



## The Price of Iran's Help

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On the eve of the Baker-Hamilton commission's report, a top Iranian official set a tough condition for his country's help in stabilizing Iraq, saying that Tehran isn't interested in such cooperation unless the Bush administration sets a timetable for withdrawing its troops.

Ali Larijani, Iran's national security adviser, said in an interview that a U.S. plan for removing "occupation forces" from Iraq would be considered "a sign of a change in strategy." In that case, he said, "Iran would definitely extend the hand of assistance and would use its influence to help solve the problem."

The Iranian official made his comments after a speech yesterday to a conference here called the Arab Strategy Forum. His remarks were the clearest statement I've heard of how Iran views its role in the region

following what he described as the failure of U.S. intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. His tone was triumphalist: In his view, America is bogged down in Iraq and "in dire need of change," while a newly confident Iran is positioning itself as a dominant power for the region.

"When we face a strategic stalemate, we can break it only by changing the strategy itself," Larijani said in his speech. He explained that America's choice was to stick with a failing strategy of unilateralism, tinker with it to "retard the process" of defeat, or replace it altogether with a new strategy of "interdependence" that recognized Iran's primacy as a regional power. By embracing a new strategy, he said, the United States "would bring psychological calm to the region and help America to behave in a more rational way."

When I asked Larijani later at a news conference what Iran would regard as evidence that the Bush administration was indeed changing its strategy, he said, "The clearest sign would be the exit or evacuation of U.S. forces," adding: "Should there be a timetable presented, that would serve as a positive sign."

On the nuclear issue, Larijani said that a U.N. Security Council sanctions resolution reportedly drafted this week by Russia and France would not stop Iran's uranium-enrichment efforts. "I announce: This is not effective," he said.

After these public comments, Larijani talked one-on-one about the changes he thinks have been set in motion by the Republican Party's defeat in last month's congressional elections. He wouldn't talk in detail about the likely recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, headed by former secretary of state James A. Baker III and ex-representative Lee Hamilton. But he indicated that if the Bush administration embraced a call for gradual withdrawal, Iran would agree to join discussions on Iraq and Afghanistan. Though he called repeatedly for a U.S. withdrawal plan, Larijani didn't explain how the resulting vacuum would be filled in a way that avoided all-out civil war.

Harvard professor Graham Allison, who had a private talk with Larijani following mine, said: "In discussing Iraq after U.S. withdrawal he didn't seem to have a credible idea of what comes next."

As for the idea of a regional peace conference involving Iraq's neighbors, Larijani told me he favored a smaller group of countries that are committed to the "new paradigm" in Iraq flowing from its democratic elections and constitution -- both of which enfranchised Iraq's Shiite majority. "We are against a tribal democracy," he said.

Larijani said President Bush's statement in an interview with me in September, in which Bush recognized Iran's status as an important nation in the region, was "the first sign of having any respect for the long history and cultural background of Iran." But Larijani said the administration needed to accompany such rhetoric with a halt to its "adventurous moves" against Tehran. "The Iranian people might be great and gracious, but not naive," he said.

Larijani isn't proposing a grand bargain but a ruthlessly pragmatic one shaped by Tehran's view of current realities: Iran is up, America is down, and any post-Iraq settlement should reflect those facts. That's the steep price of Tehran's help.