

---

# Baghdad between Washington and Tehran

By Maria Appakova  
RIA Novosti - 9/6/2008

---

Accompanied by members of his cabinet, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has made his second visit to Tehran since the beginning of the year. Iran has offered Iraq strategic cooperation, including in the military sphere.

This is at a time when talks on long-term strategic cooperation between Baghdad and Washington have stalled. That will have pleased Tehran. The agreement they are trying to reach would contradict Iranian interests.

The Iraqi prime minister is in an awkward situation. He wants good relations both with Iran and the United States. Ideally, he would like to have agreements with both of them, but the tensions between Iran and the U.S. make this all but impossible.

What should al-Maliki do? He cannot do without Iran's help, considering its influence on Iraq's Shiites. Iran could explode the situation in Iraq any time, but it could also choose to reduce tensions. In any event, the Iraqi prime minister cannot afford to quarrel with Tehran.

But at the same time, he badly needs a treaty with the United States. The UN mandate for the international military presence in Iraq expires on December 31 this year, and the Iraqi security forces are far from strong enough to stand alone without Western support. Al-Maliki cannot replace international troops with Iranian forces. Neither the United States, nor Iraq's Arab neighbors would allow this to happen, and even if they did, it would probably lead to conflict with Iraq's Sunnis and Kurds. When Tehran offered aid to Baghdad, most probably it did not mean to send its troops there - this would be way too much.

The Iraqi prime minister's only option is to attempt the Herculean task of reconciling the United States and Iran, its two greatest allies, and the only powers that can guarantee tranquility in Iraq. So far he has made little progress. During his latest trip to Tehran, he tried at least to persuade the Iranian government that a treaty between Baghdad and Washington would not threaten Iran.

Al-Maliki tried to reassure the Iranians that Iraq would not become a bridgehead for U.S. aggression against neighboring countries. This was after the British Independent and several other newspapers published a supposedly leaked draft of the agreement between Baghdad and Washington. There is no obvious evidence on the document's authenticity, but the publications made a lot of noise, threatening to wreck the talks between Iraq and the United States.

The most controversial of the "draft treaty's" clauses provide for establishment of about 50 U.S. military bases on Iraqi territory; immunity for American servicemen and professional soldiers from Iraqi laws; freedom of action for the United States in conducting arrests and taking military action without preliminary consultations with the authorities; control over Iraq's air space at an altitude of less than 9,000 meters; control over Iraq's military contracts and security decisions for the next few years; and the right to attack "any country which poses a threat to international stability" from Iraqi territory. The last is a clear reference on Iran.

These provisions were bound to cause indignation both in Iraq and beyond,

most of all in Tehran. U.S. officials, however, deny the existence of such ideas in the draft agreement.

Ryan Crocker, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, said that the future agreement would not encroach on Iraq's sovereignty. Considering that the document will be subject to the Iraqi parliament and public debate, it would be absolutely unrealistic to think that its terms could be accepted without a murmur.

Some politicians, including primarily the influential Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, have already called for protests against the treaty. Iraqi MPs have written to the U.S. Congress threatening to oppose any agreements with the United States, not only in the security sphere, unless a mechanism and timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops is agreed upon. It is easy to see what would happen in Iraq if the reported proposals became reality. Washington can hardly be so naive as to pour more oil on the flames in Iraq.

Washington insists that the leaks that led to the publication of some draft in the press are a well-organized provocation by those who would like to sabotage any agreement between Iraq and the United States. Iran is the prime suspect. At the same time, the leaks could be a ploy by Washington to test the Iraqi reaction, and possibly make it more pliable by offering better terms than those published in the media. Although the quoted terms look outrageous, some of them could be discussed in reality, for instance, freedom of movement and legal immunity for U.S. troops in Iraq.

Be it as it may, the publications in the media have done their bit - the Iraqi-U.S. talks have ground to a halt. Meanwhile, there is little time left for decision-making. The UN mandate for the presence of foreign troops in Iraq is expiring. So is the presidency of George W. Bush, with whom al-Maliki conducted talks on strategic partnership. Last November both politicians set a July 31 deadline for decision-making. But today it is obvious that the deadline will not be met.

If the media reports are to be believed, Washington is so desperate to get the deal described in the leaked document that it is threatening to lift immunity from part of the Iraqi hard currency accounts held in the Federal Reserve.

According to the Independent, Iraq may lose about \$20 billion out of \$50 billion.

If the talks with the United States drag on much longer, al-Maliki will have to ask the UN to extend its mandate for the presence of international troops in Iraq. But who, other than the Americans, would want to stay? If Barack Obama wins the presidential elections in November, the American contingent could be withdrawn whether the UN extends its mandate or not. Debates in Congress on the future agreement with Iraq may be as fierce and long as its discussion in Iraqi parliament.

So, for the time being, Tehran has no grounds to worry. But the Iranian government does not want to leave anything to chance, and is upgrading its contacts with Baghdad. The Iraqi government will find it increasingly difficult to be torn between Tehran and Washington.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.

---