

Iraq Crisis Exacerbates Divisions Within Iranian Elite

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Iran has responded to the seizure of much of northern and western Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and local Sunni militias by stepping up its support for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Shia-dominated government.

Iran has reportedly sent scores, if not hundreds, of Revolutionary Guards to assist the Iraqi military and newly-organized pro-government Shia militias. Speaking Wednesday, Iranian President Hasan Rouhani vowed that Iran would intervene to protect major Shia shrines in Iraq should ISIS try to make good on its threats to capture and destroy them.

Rouhani and his top aides and advisors have, in addition, signaled that they are ready to work with Washington in “stabilizing” the Iraqi government and state.

Other sections of the Iranian elite, particularly from the Islamic Republic’s national-security apparatus, are, however, publicly opposing strategic-military cooperation with a US government and elite that have subjected Iran to crippling economic sanctions and repeatedly threatened it with war.

Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, has called claims of US-Iranian cooperation “untrue” and said that they are tantamount to “psychological warfare.” Iranian assistance to Iraq’s government, he insisted, “will be bilateral and will not involve a third country.”

“Cooperation between Iran and the US will never take place and is meaningless,” declared Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, the Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, Wednesday. Earlier in the week, Firouzabadi had accused the US of seeking to force Maliki from office through “meddling and military intervention,” adding that the “crocodile tears” of the US over extremism in Iraq “should not receive any attention, as they are still the allies of the sponsors and supporters of terrorists in the region.”

The US and its regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, have armed and financed Islamist militia, including ISIS and other al-Qaeda allies and affiliates, to spearhead their campaign to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his Baathist regime. Moreover, they have done so as part of a drive to isolate, threaten, and bully Iran—Syria’s closest regional ally.

Iran has enjoyed close relations with Maliki’s Shia-dominated regime, which, for its part, has sought to balance between Tehran and Washington. A major factor in the crescendo of complaints emanating from Washington over Maliki’s misrule is that his government spurned US demands that he stop Iran from providing assistance to the Assad regime via Iraq.

Although the ISIS-Sunni militia offensive in Iraq threatens Iran's strategic position, Rouhani and his faction of Iran's bourgeois elite view it as having a silver lining in that it offers them an opportunity to demonstrate to Washington that Iran is ready to assist it in securing US strategic interests in the Middle East.

Over the course of several days beginning late last week Rouhani, his aides and supporters repeatedly signaled their readiness to work with Washington. Iran's president, after declaring that all countries should work together to fight terrorism, said, "Any time the Americans start to take action against terrorist groups [in Iraq], we can consider that." On Monday, one of Rouhani's closest foreign policy advisors, Hamid Aboutalebi, tweeted a series of messages arguing for US-Iranian cooperation in Iraq. "Iran and America," asserted Aboutalebi, "are the only two countries, from a perspective of regional power, that can peacefully end Iraq's crisis."

Since coming to power last August, Rouhani has sought a rapprochement with Washington. Under an interim nuclear deal reached in late November, Iran made major concessions to the US and its European Union allies, curtailing its civilian nuclear program and placing it under unprecedented international scrutiny. In return, the US has slightly eased the economic sanctions that have halved Iran's oil exports and halted most of its foreign trade.

Rouhani has also signaled his intention to reorient Iran's economy to the West, wooing European and US transnationals with promises of oil and other concessions and announcing plans to dramatically accelerate Iran's privatization drive.

While the US excluded Iran from last January's international conference on Syria, Rouhani's government has been at pains to present itself as a prospective partner of the US in stabilizing the broader Middle East, from Afghanistan to Lebanon. Iranian officials have repeatedly pointed to the intelligence Tehran provided the US when it invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and the assistance it subsequently gave in drumming up support for the US's imposition of Hamid Karzai as the country's president.

In what was widely interpreted within Iranian political circles as an attempt to distance Tehran from the Syrian government, Rouhani waited five days before congratulating Assad on his recent re-election as Syrian president and only did so under pressure from the rival Principalist faction in Iran's parliament.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has backed Rouhani's turn to the US, repeatedly urging all sections of the elite to support the government's diplomatic offensive. In a significant development, late last month Iranian armed forces head Firouzabadi denounced some media outlets associated with the Revolutionary Guards for deviating from Khamenei's support for Rouhani's administration and its overtures to the West. If they do not "reform their ways," vowed Firouzabadi, "we will confront them."

However, some factions of Iran's elite have economic and political interests, many of them bound up with the web of businesses associated with the Revolutionary Guards, that are threatened by Rouhani's pro-US and pro-European orientation. Their opposition, including their promotion of a reactionary Shia nationalism, is also rooted in fears of the response within the population, especially the working class, to Iran's abject surrender to imperialism.

On Wednesday—no doubt due both to the opposition from within Iran's security apparatus and the contradictory signals emanating from Washington about the wisdom of any form of

cooperation with Tehran—the Rouhani administration appeared to back off from its offer to work together with the US to prop up Iraq’s government. Rouhani’s chief of staff, Mohammad Nahavandian, told an international relations forum in Oslo that a final agreement on the nuclear issue would need to be reached before strategic cooperation between Iran and the US can proceed.

Neither Nahavandian’s statement, nor Firouzabadi’s claim that cooperation between Tehran and Washington is impossible should be taken at face value. There is a long history of tacit and even explicit cooperation between the US and Iran, including in 2007 during the Bush administration’s “surge” in Iraq.

But US imperialism, under a succession of presidents, has made clear that its aim is to re-impose on Iran the type of neocolonial subjugation that existed prior to the 1979 revolution and that there will be no “normalization” of relations with Tehran short of it accepting and agreeing to enforce US hegemony over the Middle East.

Even as the crisis in Iraq was unfolding this week, the US and its European Union allies were demanding at previously scheduled talks in Vienna that Iran give up virtually all uranium enrichment as a condition for “final resolution” of the nuclear dispute. And while Iran made yet another major concession—agreeing that economic sanctions will remain in place even after a “final” settlement comes into force—US and European diplomats said that Iran was far from making the “tough decisions” needed to reach a deal before the current interim agreement expires on July 20.

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