

Rapprochement with US Reinforces Iran Hand in Iraq

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Global Research, October 02, 2013

Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#), [USA](#)

Iran seems successful in turning the Iraqi “strategic” agreement with the US into a tactical one, while it is succeeding in turning its own tactical accords with Iraq into a strategic bondage of the country.

The burgeoning US-Iran rapprochement will only reinforce this trend to reinforce Iran hand in Iraq.

Therefore, none seems more jubilant than Iraq by the latest indications of rapprochement between the United States and Iran and none seems more on alert to see it through to success.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in a statement issued by his office on September 29 “hailed” what he described as “a great breakthrough” and a “victory” in the US-Iran relations, said he was “very optimistic” and pledged, according to Xinhua “that Iraq is ready to play a role to push forward the positive development” between the very two countries, which have been the “enemies” of Iraq and its war adversaries for decades now and which most Iraqis hold responsible and accountable for their current miseries.

Al-Maliki’s Foreign Minister, Hoshyar Zebari, in an interview with The Associated Press in New York the next day, revealed that Iraq played a “helpful role” in the development; moreover it aspires to “serve as a bridge of communication and understanding between the two,” he said.

Zebari was trying to take a credit that the editorial of the Iranian Bahar daily on last August 23 attributed to the Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Said’s visit to Tehran earlier that month and to the “role Oman has played” in the past between Iran and the West.

Zebari even seemed so keen to convince the US administration to take “the leadership” of President Hassan Rohani, who was elected in June, and his Iranian government “more seriously” because “they are serious” and “not playing games,” contrary of course to the negative reactions of the US Israeli and Arab GCC allies.

Writing in the British Financial Times on last September 27, Geoff Dyer and Najmeh Bozorgmehr expected the US – Iran rapprochement to “be one of the biggest geopolitical shifts since the cold war.”

The US – led military invasion of Iraq in 2003 pragmatically but counterproductively made the best use of the Iranian vengeance, which was in the waiting for whatever window of opportunity might open to revenge the ceasefire in the eight – year Iran – Iraq war, which the late leader and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini, lamented as “gulping the cup of poison.”

In hindsight, it is very clear now that Iran similarly made its best to violate the ceasefire with Iraq and facilitate the US war on Iraq as a continuation of the Iranian war by proxy; while American soldiers were dying by the thousands and Washington was depleting its budget by billions of tax-payer money spent on its war on Iraq, Iran was reaping the US harvest there quietly but persistently.

When the last of the US troops withdrew from Iraq late in 2011, they left behind in Baghdad a US - engineered “peace process” led by the same US - nurtured Iraqi “opposition” whom the US invading troops installed in power eight years earlier, ignoring the fact that this was the same “opposition” nurtured by Iran for a longer period all throughout the more than three decades of late Saddam Hussein rule, who never severed their loyalty to Iran during the US occupation of Iraq.

The real loyalty of the Iraqi rulers to either the US or Iran was blurred until the Syrian conflict made it impossible for them to continue publicly undecided.

US Ambivalent

Until recently, Iraq under PM al-Maliki was posturing as tactically placating Iran on Syria while committing quietly to its Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which al-Maliki signed with the former US president George W. Bush on December 14, 2008.

Al-Maliki’s government was on record in its support of a political negotiated settlement of the Syrian conflict and against any military solution thereto as well as in its opposition to “foreign intervention” in Syria, US strike whether “limited” or unlimited against it, arming Syrian rebels or facilitating their mission with logistics, Arab League’s suspension of its membership, imposing unilateral Arab, US and EU sanctions on the country, and Arab League’s and US president Barak Obama’s calls for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to “step down,” thus allying itself with the Russia, China and Iran.

Raymond Tanter, president of the US Iran Policy Committee, writing in The Hill on last September 20, labeled the “The Baghdad regime” a “naysayer” and “evildoer” ally of the US and wondered “of what value is one of the largest U.S. embassies in the world if American diplomats cannot persuade the Iraqi regime” to commit to its SFA accord.

Nonetheless, the US seems ambivalent.

On last September 14 Ramesh Sepehrrad noted in a UPI report that, “More often than not, Washington hesitates to hold Baghdad accountable” for its Syria stance.

Early enough however, President Obama provided an explanation: The difference between the U.S. and Iraqi responses to the Syrian conflict were simply “tactical disagreements,” Obama said on December 12, 2011, quoted by CBS News, adding he had “absolutely no doubt” that the Iraqi “naysaying” was “not based on considerations of what Iran would like to see.” The US president, like his predecessor Bush, trusts al-Maliki, but if he did not he could nonetheless count on the bilateral strategic SFA to rein him in.

Before the US-Russian latest deal on the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal, Washington, pursuant to the SFA, asked Baghdad to monitor the Iraqi airspace throughout the duration of

the planned US strikes on Syria, to prevent Iran from using it, an Iraqi military source told al-Arab London-based daily on last September 10.

As recently as last August 15, al-Maliki's Foreign Affairs Minister, Hoshyar Zebari, co-chaired with his American counterpart, John Kerry, the meeting in Washington, D.C. of the Political and Diplomatic Joint Coordination Committee (JCC), which was established as a result of the SFA. They agreed to convene the next JCC in Baghdad.

In the joint statement issued after the meeting, "Both delegations emphasized their commitment to close and ongoing security cooperation, noting in this regard the Memorandum of Understanding on security cooperation signed at the Defense and Security JCC in December 2012, the inaugural U.S.-Iraq Joint Military Committee (JMC) hosted by U.S. Central Command in June 2013."

However, this US strategic confidence is almost daily contested in Iraq.

The Iraqi Defense Minister Saadoun al-Dulaimi was in Tehran on last September 26 signing with his Iranian counterpart Brigadier General Hussein Dehqan a bilateral defense agreement, which the Iranian Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani said Iran was ready "to expand ... at the strategic level in all fields, according to www.tasnimnews.com on the same day.

The previous day, Sarah Bertin, a researcher at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C., wrote, commenting on al-Dulaimi's visit: "Iraq is once again drifting into Iran's orbit."

A few days later the Fars news agency reported that the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) commander of Navy forces Ali Fadavi and his Iraqi counterpart Ali Hussein Ali signed a MoU on naval cooperation agreement.

Last October, the then Iranian Minister of Defense Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi and al-Dulaimi signed a document of bilateral cooperation in the defense field.

The bilateral agreement on drilling cooperation signed in Ahwaz at the end of last month was the tip of an iceberg of more than one hundred multi-faceted accords, including gas, oil, energy and pipelines agreements worth billions of dollars, which Iraq signed with Iran under the umbrella of the US occupation since 2003 and the umbrella of the US-Iraq SFA after the withdrawal of the US troops from the country.

Turning Tactical Ties into Strategy

The quantity of the bilateral Iraq - Iraql accords has rapidly turned into a relationship of strategic quality, cemented by the pro-Iran parties and factions governing in Baghdad, surrounded by a belt of a Shiite sectarian affiliation to the Persian eastern neighbor and guarded by their sectarian militias, which have so far aborted the evolution of a national army and central government by excluding other Muslim sects from the failing "peace process" and alienating them to create and justify their sectarian antithesis led by al-Qaeida.

"For obvious reasons, the Iranians don't talk publicly about what they are up to in Iraq," but "it is clear that Iran has the ability to wield considerable influence in Iraq today," Kenneth M. Pollack, a senior fellow in the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, wrote last June 3.

According to an article presented by Tehran Bureau, the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and published late in November last year, “Iran does not have an interest in Iraq pumping additional oil. It does not want Iraq to have a close relationship with the United States, the Arab states or with Turkey. Iran also does not want Iraq to develop a significant defensive military capability. Ideally, Iran would like to have Iraq under its thumb, yet retain its independence and sovereignty.”

Nonetheless, the US seems ambivalent. Pollack has the following interpretation: “Although both Washington and Tehran claim to oppose the other, what Iraqis have seen— at least since 2010, but arguably longer— has been the Americans and the Iranians pushing in the same directions: in favor of (PM al-) Maliki against any and all opposition, and against renewed violence. It’s no wonder that many Iraqis believe that either the U.S. does not understand its own interests, or else we are selling them out to the Iranians in return for something that they cannot fathom.”

To all indications, Iran and US, whether in competition or cooperation, will continue for a long period to come to compromise the sovereignty and independence of Iraq, but “One has to always remember that throughout Iraq’s recent existence, it has been a very nationalist country” and will not succumb to a status of a client state either to the United States or to Iran, in view of the Washington-based, Tony Cordesman, an analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), quoted by Al - Arabia satellite TV station on July 25 last year.

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