

Iran torpedoes US plans for Iraqi oil

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In the highly competitive world of international politics, nation states very rarely miss an opportunity to crow about success stories. The opportunity comes rare, mostly by default, and seldom enduring. By any standards of showmanship, therefore, Tehran has set a new benchmark of reticence.

By all accounts, Iran played a decisive role in hammering out the peace deal among the Shi'ite factions in Iraq. A bloody week of human killing on the Tigris River ended on Sunday. Details are sketchy, however, since they must come from non-Iranian sources. Tehran keeps silent about its role.

The deal was brokered after negotiations in the holy city of Qom in Iran involving the two Shi'ite factions - the Da'wa Party and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) - which have been locked in conflict with Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in southern Iraq. It appears that one of the most shadowy figures of the Iranian security establishment, General Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) personally mediated in the intra-Iraqi Shi'ite negotiations. Suleimani is in charge of the IRGC's operations abroad.

US military commanders routinely blame the Quds for all their woes in Iraq. The fact that the representatives of Da'wa and SIIC secretly traveled to Qom under the very nose of American and British intelligence and sought Quds mediation to broker a deal conveys a huge political message. Iran signals that security considerations rather than politics or religion prevailed.

But the politics of the deal are all too apparent. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who was camping in Basra and personally supervising the operations against the Mahdi Army, was not in the loop about the goings-on. As for US President George W Bush, he had just spoken praising Maliki for waging a "historic and decisive" battle against the Mahdi Army, which he said was "a defining moment" in the history of a "free Iraq". Both Maliki and Bush look very foolish.

But why isn't Tehran in any hurry to claim victory? After all, rubbishing the Bush presidency has been the stuff of Iranian rhetoric. Perhaps, Iranians had shut down over Nauroz new year festivities. They do take the joyful advent of spring very seriously. Or maybe, Suleimani's involvement makes the subject a no-go area for public discussion. Third, Iranians should know better than anyone that the intra-Shi'ite rivalries are far too deep-rooted to lend themselves to an amicable settlement in a day's negotiations.

The turf war in the Iraqi Shi'ite regions has several templates. Iraq's future as a unitary state; the parameters of acceptable federalism, if any; attitude towards the US; control of oil wealth; overvaulting political ambitions - all these are intertwined features of a complex

matrix. Therefore, the fragility of the newfound peace is all too apparent. Tehran will be justified in estimating that it is prudent to wait and watch whether peace gains traction in the critical weeks ahead.

But the most important Iranian calculation would be not to provoke the Americans unnecessarily by rubbing in the true import of what happened. Tehran would be gratified that in any case it has made the point that it possesses awesome influence within Iraq. Anyone who knows today's anarchic Iraq would realize that triggering a new spiral of violence in that country may not require much ingenuity, muscle power or political clout.

But to be able to summarily cry halt to cascading violence, and to achieve that precisely in about 48 hours, well, that's an altogether impressive capability in political terms. In this case, the Iranians have managed it with felicitous ease, as if they were just turning off a well-lubricated tap. That requires great command over the killing fields of Iraq, the native warriors, and the sheer ability to calibrate the flow of events and micromanage attitudes.

Conceivably, Tehran would have decided with its accumulated centuries-old Persian wisdom that certain things in life are always best left unspoken, especially stunning successes. Besides, it is far more productive to leave Washington to contemplate over happenings and draw the unavoidable conclusion that if it musters the courage to make that existential choice, Iran can be an immensely valuable factor of stability for Iraq.

But it wasn't a matter of political symbolism, either. Tangible issues are involved. Questions of vital national interests. Clearly, Tehran had genuine concerns over the developing situation in southern Iraq close to its border. Tehran viewed the flare-up involving the Shi'ite factions with great disquiet. This was apparent from the speech by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who led the prayer sermon in Tehran on Friday. He bemoaned, "Iraq is currently entangled in many problems." But Jannati explicitly didn't take sides between the warring factions.

On the one hand, he advised the Mahdi Army ("Iraqi popular armed forces") and Maliki ("Iraqi popular government") to hold talks. But he also advised the "popular armed forces present in Basra" (read Badr Organization, Da'wa, the smaller Fadhila party, etc.) to intervene with the "Iraqi popular government". Third, Jannati also called on Maliki to "heed the [popular] forces' views and solve problems eventually in a way that would be to the interest of all."

Curiously, he criticized the silence on the part of the Muslim world - "especially the Organization of the Islamic Conference" (OIC) - over the "enormous brutality and oppression in Iraq". He said, "It is not clear why Muslim states, especially the OIC, do not show any reaction against so much injustice and oppression in Iraq, while such measures could be easily prevented through unity and solidarity." The remark contained a barely disguised barb aimed at Saudi Arabia for hobnobbing with the US. (US Vice President Dick Cheney had visited Riyadh and Baghdad barely one week before Maliki launched the offensive in Basra.)

Yet, all in all, Jannati politely refrained from expressing Iran's complete disapproval of the conduct of Maliki in carrying out the offensive as part of the US game plan to establish control of Basra, which is the principal artery for American oil majors to evacuate Iraqi oil. The Sadrists oppose the current plans for opening up the nationalized Iraqi oil industry to foreign exploitation.

However, the day after Jannati spoke, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali

Hosseini came down hard on the Maliki government. He deplored the use of American and British air power against the Sadrist militia – “waves of US-UK air raids on civilians”. He called on the Shi’ite factions to end the fighting as “continued fighting only serves the interests of the occupiers ... and give pretexts to occupiers to continue their illegitimate presence” in Iraq.

Most important, he called for negotiations – which had already commenced in Qom by that time – “in a friendly and goodwill atmosphere”. As for the Maliki government, Hosseini expressed the hope it would “exercise wisdom, cooperation, mutual understanding, patience, calm and contacts with Iraqi political leaders to overcome the current crisis period”. Plainly put, Hosseini asked Maliki not to be dumb enough to sub-serve US interests and to realize where his own political interests lay. He pointedly drew a line of distinction between Maliki and the powerful Iraqi Shi’ite leadership.

The Iranian accounts of the fighting have shown a distinct sympathy for the Sadrist militia, highlighting that the Mahdi Army was being “unfairly singled out” for attack by government forces; that the Sadrists’ quarrel with Maliki was that he “refused to set a deadline for US and coalition troops to leave”; that US troops were providing the government forces with “intelligence, surveillance and occasional air strikes and raids”; and that Iraqi troops were refusing to obey orders to fight the Sadrist militia. The Iranian official news agency quoted Muqtada as comparing Maliki to Saddam Hussein. “Under Saddam’s rule, we complained about how the government distanced itself from the people and operated under dictatorial terms. Now the government is also dealing with people on such terms,” he was quoted as saying.

Out of the dramatic developments of the past week, several questions arise, the principal being that the Bush administration’s triumphalism over the so-called Iraq “surge” strategy has become irredeemably farcical, and, two, US doublespeak has become badly exposed. What stands out is that Washington promoted the latest round of violence in Basra, whereas Iran cried halt to it. The awesome influence of Tehran has become all too apparent. How does Bush come to terms with it?

What has happened is essentially that Iran has frustrated the joint US-British objective of gaining control of Basra, without which the strategy of establishing control over the fabulous oil fields of southern Iraq will not work. Control of Basra is a pre-requisite before American oil majors make their multi-billion investments to kick start large-scale oil production in Iraq. Iraq’s Southern Oil Company is headquartered in Basra. Highly strategic installations are concentrated in the region, such as pipeline networks, pumping stations, refineries and loading terminals. The American oil majors will insist on fastening these installations.

The game plan for control of Basra now needs to be reworked. The idea was to take Basra in hand now so that the Sadrists would be thwarted from taking over the local administration in elections in October – in other words, to ensure the political underpinning for Basra. All indications are that the Sadrists are riding a huge wave of popular support. They have caught the imagination of the poor, downtrodden, dispossessed masses in the majority Shi’ite community. They are hard to replace in democratic elections. The sense of frustration in Washington and London must be very deep that Basra is not yet fastened. Time is running out for Bush to make sure that his successor in the White House inherits an irreversible process in the US’s Iraq policy.

Indeed, in his first comments, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown initially refused to say on

Tuesday whether the government's plans to cut the number of troops in Iraq to 2,500 from 4,000 were on course. He simply said British troops were facing "difficulties" in Basra. This was followed by Defense Secretary Des Browne saying that return of 2,500 troops from southern Iraq this spring had been placed on hold indefinitely.

Bush hasn't yet spoken. US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put on a brave face, saying first-hand information was limited, but based on that, "they [Iraqi troops] seem to have done a pretty good job". To be sure, Cheney must be furious that Tehran torpedoed the entire US strategy for Big Oil. He has had a hard time shepherding the pro-West Arab regimes in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, up to this point.

Besides, nothing infuriates Cheney more than when US oil interests are hit. Thus, the most critical few weeks in the decades-long US-Iran standoff may have just begun. Last week, five former US secretaries of state who served in Democratic and Republican administrations - Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Warren Christopher, Madeline Albright and Colin Powell - sat at a round-table discussion in Athens and reached a consensus to urge the next US administration to open a line of dialogue with Iran.

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