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The Iraq Conference: Iran and Syria's Engagement Brings Unrealistic Hopes and Diplomatic Risks

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The upcoming international conference on Iraq has raised unrealistic expectations about the prospects of gaining the cooperation of Iran and Syria, the world's leading state sponsors of terrorism, in stabilizing Iraq. Both countries have strong reasons to continue their efforts to undermine the peace and security of their beleaguered neighbor. Both want to inflict a stinging defeat on the United States and drive Western forces out of Iraq, as they did in Lebanon in the 1980s. Little is likely to be gained by including them in the multilateral negotiations, and much could be lost. Tehran and Damascus will seek to use the Iraq talks to deflect international pressure to curb their support for terrorism and subversion of Lebanon and to rein in Iran's nuclear program. The United States must not trade concessions to Iran and Syria in exchange for promises that those countries are unlikely to keep.

The Conference. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki announced on February 28 that his government will convene the first stage of its diplomatic initiative on March 10 in Baghdad. Invited to attend will be representatives of Iraq's six neighbors (Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Turkey), the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China), the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. A follow-up meeting at the foreign minister level is slated to be held in Turkey in April.

The sudden acceptance of meeting with Iran and Syria to discuss Iraq represents a major shift in the

Bush Administration's policy. In January, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had rejected such a policy, telling the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, "The only reason to talk to us would be to extract a price, and that's not diplomacy, that's extortion."

Administration officials stress that this is a multilateral Iraqi initiative, not a bilateral American one, a distinction that they contend will limit any signal of American weakness. They see it as an encouraging sign that the Maliki government is asserting initiative in the diplomatic field, but it would be more encouraging if the Iraqis took greater initiative on the battlefield.

The White House took pains to rule out direct talks with Iran or Syria unless those countries take action to address long-stated American concerns: Iran's uranium enrichment program and Syria's support for terrorism against Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq.

Although the United States has not maintained formal diplomatic relations with Iran since the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, advocates of engagement point out that American officials have met with Iranian officials at multilateral conferences on Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell even sat beside Iranian Foreign

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Minister Kamal Kharazzi at an international conference on Iraq convened in Egypt. Iran contributed little to that meeting except empty rhetoric.

Moreover, the situation now is changed due to the heating up of the long-simmering confrontation with Iran over its prohibited nuclear activities and a confrontation with Syria over its suspected involvement in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Iran will seek to use its participation in the conference on Iraq to gain diplomatic leverage to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies on the nuclear issue. There is also a distinct danger that European allies will use the Iraq conference as a convenient justification to back away from further sanctions against Tehran over its nuclear noncompliance. This would be ill-timed, coming just when sanctions seem to be impacting the regime by encouraging a rising chorus of criticism of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from Iranian hard-liners as well as reformists.

Bad Actors. Iran and Syria have been very much part of the problem in Iraq and cannot be trusted to be part of a solution. Both seek to inflict a decisive foreign policy defeat on the United States, and both seek to undermine the prospects for democracy in Iraq because it poses an ideological threat to the survival of their repressive regimes.

Syria's President Bashir Assad leads the world's only Baathist regime after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Assad has harbored high-ranking Iraqi Baathist leaders who continue to finance and direct diehard Baathist insurgents inside Iraq. Syria also allows radical Islamic movements to funnel militants, money, and weapons to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups operating inside Iraq. Iran provides money, arms, sophisticated bombs, and training to Shiite militias, including Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi

Army, which has staged two bloody uprisings against U.S.-led coalition forces.

Both countries have a long history of supporting terrorism and opposing democracy. Neither can be trusted to fulfill any pledges to help stabilize a democratic Iraq. Syria's Assad regime failed to make good on promises to crack down on the movement of radical Islamists and supplies into Iraq, just as it failed to expel Palestinian terrorist groups from its territory despite promises to do so.

American efforts to open a dialogue with Iran's revolutionary regime failed in the Carter, Reagan, and Clinton Administrations. There is no reason to expect a different outcome with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, who is even more hostile to the United States than previous Iranian leaders.

Conclusion. In acceding to the Iraqi government's plans to include Iran and Syria in the Iraq conference so soon after taking a softer line on North Korea's nuclear program, the Bush Administration has reinforced the perception that it is going soft on America's enemies. It now must contain the damage by minimizing the risk that Tehran and Damascus will exploit the conference to defuse international pressure against them on other issues. There must be a strict focus on how Iran and Syria can help Iraq, to the exclusion of other issues. Above all, the Bush Administration must not be suckered into trading concessions on Iran's nuclear program for a cosmetic deal on Iraq that involves Iranian and Syrian promises that will never be fulfilled.

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