

Iran is divided over talki

Nuclear Issue - Iran

By Abbas William Samii

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T EHRAN'S recent announcement that it was willing to discuss Iraqi affairs directly with Washington does not reflect serious concern about stability to its east. If that was Tehran's real concern, it could have acted six months ago, in October, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that she has authorised the US Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, to speak directly with Iranian officials. Tehran has overcome its initial reluctance for two related reasons — the first and most important relates to domestic political factors; the second relates to Iran's international isolation. But even before the talks got under way, developments in Iraq threw a spanner in the works.

When the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, declared on March 16 that Iran was open to discussing Iraq, he said Tehran remained sceptical and framed the issue in terms of American difficulties: "The US ambassador [to Iraq] has also announced several times that they would like to [hold talks] since they cannot solve the problems there and need to have discussions with Iran," he said. "But, we don't trust these US words." Larijani went on to say that Iran would act so it could help the Iraqi government.

Iran and the US have held bilateral talks on limited issues for years, but Iraq is a particularly

touchy topic. The Iranian government has consistently portrayed US activities there in the worst possible light. The terms used by Larijani reflected a 180-degree diplomatic turnaround and recognition of the domestic controversy this would cause. They were meant to protect the administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from the criticism of other hardliners hostile to any interaction with the US specifically or the West generally. Such attitudes have become more pronounced as Iran is increasingly isolated over the nuclear issue.

Washington suspects that Tehran seeks to hold talks now in order to divert pressure it is facing because of its nuclear programme. It also believes that Iran is trying to cause divisions between the US and its allies. This may be true, but it is not the only explanation for Iran's decision.

Many Iranians are critical of Ahmadinejad's forays into international affairs and his diplomatic blundering. The most intense and meaningful criticism has come from relatively centrist figures who represent an older generation of politicians — former Presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, for example. They have spoken out against the undoing of their work, particularly the painstaking restoration of Iran's relations with the international community.

There is a political aspect to this. The older generation has also spoken out against the wholesale replacement of state officials by the Ahmadinejad administration. This includes not only people at the top of the executive branch, such as Cabinet members, state bank governors, and provincial governors-general, but second-tier officials, too. According to critics of the

administration, by replacing all these people, belittling their efforts while in office, and making unsubstantiated allegations of corruption, the executive branch is undermining the accomplishments of the preceding generation and the revolution.

Iranian legislators, particularly reformists but also conservatives, have spoken out against the executive branch's diplomatic efforts, too, complaining of its ultimately pointless reliance on Russia and China as counterweights to the US and Europe. In early March, a number of legislators said Tehran should eliminate the

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middleman and negotiate directly with the US. For example, National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Ali Zadsar said, "It is better to negotiate with the Great Satan than with little Satans." Zadsar explained that Moscow was acting as Washington's proxy, and history had proven that the Russians were more treacherous than the Americans. A few days later, the committee's rapporteur, Kazem Jalali, said it was time to call on the expertise of individuals with good international reputations. This was code for ditching the Ahmadinejad team and turning to its predecessors. Another aspect of this concern about the executive

Looking to the United States

people, and of ending edging mists gainst, too, liance to the per of e the branch's international blundering was apparent when, in January, the legislature began debating Ahmadinejad's submitted budget. There were calls for a "crisis" budget that could be used in case economic sanctions were imposed on Iran after it was referred to the United Nations Security Council.

To date, no meaningful criticism of Iran's effort to master the full nuclear fuel cycle has been heard from significant domestic political actors. Most criticism is focused on the executive's diplomacy — reformists say it is too confrontational, hard-liners say the

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the US. oreign id, "It n than l that y, and e more days Jalali, ise of ations. linejad nother ecutive opposite. Larijani's indication of willingness to talk to the US seemed a sop to critics on one side of the aisle, while his terminology was a sop to critics on the other side.

The international isolation Iran is facing due to its intransigence has contributed to the growth of fissures within Iran's body politic. In an effort to end public debate on this subject and criticism of the executive, Rafsanjani announced at a March 8 meeting of the Assembly of Experts — a popularly elected body of 86 clerics tasked with supervising the supreme leader — that it was time for national unity in the face of "enemy" plots. Divisive

comments, he said, undermined national unity.

The next day, Ahmadinejad accused unnamed Iranians of being agents of an enemy trying to divide the country. These efforts, he continued, were connected with the desire to undermine Iran's nuclear pursuits. And on March 10, Friday prayer leader Hojatoleslam Ahmad Khatami's sermon in Tehran, which was broadcast across the country by state radio, shed light on the political colouring of the call for unity. Khatami (no relation to the former president) noted that the current nuclear policy was not Ahmadinejad's alone and had been shaped years earlier. "The decision was first taken during the previous government's term of office. The current government is implementing the same decision now." As for domestic critics, he said, "When the time comes, the great Iranian nation will give a harsh response to the insiders who move in the same direction as the enemies, just as it has given decisive responses to foreigners."

These calls for unity and efforts to portray the president's critics as foreign agents did little to silence public debate; indeed, Tehran's decision to enter into talks with Washington only heightened it.

The government's spin control continued. While the speech before the Friday prayers sermon is not always broadcast by radio, the one given by Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki on March 17, the day after Larijani's announcement, was. Mottaki stressed that Iran was calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq because their presence was being exploited by combatants in the country. Mottaki also emphasised the need for unity,

saying, "Our officials, scholars, scientists, academics, students, political parties and people, more than anytime before, must remain united on the nuclear policy which has been carefully thought through."

This did not do the trick, and on March 21 supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stepped in to end the debate over the wisdom of engaging Washington. He said he did not object to talks, and that Iran would offer its view on Iraq to the Americans. That view, he said, was "aimed at making Americans understand that they should leave Iraq alone and let Iraqis run their own country". Khamenei also made it clear that he was suspicious of American intentions, saying, "There is overwhelming evidence implicating espionage organisations in instabilities in Iraq — British, American or Israeli espionage operations."

Tehran's effort to encourage the US to leave Iraq, and Washington's effort to persuade Iran to leave Iraq alone, came to a grinding halt less than two weeks after Larijani's announcement. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and other figures demanded that the talks be delayed until Iraqi representatives could participate. Yet this cannot happen until a new government is formed. Although this is unfortunate for Iraqi security, it works out well for the Iranian government. It can tell the international community that it was trying to act responsibly, and it can tell its domestic critics that its efforts at responsible diplomacy were foiled. COURTESY THE DAILY STAR

The writer is an analyst at Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty, Inc. The views in this article are his own and do not represent the position of RFE-RL