



THE TURKISH ROLE IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH IRAN

By George Friedman

The P5+1 talks with Iran will resume Jan. 21-22. For those not tuned into the obscure jargon of the diplomatic world, these are the talks between the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (the United States, Britain, France, China and Russia), plus Germany -- hence, P5+1. These six countries will be negotiating with one country, Iran. The meetings will take place in Istanbul under the aegis of yet another country, Turkey. Turkey has said it would only host this meeting, not mediate it. It will be difficult for Turkey to stay in this role.

The Iranians have clearly learned from the North Koreans, who have turned their nuclear program into a framework for entangling five major powers (the United States, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea) into treating North Korea as their diplomatic equal. For North Korea, whose goal since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the absorption of China with international trade has come down to regime survival, being treated as a serious power has been a major diplomatic coup. The mere threat of nuclear weapons development has succeeded in doing that. When you step back and consider that North Korea's economy is among the most destitute of Third World countries and its nuclear capability is far from proven, getting to be the one being persuaded to talk with five major powers (and frequently refusing and then being coaxed) has been quite an achievement.

Iran Exploits an Opportunity

The Iranians have achieved a similar position. By far the weakest of the negotiators, they have created a dynamic whereby they are not only sitting across the table from the six most powerful countries in the world but are also, like the North Koreans, frequently being coaxed there. With the obvious blessings of the others, a seventh major power, Turkey, has positioned itself to facilitate and perhaps mediate between the two sides: the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany on one side, Iran on the other. This is such an extraordinary line-up that I can't help repeating it.

No one does anything about North Korea militarily because it is more of a nuisance than a threat, even with its artillery in range of Seoul (fixed artillery positions are perfect targets for U.S. air power). Negotiations and occasional aid solve the problem. Iran's position is much more significant and goes far beyond potential nuclear weapons. If the United States withdraws from the region, Iran becomes the most powerful conventional power in the Persian Gulf, regardless of whether it has nuclear weapons. Given that the United States is officially bound to leave Iraq by the end of this year, Iran is becoming substantially more powerful.

North Korea's goal is regime survival. It has no goals beyond that. Iran's ambitions include regime survival but go well beyond it. Indeed, if there are any threats to the regime, they do not come from outside Iran but from inside Iran, and none of them appears powerful enough to cause regime change. Iran, therefore, is less about preserving its power than it is about enhancing it. It faces a historic opportunity and wants to exploit it without embroiling itself in a ground war.

The drawdown of American forces in Iraq is the first step. As U.S. power declines in Iraq, Iranian power increases. Last week, Muqtada al-Sadr returned to Iraq from Iran. Al-Sadr was the leader of a powerful pro-Iranian, anti-American militia in Iraq, and he left Iraq four years ago under heavy pressure from American forces. His decision to return clearly was not his alone. It was an Iranian decision as well, and the timing was perfect. With a nominally independent government now in place in Iraq under the premiership of Nouri al-Maliki, who is by all accounts pro-

Iranian, the reinsertion of al-Sadr while the U.S. withdrawal is under way puts pressure on the government from the Iranians at the same time that resistance from the United States, and the confidence of its allies in Iraq, is decreasing.

U.S. Options

The United States now faces a critical choice. If it continues its withdrawal of forces from Iraq, Iraq will be on its way to becoming an Iranian satellite. Certainly, there are anti-Iranian elements even among the Shiites, but the covert capability of Iran and its overt influence, coupled with its military presence on the border, will undermine Iraq's ability to resist. If Iraq becomes an Iranian ally or satellite, the Iraqi-Saudi and Iraqi-Kuwaiti frontier becomes, effectively, the frontier with Iran. The psychological sense in the region will be that the United States has no appetite for resisting Iran. Having asked the Americans to deal with the Iranians -- and having failed to get them to do so, the Saudis will have to reach some accommodation with Iran. In other words, with the most strategically located country in the Middle East -- Iraq -- Iran now has the ability to become the dominant power in the Middle East and simultaneously reshape the politics of the Arabian Peninsula.

The United States, of course, has the option of not drawing down forces in Iraq or stopping the withdrawal at some smaller number, but we are talking here about war and not symbols. Twenty thousand U.S. troops (as the drawdown continues) deployed in training and support roles and resisting an assertive pro-Iranian militia is a small number. Indeed, the various militias will have no compunction about attacking U.S. troops, diplomats and aid workers dispersed at times in small groups around the country. The United States couldn't control Iraq with nearly 170,000 troops, and 50,000 troops or fewer is going to result in U.S. casualties should the Iranians choose to follow that path. And these casualties would not be accompanied by hope of a military or political success. Assuming that the United States is not prepared to increase forces in Iraq dramatically, the Iranians now face a historic opportunity.

The nuclear issue is not all that important. The Israelis are now saying that the Iranians are three to five years away from having a nuclear weapon. Whether this is because of computer worms implanted in Iranian centrifuges by the U.S. National Security Agency or some other technical intelligence agency, or because, as we have said before, building a nuclear weapon is really very hard and takes a long time, the Israelis have reduced the pressure publicly. The pressure is coming from the Saudis. As STRATFOR has said and WikiLeaks has confirmed, it is the Saudis who are currently pressing the United States to do something about Iran, not because of nuclear weapons but because of the conventional shift in the balance of power.

While Iran could easily withstand the destruction of weapons that it does not have, its real fear is that the United States will launch a conventional air war designed to cripple Iran's conventional forces -- its naval and armored capability, particularly. The destruction of Iranian naval power is critical, since Iran's most powerful countermove in a war would be to block the Strait of Hormuz with mines, anti-ship missiles and swarming suicide craft, cutting off the substantial flow of oil that comes out of the strait. Such a cutoff would shatter the global economic recovery. This is Iran's true "nuclear" option.

The Iranians are also aware that air warfare -- unlike counterinsurgency -- is America's strong suit. It does not underestimate the ability of the United States, in an extended air war, to shatter Iran's conventional capability, and without that conventional capability, Iran becomes quite insignificant. Therefore, Iran comes to the table with two goals. The first is to retain the powerful negotiating hand it has by playing the nuclear card. The second is to avoid an air campaign by the United States against Iran's conventional capabilities.

At stake in this discussion is nothing less than the future of the Arabian Peninsula. The Iranians would not have to invade militarily to be able to reshape the region. It would be sufficient for there to be the potential for Iran to invade. It would shift the regime survival question away from Iran to Saudi Arabia. U.S. troops in Kuwait would help but would not change the basic equation. The Saudis would understand that having left Iraq, the United States would be quite capable of leaving Kuwait. The pressure on the Saudis to accommodate the Iranians would be terrific, since they would have to hedge their bets on the United States. As for basing troops in Saudi Arabia

itself, the risks pyramid, since the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia during Desert Shield and Desert Storm helped trigger the rise of al Qaeda.

Therefore, the choices appear to be accepting the shift in the regional balance in favor of Iran, reversing the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq or attempting to destroy Iran's conventional forces while preventing the disruption of oil from the Persian Gulf. From the American point of view, none of these choices is appetizing. Living with Iranian power opens the door to future threats. Moving heavily into Iraq may simply not be possible with current forces committed to Afghanistan. In any case, reversing the flow out of Iraq would create a blocking force at best, and one not large enough to impose its will on Iraq or Iran.

There is, of course, the option of maintaining or intensifying sanctions. The problem is that even the Americans have created major loopholes in these sanctions, and the Chinese and Russians -- as well as the Europeans -- are happy to undermine it at will. The United States could blockade Iran, but much of its imports come in through land routes in the north -- including gasoline from Russia -- and for the U.S. Navy to impose an effective naval blockade it would have to stop and board Chinese and Russian merchant ships as well as those from other countries. The United States could bomb Iranian refineries, but that would simply open the door for foreign sales of gasoline. I do not have confidence in sanctions in general, and while current sanctions may hurt, they will not force regime change or cause the Iranians to forego the kind of opportunities they currently have. They can solve many of the problems of sanctions by entrenching themselves in Iraq. The Saudis will pay the price they need for the peace they want.

The Europeans are hardly of one mind on any subject save one: They do not want to see a disruption of oil from the Persian Gulf. If the United States could guarantee a successful outcome for an air attack, the Germans and French would privately support it while publicly condemning American unilateralism. The Chinese would be appalled by the risks U.S. actions would impose on them. They need Middle Eastern oil, though China is happy to see the United States bogged down in the Middle East so it doesn't have to worry too much about U.S. competition elsewhere. And, finally, the Russians would profit from surging energy prices and having the U.S. bogged down in another war. For the Russians, unlike the Europeans and Chinese, an attack would be acceptable.

Therefore, at the table next week will be the Americans, painfully aware that its campaigns look promising at the beginning but frequently fail; the Europeans and Chinese, wanting a low-risk solution to a long-term problem; and the Russians, wanting to appear helpful while hoping the United States steps in it again and ready to live with soaring energy prices. And there are the Iranians, wanting to avoid a conventional war but not wanting to forego the opportunity that it has looked for since before the Islamic Republic -- domination of the Persian Gulf.

The Turkish Stake

Then there are the Turks. The Turks opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq because they expected it to fail to establish a viable government in Baghdad and thereby to destroy the balance of power between Iraq and Iran. The Turks have also tried to avoid being drawn into the south beyond dealing with threats from Turkish Kurds operating out of Iraq. At the same time, Turkey has been repositioning itself as both a leading power in the Muslim world and the bridge between the Muslim world and the West, particularly the United States.

Given this, the Turks have assumed the role of managing the negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran. The United States in particular was upset at Turkey's last effort, which coincided with the imposition of sanctions by the P5+1. The Turks, along with Brazil, negotiated a transfer of nuclear materials from Iran that was seen as insufficient by the West. The real fact was that the United States was unprepared for the unilateral role Turkey and Brazil played at the time they played it. Since then, the nuclear fears have subsided, the sanctions have had limited success at best, and the United States is a year away from leaving Iraq and already has withdrawn from a combat role. The United States now welcomes the Turkish role. So do the Iranians. The rest don't matter right now.

Now the Turks must face their dilemma. It is all very good to want to negotiate as a neutral party, but the most important party isn't at the table: Saudi Arabia. Turkey wants to play a dominant role in the Muslim world without

risking too much in terms of military force. The problem for Turkey, therefore, is not so much bringing the United States and Iran closer but bringing the Saudis and Iranians closer, and that is a tremendous challenge not only because of religious issues but also because Iran wants to be what Saudi Arabia opposes most: the dominant power in the region. The Turkish problem is to reconcile the fundamental issue in the region, which is the relationship between Persians and Arabs.

The nuclear issue is easy simply because it is not time-sensitive right now. The future of Iraq is time-sensitive and uncertain. The United States wants to leave, and that creates an Iranian ally. A pro-Iranian Iraq, by merely existing, changes the reality of Saudi Arabia. If Turkey wants to play a constructive role, it must find a formula that satisfies three needs. The first is to facilitate the American withdrawal, since simply staying and taking casualties is not an option and will result in the conventional air war that few want. The second is to limit the degree of control Iran has in Iraq, guaranteeing Iranian interests in Iraq without allowing absolute control. The third is to persuade Saudi Arabia that the degree of control ceded to Iranians will not threaten Saudi interests.

If the United States leaves the region, the only way to provide these guarantees to all parties is for Turkish forces, covert and overt, to play an active role in Iraq counterbalancing Iranian influence. Turkey has been a rising power in the region, and it is now about to encounter the price of power. The Turks could choose simply to side with the Iranians or the Saudis, but neither strategy would enhance Turkish security in the long run.

The Turks do not want an air war in Iran. They do not want chaos in Iraq. They do not want to choose between Persians and Arabs. They do not want an Iranian regional hegemon. There are many things the Turks do not want. The question is: What they do want? And what risks are they prepared to take to get it? The prime risk they must take is in Iraq -- to limit, not block, Iranian power and to provide a threat to Iran if it goes too far in the Arabian Peninsula. This can be done, but it is not how the Turks have behaved in the last century or so. Things have changed.

Having regional power is not a concept. It is a complex and unpleasant process of balancing contradictory interests in order to prevent greater threats to a country's interests emerging in the long run. Having positioned itself as a host for negotiations between the United States, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany on one hand and Iran on the other hand, Turkey has a basic decision to make: It can merely provide a table for the discussion, or it can shape and guarantee the outcome.

As the Americans have learned, no one will thank them for it, and no one will think better of them for doing it. The only reason for a deeper involvement as mediator in the P5+1 talks is that stabilizing the region and maintaining the Persian-Arab balance of power is in Turkey's national interest. But it will be a wrenching shift to Turkey's internal political culture. It is also an inevitable shift. If not now, then later.

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