm el-Sheikh gathering to no avail. Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari hailed the upcoming meeting in Baghdad as “a very encouraging and important development;” but the comment is little more than wishful thinking.

Cheney’s trip to the region has underscored the Bush administration’s determination to intensify the pressure on Iran, if necessary by military means. The vice-president remained tight-lipped about the outcome of talks with leaders and senior officials in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Jordan. But there is no doubt that he attempted to secure the continued support of these allies for the US occupation of Iraq and backing in the event of a US confrontation with Iran.

By ousting the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, the US invasion of Iraq removed the main regional counterweight to Iran and destabilised the region. Saudi Arabia and the other “Sunni” countries have expressed their concerns about growing Iranian influence, the emergence of a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad and the possibility of Shiite unrest at home. Saudi King Abdullah deliberately snubbed Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the lead up to the Sharm el-Sheikh conference. In talks with Cheney last November, the king reportedly warned that Saudi Arabia would back Sunni insurgents if the US pulled out its troops out of Iraq.

The Bush administration has exploited these concerns to try to forge a “Sunni” alliance against Iran. However, while hostile to Tehran, Washington’s allies are also fearful of being caught up in a new US military adventure against Iran. The nervousness is most evident in the oil-rich Gulf states that host key US military bases in the region. Several Gulf states have announced that the US military would not be permitted to operate from their territory in the event of a war with Iran.

Mustafa Alani of the Dubai-based Gulf Research Centre told Associated Press: “We have a deep mistrust of both sides. Each is trying to defend his corner on major issues in the region.... We have a common interest with the US in preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power and intervening in Iraq and Lebanon. But the problem is that we have a huge mistrust of the US and cannot support publicly its position.”

In an effort to demonstrate its neutrality, the UAE pointedly invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to visit the country in the immediate aftermath of Cheney’s trip. Ahmadinejad, the first Iranian leader to visit the UAE since the confederation was formed in 1971, used the opportunity to answer Cheney’s bellicose remarks in kind.

At a press conference in Abu Dhabi on Monday, he warned of “severe retaliation” if the US attacked Iran, and called for all US forces to leave the region.

On Sunday Ahmadinejad visited Dubai, which is home to more than 500,000 Iranians who rely on the tiny Gulf state for travel and business. The Iranian president met with members of the Iranian Business Council in Dubai and held a rally of thousands of supporters at a local soccer stadium. He told the crowd that the US was to blame for regional instability and called for its withdrawal from the Gulf. There is no sign, however, that the Gulf states are about to cut their ties with Washington and embrace Iranian proposals for a regional security agreement.

In the US, some proponents of diplomatic engagement with Iran have seized on the announced meeting in Baghdad as a hopeful sign. Republican Senator Chuck Hagel told Associated Press: “I was heartened to see that the United States and Iran are finally, evidently, going to sit down and talk.” However, as Anthony Cordesman, Middle East analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, warned: “One needs to be very careful about confusing dialogue with progress.” Pointing to the huge differences, he added: “There is no meaningful prospect for a ‘grand bargain’, in spite of some well-meaning voices.”

If talks do eventuate, they will take place about the same time as a second UN Security Council deadline expires for Iran to shut down its uranium enrichment and other nuclear programs. Tehran, which has declared its programs are for peaceful purposes, refuses to be bound by UN resolutions that it describes as illegal. The Bush administration, which bullied Security Council members into passing the resolutions, will seize on the May 24 deadline as the pretext to raise the pressure on Iran another notch.



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