

International conference on Iraq: bitter antagonisms on display

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The Bush administration's efforts to enlist support for the disastrous US occupation of Iraq at the international conference in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on May 3-4 produced very little. Under pressure from Washington, some of Iraq's creditors consented to provide debt relief to Baghdad and neighbouring countries agreed to do more to block arms and insurgents entering Iraq. However, the sharpening regional tensions produced by the illegal US invasion of Iraq and threats of aggression against Iran and Syria were never far from the surface.

Much of the media commentary on the conference, which included all Iraq's neighbours as well as other Middle Eastern countries and the permanent members of the UN Security Council, bordered on the farcical. What was the significance of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's 30-minute meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem? Was the failure of Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki to sit down to dinner opposite Rice really a result of his objections to a Russian violinist and her low-cut red dress? Did a three-minute encounter between the US ambassador to Iraq and a deputy Iranian minister mark a thawing of relations? These and other weighty questions have been dissected at length.

Over the past six months, Washington has provocatively heightened its confrontation with Tehran by a naval build-up in the Persian Gulf and its none-too-subtle hints that a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities remains an option. The US has steadfastly refused any negotiations over Iranian nuclear programs unless Iran agrees in advance to shut down its disputed uranium enrichment facilities. Before the conference, Rice had narrowly limited potential dialogue with her Iranian counterpart to the issue of "Iraqi security"—that is, to Washington's unsubstantiated claims that Tehran is providing arms and training to anti-US insurgents in Iraq.

Without the slightest hint of a compromise on Washington's part, it is hardly surprising that Iran declined the US offer of an informal chat. As Iran's Foreign Minister Mottaki explained to the media: "There was no time, no appointment and no plans. A meeting between foreign ministers has certain requirements [such as] political will and it also has to be clear on what basis such a meeting would be held." If it had wanted to show good faith, the Bush administration could have released five Iranian

officials seized by the US military in a raid on the Iranian liaison office in northern Iraq in January, but refused Tehran's demands to do so.

The short discussion with Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem simply underscores the fact that Rice's much-publicised overtures involve no fundamental shift in US policy. Washington cut off contact with Damascus after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in February 2005 and has been pushing in the UN for an international tribunal to hear the case. Syria, which is accused of organising the murder, strongly opposes the move. The Bush administration brands Syria, like Iran, as a "state sponsor of terrorism" for backing the Lebanese Shiite organisation, Hezbollah, and the Palestinian party, Hamas.

According to media accounts, talks between Rice and Moallem focussed on US demands for Syria to stop anti-US insurgents infiltrating into Iraq. Rice described the discussion as "professional," while Moallem declared that Syria was "serious about improving relations". However, no decisions were announced. Nothing was discussed on substantive issues such as Hariri and Lebanon. Moreover, the White House, which just last month roundly criticised House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for visiting Syria, played down the encounter in Sharm el-Sheikh as "a sidebar conversation".

In recent months, the Bush administration has been seeking to build an anti-Iranian alliance in the Middle East, by exploiting fears among conservative "Sunni" states over Tehran's growing influence in Iraq. Saudi Arabia in particular has assumed a far more active diplomatic role in Lebanon, conducting talks with Palestinian parties and elsewhere in the region in a bid to isolate Iran.

According to the US-based Stratfor thinktank, the meeting between Rice and Moallem may be part of efforts to break up Syria's longstanding alliance with Iran. "Saudi Arabia appears to be the main driver behind Washington's decision to engage Syria, with an interest in weaning Syria away from the Iranian orbit. The efforts to bring Syria back into the Arab fold have mainly involved flooding Gulf petrodollars into the Syrian economy," the article stated.

Similar manoeuvring surrounded the five-year International Compact on Iraq—the only concrete outcome from the

gathering. In return for debt reduction of some \$30 billion, the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki agreed to implement a series of economic and political benchmarks, largely drawn up by the Bush administration.

At the top of the list is the implementation of an oil law to enable American corporations to exploit the country's huge reserves. The Compact set a target for crude oil production of 3.5 million barrels a day by 2011—double the present figure—which would require substantial foreign investment in Iraq's dilapidated and outdated infrastructure. It also set an economic growth figure of 15.4 percent in 2007—up from just 3 percent in 2006.

Many of the remaining yardsticks were aimed at meeting the demands of neighbouring states for the inclusion of Sunnis, who formed the social base of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, in the government and the state apparatus. Under the banner of "national reconciliation," these include an end to de-Baathification, new provincial elections and the disbanding of Shiite militias.

Iraq's so-called Sunni neighbours—including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf states—regard the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad as too closely aligned with Tehran. As one unnamed Arab diplomat told *Time* magazine: "Al-Maliki is not representing all of Iraq's people. He is too Iranian. He's serving Iran's interests." The underlying hostility was indicated by the refusal of Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal to meet with Maliki at the conference. Before the conference, Saudi King Abdullah also declined to meet with the Iraqi prime minister during Maliki's tour of neighbouring states.

In criticisms targetted at the Maliki government, Prince Saud told the *New York Times*: "We don't see anything happening in Iraq in implementation. Our American friends say there is improvement: improvement in violence, improvement in the level of understanding, improvement in disarming militias. But we don't see it."

Former Egyptian ambassador to the US, Abdel Raouf el-Reedy told the *International Herald Tribune* that the Arab states faced a no-win situation. "They realised that the longer the United States stays in Iraq, the deeper and more complicated Iraq could become as a problem. On the other hand, if the United States leaves Iraq, there will be a vacuum, and who could fill the vacuum? Iran is the most eligible force to fill that vacuum."

While most of Iraq's neighbours, under pressure from Washington, begrudgingly offered some form of debt relief to Iraq, the benchmarks contained in the compact provide plenty of pretexts for cancelling any promises. Kuwait avoided making any definite commitment, saying any debt measure would have to be ratified by parliament. In comments to Associated Press, Maliki bluntly warned: "We will see the extent of the seriousness and commitment among these nations to what they signed today. If these promises are not kept, we

will watch it, and there will be no reason to hold any further conferences."

None of Washington's "Sunni" allies at the conference voiced any opposition to the US occupation of Iraq, the trampling on basic democratic rights and the social disaster confronting the Iraqi people. Their slavish support for the Bush administration's criminal policies, which have evoked broad popular opposition inside Iraq and throughout the Middle East, has made these governments all the more sensitive to Iran's limited opposition to the US.

Having tacitly backed the US invasion in 2003 as a means of removing its longstanding rival in Baghdad, Iran called at the conference for a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops. Responding to US accusations of arming insurgents, Iranian foreign minister Mottaki told the delegates: "The continuation of and increase in terrorist acts in Iraq originates from the flawed approaches adopted by foreign troops. Thus, in our view, the continuation of [the] occupation lies at the origin of the crisis. The United States must accept the responsibilities arising from the occupation of Iraq, and should not finger point or put the blame on others."

Outside the rarified atmosphere of the conference, sections of the Middle Eastern press reflected something of the broad opposition to the US occupation of Iraq. A commentator in Egypt's *Al Akhbar* stated: "If we want a clear and frank explanation of this Sharm el-Sheikh conference and its aims, we would say without hesitation that the situation in Iraq has reached a dead end and that there is an almost total US failure in its objectives and achievements." An editorial in *Al-Arab Al-Alamiyah* bluntly declared: "The Sharm el-Sheikh conference is being held not to salvage Iraq but to save the US administration from its numerous predicaments—security predicaments in Iraq—and political predicaments within America itself."

Far from providing a means for stabilising the US occupation of Iraq, the conference simply provided a snapshot of the deepening regional tensions fuelled by the Bush administration's invasion and its preparations for a new military adventure against Iran.



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