

American-Iranian Talks on Iraq.. End of Conflict or Another Start?



Mahjoob Zweiri

Introduction

Representatives of the American and Iranian governments met on April ٢٠٠٧ ٢٨ in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. This meeting- the second televised meeting since William Sullivan, the last American ambassador, left Iran in April ١٩٧٩- will be at the ambassadorial level. Iran will be represented by its ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, while the United States will be represented by its ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker.

The first meeting was held in Algeria, in ١٩٨٦, to resolve the American hostage crisis. Since then, Americans and Iranians have been exchanging statements through the media or a third party, or attending the so-called "track ٢ meetings": dialogue between non-official representatives of America and Iran. One of the most prominent such meetings was held after the attacks of September ٢٠٠١ and semi-periodic meetings were held between the two parties until May ٢٠٠٣. Moreover, Iran and the United States are members of the group of six-plus-two, which handled the Afghan question after the collapse of the Taliban government. The two countries worked together throughout the period that followed the collapse of the Taliban government.

Both sides have stressed that the Iraq issue will be the only issue on the negotiation agenda of the current talks. The United States made an official request to Iran through the Swiss embassy, which looks after U.S. interests in Iran, to hold negotiations with Tehran. Tehran immediately agreed to the request. This was expected, since Iran was willing to hold such negotiations if the United States asked for them, which is what happened according to the Iranian account.

A number of important developments accompany these negotiations. In Iran, Haleh Esfandiari, the Iranian-American academic and director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, was arrested. Esfandiari is being held in the Evin jail in Tehran, allegedly for being a threat to national security. These negotiations also coincide with the new budget, proposed by the State Department, to promote democracy in Iran, which is estimated at about ١٠٩\$ million. Reference should also be made to the American reports, which refer to Iran's secret plan to force American troops out of Iraq by increasing support to Sunni and Shiite militias (especially the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr), in order to justify intensification of US military operations in Iraq in the summer of ٢٠٠٧. Iran's focus on the Mahdi Army aims to take advantage of the anger caused by statements made by Iraqi National Security Adviser, Muwaffaq al-Rubaie, in which he asserted that the United States sought and planned to kill Muqtada al-Sadr in ٢٠٠٤. The United States enters also these negotiations armed with the fact that nine new American warships have recently arrived to the Gulf. These warships, packed with ١٧thousand Marines and sailors, will be added to the huge American military force in the region.

This analysis, which addresses the prospective American-Iranian talks, focuses on three main axes:

- First: The timing of these talks. In other words, why now?
- Second: The Iranian political scene and the talks with Washington.
- Third: The Middle East and Washington-Tehran talks.

The Timing of these Talks. In other words, Why Now?

Despite the presence of more than 140,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, in addition to a number of security companies operating in Iraq, providing security in post-Saddam Iraq has turned out to be a real dilemma. Hundreds of anonymous corpses are being found, Iraqi security and police forces are being infiltrated and the political conflict between the new political elites have all made providing security, the most basic need in Iraq, an impossible task.

The political and security failure in Iraq- often referred to by American officials as a "very difficult" or "extremely complicated" situation - is one of the fundamental reasons that the United States has initiated dialogue with one of the so-called "axes of evil". Initially, the United States' eagerness to achieve a quick victory in Iraq, and the lack of any clear vision for the post-war period, forced it to try to convince Iran to join the so-called international coalition against Iraq, even if nominally. The US then shifted its attention to associating the war on Iraq with what was called the War on Terror. Finally, it began talking about the negative role of Syria and Iran in the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq. Iran was the main, if not the only, beneficiary of all three of these stages. The destruction of the Baath regime, the removal of Sunni Arabs from the Iraqi political equation and the portrayal of Iran as a prominent player in the new Iraq, was all a big reward for Iran.

Iran has succeeded in strengthening its presence in Iraq, adopting a clear strategy that aims to ensure that Iraq does not pose a threat to Iran, as it did during the years of Baath Party rule. Therefore, to protect what Iranians call their national security, the first line of defense for Iran is a presence on the ground in Iraq. Additionally, the hostility between Tehran and Washington prompted Iran to strengthen its presence in Iraq in order to achieve another goal: thwarting what the United States describes as building "a democratic model in Iraq".

These goals were a source of great concern to the American administration, especially because the Americans in Iraq claim that there is a lot of evidence of Iranian influence in Iraq, as has been reported to politicians in Washington. Politicians in Washington have responded to this by saying that Iran must change its behavior in Iraq. The result was that Tehran stepped up its defiance. Thus Washington has found itself under increasing pressure from its Arab friends. Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al Faisal, said in Washington that "the United States offered Iraq as a gift to Iran." This was a clear criticism of the US performance in Iraq following the collapse of the former regime.

The unilateralism of the US administration is demonstrated by its unwillingness to listen to differing points of view. It has always issued statements confirming that the situation in Iraq is under control. Even when Baker-Hamilton report recommended negotiating with Iran and Syria to help stabilize Iraq, the US Administration rejected this recommendation under the pretext that any contact between Washington and the two capitals could be abused. There still are unresolved issues between Washington and Tehran, especially regarding the Iranian nuclear portfolio, as well as unresolved issues between Washington and Damascus, most importantly regarding Lebanon.

Last year, the US Administration rejected Baker-Hamilton recommendation to talk to Iran, confirming that it was working on a new security plan, the "Baghdad Security Plan". This was followed by the ousting of Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, and the appointment of a new Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, who has been emphasizing the need to talk to Iran.

A few months later, after it became clear that the new security plan failed to reduce violence, and due to increasing criticism of the US Administration following the Democratic victory in the congressional elections, the administration followed a more timid policy towards Iran. Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker, met with Syrian officials in Damascus, and the Bush Administration started talking enthusiastically about the possibility of holding a dialogue with Iran in the Iraq Neighbors Conference, held in March 2007.

Although this conference took place, it did not yield the desired results. Therefore, the Americans made another attempt by talking about a possible meeting between Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State, and Manouchehr Mottaki, the Iranian Foreign Minister, at the Sharm el-Sheikh Conference, held in May 2007, which did not take place.

In light of the difficult conditions in Iraq, the US administration now finds itself in a position of being forced to talk directly to Iran. On the Iranian side, there is a conviction that holding talks with the United States on Iraq is vital, since it amounts to an explicit recognition of Iran's regional status. In addition, from the Iranian point of view, these talks are important because they would contribute to changing Iran's image as a rogue state. Most importantly, these talks come amid the growing crisis in Iran-Russia relations over Iranian arrears in agreed payments for assistance on the Bushehr nuclear site. This crisis caused the opening of Bushehr Reactor, in southwestern Iran, to be delayed.

Another development related to Iran is Iranian dissatisfaction with the performance of Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri Al-Maliki, because of his policy, perceived by Iran as an attempt to pull the carpet from beneath it in the Iraqi arena by monopolizing the decision-making process and not consulting with other participants in the Shiite coalition. Moreover, the Al-Maliki government is not making serious efforts to release the five Iranians kidnapped by the American forces in northern Iraq. Dissatisfaction with the Al-Maliki government is also shared by the United States, but for another reason. The US feels that Al-Maliki government is not making serious efforts to resolve the security dilemma in Iraq, a process which they believe should involve forging some kind of national reconciliation between the components of Iraqi society.

It also seems that other issues will appear on the discussion agenda. The Iranian opposition, Mojahedin-e Khalq which is currently in Iraq, will be a part of the dialogue between Washington and Tehran. There is also the issue of the American presence in the Gulf area and the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq.

Finally, it is necessary to remember that these talks come ahead of the presidential elections in the United States and the neo-conservatives in Iran. As is known, the countdown for the election for the Eighth Majlis, which will be held in early 2008, has begun. The same is true for the United States, which will hold presidential elections in the same year. These developments have made it crucial that both sides meet and talk face to face.

The Iranian Political Scene and the Talks with Washington

The relationship with the United States is considered an important issue in the domestic political debate in Iran. It has often been the reason behind persecution of, or accusations directed towards, those intellectuals who advocate establishing political relations with the United States. In general, it is safe to say that there are three political groups with declared stances on the relationship with America:

- *First: the Traditional Conservatives.* This group describes themselves as conservative fundamentalists who are the followers of the line of Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. For them, working with the United States, the Great Satan as it is called there, is a sin. They also believe that the American hostility to Iran is a century old. Yet, this stance does not totally prevent talking with America on specific issues, like Iraq. This was confirmed by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Khamenei when he said that "negotiations between Washington and Tehran do not, in any way, entail a shift in the Iranian attitude towards America."

- *Second: the Liberal Reformist trend,* whose followers believe that talking with America, and even establishing diplomatic relations with it, is in the interest of Iran. From their point of view, such relations, if built on solid foundations, will strengthen Iran's regional and international role and put an end to one of the sources of threat to Iran. Due to the fact that this trend is not currently in power, and because it suffers from political isolation, it sees the timing of the talks between Iran and America as inappropriate. This is a tactical position and does not reflect the known declared position of this trend.

- *Third: the Neo-Conservatives.* This is the elite which tries to combine the fundamentalism of the traditional conservatives with the reformers' opinions on social justice and economic reform, attempting to distance themselves from all forms of political and economic corruption that has affected the other political trends. This group currently holds power in Iran. The Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who said in August 2005 that Iran does not need America, is now celebrating victory over the US. The widespread impression among neo-conservatives is that America needs Iran. Therefore, they believe that the upcoming talks might be a step towards ending years of political estrangement. They may be hoping to be credited for this achievement and that it might be useful in the next parliamentary and presidential elections.

The disparity in attitudes between these political groups concerning the nature of the circumstances under which these talks are held, and the extent to which Iran benefits from its nuclear portfolio, have helped all these trends to come to a consensus that what is taking place now is the beginning of a new stage in the history of US-Iran relations. Nevertheless, there are some skeptical voices. The conservative Kayhan newspaper reported that Iran has little interest in talking with the United States, indicating that it is important for Iran to make sure that the US pays a heavy price before receiving Iran's help in getting out of the Iraqi quagmire.

The first two trends believe that the ruling elite in Iran should realize the serious consequences of its actions. Mohsen Armin, spokesman of Islamic Revolution's Mujahideen Organization, thinks that the neo-conservatives have crossed the red line, stressing that the political conditions seem to benefit the US more than Iran. In the same context, Emad Afroogh, head of the Majlis Cultural and Social Commission, sees that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government is rushing into holding talks with the US, and highlights the need for the talks to be based on equality and parity.

However, it is important to indicate here that the skepticism in Iran about the success of these talks probably reflects frustration and dissatisfaction with the performance of the Iranian government under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The skeptics fear that the government which has failed in fulfilling its economic and social promises might not be able to properly handle the talks with the United States.

The Middle East and Washington-Tehran Talks

Despite the insistence of the United States and Iran that Iraq is the lone issue on the agenda, and that America wants Iran to help in stabilizing Iraq by supporting efforts at national reconciliation and refraining from supporting armed groups, it is likely that other issues will be raised, including the Iranian nuclear issue and the Lebanese crisis.

The focus on the Iraqi issue does not necessarily mean that all Iraqi parties are happy with these talks. The Shiite coalition led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim welcomes these talks, considering them a major success of their leader, who has repeatedly stressed the need for Washington and Tehran to work together to address the security challenge in Iraq. However, Tariq al-Hashimi, the Iraqi Vice President, thinks that these talks damage Iraq's sovereignty. He also believes that it is not acceptable to allow others to discuss Iraq-related issues and that it is necessary for the Iraqi state to insist on being represented at this meeting and to be kept informed of all the decisions and the outcome of talks.

On the other hand the timing of this meeting, only days before the 60-day deadline stipulated by the UN Security Council in its latest resolution on Iran (No.1747), may have some implications. Despite Iran's insistence that the Iranian nuclear portfolio is not on the agenda, the atmosphere of the Baghdad meeting will cast its shadow on the post-meeting period. According to John Bolton, the former United States ambassador to the United Nations, there is serious talk about painful sanctions if Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, confirms in his report, submitted to the Security Council on May 23 2007, that Iran did not meet its commitment to halt uranium enrichment.

This report has infuriated Western powers even before it has formally been discussed by the Security Council, because it was leaked that Mohamed El-Baradei calls on the western countries and the United States to recognize Iran's right to enrich a certain amount of uranium. This brings us back to the key reason of the crisis between Washington and Tehran, especially with regard to Iran's nuclear program. This key reason is the security guarantees which the United States refuses, under any circumstances, to give Iran.

Importantly, America did not participate in the European proposal, presented to Iran in August 2005, offering greater economic and technological cooperation with Iran, acknowledging its political and security role and giving it a guarantee against any threat that might lead to changing the regime or undermining its security. Although America refused to sign this proposal, it signed the other proposal submitted by the European Union in June 2006, which did not contain any security guarantees.

It is thought that Iran's inflexibility and insistence on enriching uranium result from its conviction that America is serious about the use of military force. Iran feels that America continues to pursue its regime-change strategy. The US State Department dedicated \$109 million in its budget for the year 2008 to support civil society organizations in Iran, and \$75 million to support human rights groups there. This is in addition to \$20 million to the American Persian radio station. \$8.1 million were dedicated to Radio Farda. Finally, \$5.5 million were dedicated to consulate matters in the countries bordering Iran. Such developments reinforce suspicions between the two countries, leaving Iran to wonder if all this helps in the breaking the ice in the relationship between the two countries.

As for Iraq, Iran's help for the United States would mean a victory for America in Iraq. This would mean that the United States will repeat its adventure in Iraq elsewhere, starting probably in Iran. This would also mean that Iraq will rejoin the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which will reduce oil prices, depriving Iran from an important pressure tool in case it is attacked by the United States. Moreover, a stable political regime in Iraq would open the door for a series of claims in Iran, starting from borders and water issues.

It is also important to note that these talks will cast a long shadow on the developments of Lebanon crisis. The March 14 Movement, which sees Iran-Hizbollah relationship as one of the reasons of crisis, finds itself in a very difficult situation. These talks, if they are to happen, will change the course of the political crisis in Lebanon. Such belief reinforces the hypothesis that the aim of these talks is to strengthen the conviction of each party that the other does not want to cooperate, which will open the door for a possible military confrontation.

The talks between the US and Iran are probably a tactical step towards the moment of the new confrontation. The US, especially the Republicans, might choose to go to the war if these talks fail to convince Iran to cooperate in the Iraqi issue. This will provide an additional reason to brand Iran as a rouge state, as the US Administration often describes it, despite their conviction (the Republicans) that this might cause them to lose the presidential elections. But on the other side, it will leave the Democrats an extremely complicated political legacy.

These talks may also be a means to justify a prospective war on Iran, and mobilize more supporters, especially in the Middle East. These talks will certainly help Iran develop a clear-cut plan to deal with the United States in the post-talks phase. Iran will also re-assess its presence in Iraq to either strengthen it or redeploy it. Finally, there is also the upcoming Security Council resolution on Iran's nuclear program, which will clearly reflect the outcome of these talks and the features of the next phase of Washington-Tehran relationship.