

Two Agendas: Why Iran, U.S. Stand Far Apart

Contributed by Administrator
Monday, 25 June 2007

Tehran Seeks End to Bid to Destabilize Regime;
Washington Wants Insurgent Backing in Iraq to Stop

WASHINGTON -- As the U.S. and Iran consider a second round of talks aimed at stabilizing Iraq, Tehran is calling for the U.S. to stop actions it claims are aimed at stirring trouble within Iran. Iran's list of concerns underscores the deep divisions separating the two sides -- and could stymie any hoped-for cooperation on Iraq.

For its part, Washington claims Iran is backing Iraqi insurgent groups that are attacking U.S. forces and wants it to stop. But the Iranians are countering with demands, both in public and through private channels, that the Bush administration break up an Iranian terrorist group, the Mujahedin e-Khalq, or MEK, that opposes the Iranian government and is being sheltered by U.S. forces in Iraq near the Iranian border, senior U.S. officials and academics said.

"The MEK has been a constant irritant to the Iranians, and they have brought [the group] up repeatedly, both directly and indirectly," said a senior U.S. official working on Iran.

Iran has listed other issues it wants addressed, as the U.S. pushes it to help tame sectarian violence and weapons proliferation in Iraq. These include an end to Washington's alleged support of ethnic insurgent groups, which Tehran views as part of a broader destabilization campaign against the regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Tehran also wants the U.S. to return five Iranian officials detained in Iraq by the Pentagon in January and to set a firm timetable for a U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq.

Iran's demands, and particularly its fixation on the MEK, illustrate the increasingly tit-for-tat approach Tehran is employing in its growing contretemps with Washington and its Western allies over Iraq and over Iran's pursuit of nuclear know-how. The demands also reflect a growing anxiety sweeping Mr. Ahmadinejad's government about the perceived threat posed by the U.S. and its allies to Iran's internal stability, U.S. officials and analysts said.

In recent months, Tehran has detained four Iranian-American academics on espionage charges, as well as 15 British marines and naval officers -- since released -- who it alleged had illegally entered Iranian waters. The government has also stepped up a crackdown on student activists and pro-democracy advocates challenging Tehran's theocratic rulers, human-rights groups said.

The Iranian government is facing mounting public unrest at home amid signs that the economy is suffering. International financial sanctions pushed by the U.S. in response to Tehran's nuclear activities could further damage the country's economy and Mr. Ahmadinejad's political standing.

Iran has emerged as an increasingly influential player in the Middle East, as Shiite Muslim political parties and militant groups bolster their presence across the region. In Iraq, the Bush administration believes Tehran is supplying weapons and training to Shiite militias fighting against Sunni Muslims and American forces, in a bid to undermine Washington's Iraq mission. Iranians officials, who declined to comment for this article, have previously denied the country is training or arming militias in Iraq.

In the first direct talks between Washington and Tehran in decades, held on May 28 in Baghdad, the U.S. delegation, led by U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, demanded that Iran move to stop its support of Iraqi militia groups. The Iranians raised some of their concerns in response, with Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Quomi, bringing up the MEK.

Now Iran is pushing for a second round, but U.S. officials said the White House hasn't decided whether more talks would be useful at this moment. Mr. Crocker and other officials described the first session as a largely formal, four-hour presentation of each country's views on Iraq, and what each thought the other could do to lessen the violence.

Washington's position on the MEK has emerged as a litmus test in Tehran's eyes of the Bush administration's overall posture toward Iran, and could help determine the success of any future talks between the two countries.

Selig Harrison, a scholar based in Washington who recently met with Iranian officials in Tehran, said the Iranian government views the dismantling of the MEK "as a key barometer of the U.S.'s goodwill."

The issue may also be the only one among Iran's demands on which the U.S. has some flexibility. U.S. officials said they are weighing ideas on how to remove the group from its U.S.-protected base in Iraq. But they conceded that any decision would have to overcome numerous legal and other obstacles, as well as heavy criticism on Capitol Hill.

The U.S. State Department considers the MEK a terrorist organization for its role in assassinating American and Iranian officials, and its military alliance with deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and '90s.

Even so, the Pentagon continues to safeguard more than 3,000 MEK members and their families at an Iraqi military base near the Iranian border under an international covenant protecting displaced peoples. The U.S. command has allowed the group to use Camp Ashraf as a base to orchestrate anti-Iranian political and propaganda programs, though it has disarmed MEK fighters.

Members of the MEK and its political arm, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, have emerged as a source of intelligence for Washington on Iran's nuclear programs and paramilitary operations. And thanks to a healthy lobbying operation, the organization enjoys strong support in Congress, where some sympathetic lawmakers view it as a potential democratic counterweight to Tehran.

Mr. Harrison, who is based at the Center for International Policy and visited Tehran three weeks ago, said aides to Mr. Ahmadinejad and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told him that Washington's partnership with the MEK was viewed as part of a broader U.S. campaign to use ethnic insurgent groups to challenge Tehran.

Iran has charged the U.S. with supporting ethnic militias in Iraqi Kurdistan and Pakistan's Baluchistan province in a bid to strike Iranian military assets.

The Pentagon and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency have denied using these militias, or the MEK itself, as military tools against Iran.

Iranian officials have floated proposals at international events that would allow agencies such as the Red Cross to oversee the resettlement of MEK personnel out of Camp Ashraf either back to Iran or to third countries.

Other Iran analysts said the stalemate between Washington and Tehran over the MEK underscores the high distrust between the countries. In the late 1990s, the Clinton administration listed the MEK as a terrorist organization, partly in an effort to build bridges to reformist elements in Iran. Now, there appears to be no middle ground between the countries on the MEK and other issues.

"The MEK was always a small price to pay" for Washington to improve ties with Iran, said Vali Nasr, a Middle East expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. "The problem is that Washington is not interested anymore in paying any price."

By JAY SOLOMON and NEIL KING JR.
June 25, 2007; Page A6 Wall Street Journal

Write to Jay Solomon at jay.solomon@wsj.com and Neil King Jr. at neil.king@wsj.com