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## Salon

### Is Iran Using Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan to Deflect the West?

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Yet another chapter in the Great Game may be afoot across the Middle East, as Iran seeks to sidetrack the United States and allied powers from their mission to block Tehran from gaining nuclear weapons.

And players, or pawns, in the game this time may include Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Palestinian territories -- all historically, and often bloody, areas of Iranian influence, and all places where Iran could have had a hand in recent disruptive events.

Next week, Iranian negotiators are set to resume nuclear talks in Turkey with the so-called P5+1 group, the five permanent United Nations Security Council members -- the U.S., Russia, China, France and Britain -- and Germany.

The talks, which began with an all-but-empty series of meetings last month in Geneva, are the first serious negotiations on the matter since the fall of 2009, when Iran backed out of an agreement to stop enriching uranium, a key process in the creation of atomic weaponry. Months later, the International Atomic Energy Agency, a U.N. watchdog, ratcheted up its accusations about suspicious Iranian activities that could have military goals.

Since then, the U.S. has cobbled together diplomatic support for onerous U.N. sanctions on Iran, imposed even harsher economic punishments on the Iranian government and business interests tied to the nuclear program with the support of allies in Europe and Asia, and watched as a computer worm known as Stuxnet wreaked havoc on the Iranian centrifuge systems used to enrich uranium. No one has claimed responsibility for Stuxnet, but the U.S. and Israel are high on the list of experts' suspects.

Meanwhile, the domestic unrest that followed Iranian elections in 2009 hasn't fully been extinguished, and Iranians are suffering some economic pain from the sanctions and their government's questionable economic and fuel policies.

This week even perennially friendly Russia and China -- which relies on Iranian oil -- joined Europe in declining an invitation to a tour of Iranian nuclear sites that wouldn't include the IAEA or the Americans.

Iran, which outfoxed American-led attempts to rein in its nuclear program over three U.S. presidencies, had seemed headed to the talks in Istanbul while suffering its weakest position in years.

And yet, a series of ostensibly unconnected events across the region this past week suggests Iran may be reminding the West that Tehran wields power on important fronts far from its own borders.

First, there is the return last weekend to Baghdad of Muqtada al-Sadr, one of Iraq's most formidable and anti-American power brokers, after nearly four years in Iran.

At the same time, reports were emerging from western Afghanistan that Iran had established a de facto fuel embargo in midwinter, sending Afghan gasoline and heating fuel prices skyrocketing at a time when the U.S. is fighting to stabilize that country.

There has been a surge in rocket and mortar fire into Israel this month from the Palestinian territory of Gaza. Though Iranian-sponsored Hamas blames smaller, splinter Palestinian militant groups for the attacks, Hamas dominates Gaza and has the final say over any such activity there. Indeed, wary of Israeli counterattacks, Hamas this week made moves suggesting it will stop the rockets.

And then there is Lebanon, where Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah decided to quit the coalition government just as Prime Minister Saad Hariri was at the White House meeting with President Barack Obama, breaking up a national unity coalition that, while short on accomplishments, has provided stability to Lebanon since 2009.

The nominal reason for Hezbollah's move can't be dismissed. A U.N.-backed court in The Hague is expected soon to indict Hezbollah officials for the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. And Hezbollah, as much a political and social movement as an armed force, had insisted that the younger Hariri condemn the investigating tribunal.

But the timing of the walkout, when Washington and allies in the region and in Europe were focusing on Iran, can't be dismissed either.

After leaving Washington, Hariri met Thursday with President Nicolas Sarkozy in France and planned to meet Friday with the leaders of Turkey, which in recent months has become one of Iran's primary interlocutors with the international community.

The West knows that Hezbollah, with the help of Iran and Syria, has restored its military capabilities in southern Lebanon to a higher level than what they were before Hezbollah fought Israel to something of a draw there in 2006, including an arsenal of more advanced rockets.

Aggression from Hezbollah and Hamas in the past has often come just as tension is growing between Iran and the West, and the turmoil in Beirut isn't lost on either the negotiators who head to the table in Istanbul next week or leaders in Israel, the most fervent proponents of a tougher line with Iran.

More alarming for Washington, though, may be the return of Sadr to Iraq.

Sadr, who was educated in Iran after his father, a respected cleric, was killed by Saddam Hussein, became a popular anti-American leader following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He sent his militias to openly fight against U.S. forces twice, and he openly opposed Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as an American puppet. American generals portrayed him as a thug in cleric's clothing, and essentially forced him to flee.

Despite Sadr's exile in Iran, his political party came out of last year's elections as one of the most powerful in the Iraqi parliament, and it's now a partner controlling key ministries in Maliki's new governing coalition.

Sadr's actual return to the scene, even as Maliki calls for the U.S. to complete its promised withdrawal from Iraq, suggests Iran is preparing to exert more influence in ways that could complicate, with violent implications, the evolution of the U.S. role there.

Sponsored Links "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," George Friedman, the head of private intelligence provider Stratfor, pointed out this week. "If Iraq becomes an Iranian ally or satellite, the Iraqi-Saudi and Iraqi-Kuwaiti frontier becomes, effectively, the frontier with Iran."

And that means the Saudis -- who after Israel are the biggest if quietest backer of a tough international line against Iran -- would have to re-evaluate their options for Tehran.

"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," Friedman said. "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."

And the weak hand Iran had heading into nuclear negotiations now looks stronger.