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NEGOTIATING WITH IRAN AND SYRIA OVER IRAQ

W. Andrew Terrill

The United States has been struggling for decades to establish effective ways to deal with Iran and Syria, with no easy answer coming to the fore. In recent years, the question sometimes was framed as to whether we should seek regime change for these nations or accept the existence of the current regimes and attempt to change their behavior through political pressure and negotiations. Recently, the possibility of coercive regime change seems to have been ruled out under all but the most exceptional circumstances by a key administration official. In response to a series of questions by Senator Robert Byrd, Secretary of Defense designate Robert Gates used his confirmation hearings to assure the Senate of his strong opposition to military action against Iran and Syria. This testimony is hardly surprising since coercive regime change in Iraq has led to a number of challenges that could emerge in even more problematic ways should the policy be applied to Iran and Syria. Does this movement away from regime change mean that we should seek behavior change with regards to the existing Syrian and Iranian regimes? Is there any value to opening new channels of communications with Tehran and Damascus with regard to Iraq since we may have accepted implicitly that these governments are going to be around for a while?

A diplomatic option involving Syria and Iran appears to be worth exploring if done within the context of a broad regional initiative that includes our regional friends and allies as well as our adversaries. In dealing with both Tehran and Damascus, we must enter into discussions with our eyes open and remember that these are dangerous and untrustworthy adversaries. Communicating with an adversary, nevertheless, is not a reward to that country, and in some cases you may have overlapping interests with an opponent. In the late 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union cooperated on the creation of a nuclear nonproliferation treaty because a world composed of large numbers of nuclear weapons states was not in the interest of either party. Cooperation on this issue did not mean that Washington and Moscow were ready to beat their swords into plowshares because of this one area of agreement. It meant they were willing to work together on one issue while remaining deeply opposed to each other on a variety of other concerns. If we choose to negotiate with Iran and Syria, it also, under current circumstances, should be on one issue—the future of Iraq. Our opposition to policies such as the Iranian nuclear weapons program and the Syrian efforts to dominate the government of Lebanon are not negotiable unless we are negotiating how to end them.

Syria, Iran, and the United States all can benefit from a stable Iraq, and discussions on this topic can be of value if Tehran and Damascus are capable of placing their self-interest on this problem above demands for a broader agenda. A full-scale civil war in Iraq may produce millions of refugees, many of whom would be streaming over the Syrian and Iranian borders. These borders are impossible to close fully. In some cases, refugees might remain in foreign host countries for years, if not decades. Many would be armed and angry—angry at each other and perhaps the host government, which would then have to adjudicate their disputes and control their potential to cause problems. Moreover, Syria,

and especially Iran, have large Kurdish populations which may find an independent Iraqi Kurdistan interesting in ways that would complicate their relations with their own governments. Furthermore, Syria is a highly diverse society whose own sectarian divisions may be magnified deeply by escalating problems in Iraq. On another level, Iraqi intra-Shi'ite violence, as well as sectarian conflict, might occur for a very long time under civil war conditions. Such difficulties could be expected to create severe challenges for Iranians attempting to navigate factional differences. Terrorism could cross the Iranian-Iraqi border from both directions under these circumstances.

Opponents of negotiations with our adversaries, often (in fact very often) use the word appeasement. Yet, in the case of Iran and Syria, there is at least some possibility that these nations will respond to hard-hitting diplomacy by appeasing us because they may have more to lose from a collapsed Iraq. The worst thing we might do for their long-term interests would be to wash our hands of Iraq and let the regional states (friendly and hostile) cope with an unfolding disaster. While this would be a counterproductive policy for the United States, it would be a disaster for all of Iraq's neighbors, and at some level they probably know this, even if such knowledge is not reflected in their rhetoric. Moreover, if Iran and Syria choose to be obstructionist, they may find themselves with a significant portion of the regional culpability should chaos develop in Iraq. Currently, their approach often is to blame the United States for everything that goes wrong in Iraq, and this approach needs to end. Syria needs to control its border aggressively with U.S. and Iraqi help. Iran needs to use its influence to support Iraqi national reconciliation, and both countries need to cooperate extensively on counterterrorism efforts. They may choose not to take these important steps, but they should not be allowed to do so because we have failed to confront them diplomatically over the exact mechanics of what we expect from them on these issues.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we might want to remember that America currently has 141,000 troops in Iraq undertaking an extremely difficult mission and taking casualties every day that they are doing it. If we are going to ask these young people to stay with the struggle for a third or fourth tour of duty, they need to be supported by every available tool of national power, including creative and hard-hitting diplomacy. The Iranians and Syrians might feel the need to check their wallets and count their fingers after every negotiating session with the United States, but the negotiations should go forward. Negotiations with Iran and Syria, even if successful, will not turn around the difficulties in Iraq, but if they can make things a least a little better for our soldiers and the Iraqis we should be willing to go forward with this effort.

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