

Iraq will not be used against Iran, PM vows

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by Stuart Williams
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Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki sought to reassure Iran over a planned security pact with Washington on Sunday, vowing Iraq would never be used as a platform to attack the Islamic republic.

"We will not allow Iraq to become a platform for harming the security of Iran and neighbours," Maliki said after a late-night meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in Tehran.

Maliki's comments come amid Iranian alarm over American pressure on Baghdad to sign an agreement that would keep US soldiers in the country beyond 2008. Iran has always called for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

US President George W. Bush and Maliki agreed in principle last November to sign the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) by the end of July. But Iraq has now said it has a "different vision" from the United States on the issue.

Iran's concern about the deal comes amid renewed tensions over its nuclear programme, which the United States fears is aimed at making atomic weapons, a charge vehemently rejected by Tehran.

The United States has never ruled out a strike against Iranian nuclear facilities while Israel has also been warning there may be no alternative to military action.

Maliki, quoted by Iran's state news agency IRNA, said: "Iraq's stability and security can have a great impact on the region ... We see the implementation of peace and security in Iraq and Iran as what both countries want."

Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh had said Maliki would be using the visit to assure Iranian leaders that Iraq "will not serve as a base or staging ground to launch attacks against neighbouring countries."

The Shiite premier held talks with First Vice President Parviz Davoudi and was to meet President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad later on Sunday.

Both Maliki and Davoudi vowed a further expansion of ties and "condemned the conspiracies of the enemies against the two nations," IRNA reported.

Iran and Shiite-majority Iraq waged a war between 1980 and 1988 in which around one million people died but ties have warmed considerably since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime.

Maliki, who lived in exile in Iran during Saddam's dictatorship, is making his third visit to the country as prime minister. Ahmadinejad's March visit to Iraq, the first by an Iranian president, was also hailed as a landmark in ties.

But some observers expect Maliki to use the talks to raise US allegations of Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs, a charge vehemently denied by predominantly Shiite Iran.

The United States has accused Iran of shipping in tank-busting munitions for attacks on US troops, training Shiite militants inside Iran for operations in Iraq and supplying rockets for attacks in central Baghdad.

Last month, Maliki formed a panel of security ministries to assess the US accusations.

Washington was troubled by the apparent warmth of ties displayed during Maliki's last visit to Iran in August 2007 and will be closely watching his latest trip.

US ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker stressed in Washington on Thursday that Iran and Iraq were neighbours and had to conduct a relationship. "The question is: what kind of relationship is it going to be?" he said.

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