

Policy Watch: Help from Syria and Iran?

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One idea being floated for resolving the conflict in Iraq is for the United States to get help in doing this from Iran and Syria -- two governments that Washington has long had hostile relations with. It is highly doubtful this will work.

Everyone knows, including Tehran and Damascus, that America's military effort in Iraq is floundering. Indeed, part of the reason it is doing so is that Tehran and Damascus are aiding (or allowing aid to flow to) various Iraqi insurgent groups. Iran and Syria could indeed cut back on this and take other steps to relieve America's burden in Iraq. Both, though, will demand a high price for helping America.

The condition that Tehran will surely insist on for cooperating with the United States is an end to all American opposition to Iran's "peaceful" nuclear program. Damascus, for its part, will demand that it be given a free hand to re-impose its dominion in Lebanon, which the "Cedar Revolution" of 2005 greatly reduced.

The Bush administration has already made clear that it will not do either of these things. But it has also suggested that it would welcome the cooperation of Iran and Syria in Iraq. This is clearly unrealistic: Iran and Syria are not going to do anything for the United States unless and until it does something for them.

The question, then, is should Washington meet Iran's and Syria's conditions in order to get help from them?

In the case of Syria, the answer to this question should undoubtedly be "No!" Unlike many other Middle Eastern countries where democratic forces are weak or non-existent, they are strong in Lebanon. For America to abandon them in exchange for Syrian help in extricating U.S. troops from Iraq would be a complete betrayal of American values.

America, however, might not need to make a deal with Syria if it could make one with Iran, which is far more powerful. And here the case is more ambiguous: It is not clear how close Iran actually is to acquiring a nuclear weapon. Even if it does, it is not clear why the threat of overwhelming nuclear retaliation wouldn't serve to deter Iran from using nuclear weapons the way it did the Soviet Union and China.

But if the United States dropped its opposition to the Iranian nuclear program, would Tehran actually cooperate in Iraq? Or would it pocket that concession, rein in the Shiite Iraqi militias temporarily while the United States wound down its presence, and then resume support for them later?

Even if Iran and Syria were willing to cooperate in good faith with the United States in Iraq, it is doubtful that they actually have the ability to rein in the well-armed militias they have been assisting. And if fighting persists between Iraqi Sunni and Iraqi Shiites, it is highly unlikely that Iran would refrain from helping the latter, no matter what it agreed on with the United States. In other words, while Iran and Syria might claim the ability to help America out of Iraq in return for American concessions, it is doubtful that Tehran and Damascus could or would actually deliver on their end of the bargain.

Finally, just the U.S. attempt to strike a bargain over Iraq with Iran and Syria could negatively affect U.S. relations with traditional Sunni Arab allies such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait.

Unlike at present, Washington should be talking with Tehran and Damascus. It is always important to be in communication with one's opponents. But however appealing the idea that Iran and Syria could help America out of its Iraqi predicament might be, it is not going to work. There should be no illusions about that.

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