

Iran, Syria don't belong at the table

by *The Detroit News*

It's not clear to us what's changed between December, when the Bush administration said it would not sit down with the rogue regimes of Syria and Iran, and this week, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said announced the United States will join a pair of meetings to include both the Iranians and Syrians. In rejecting the Iraq Study Group's recommendation that the United States engage Iran and Syria to find a solution to the insurgency in Iraq, the administration said it would not do so unless Iran abandoned its nuclear development program and Syria stopped meddling in Lebanon.

Neither condition has been met. And yet Rice said America will be represented at the Iraqi-led "neighbors meeting" on March 10. The session will include the Arab League nations and the other four permanent members of the United Nations Security Council - Britain, France, Russia and China.

A second meeting of the foreign ministers of those countries will be held in April, and Rice said she will attend.

The meetings are ill-advised. Iran and Syria certainly have an interest in helping avoid an all-out civil war in Iraq, which would flood their countries with Iraqi refugees. But they have a larger interest in maintaining the chaos in Iraq to keep the world's attention off their own bad behavior.

They believe, and perhaps rightly so, that as long as the United States is tangled up in Iraq, it is powerless to act against them.

There is little doubt that Iran is supplying weapons to the insurgents in Iraq, and Syria is a conduit for foreign jihadists moving in and out of Iraq. If they would stop fueling the insurgency, the fledgling Iraqi government would have a greater chance of restoring order.

Unless the other nations at the table intend to use the meeting as an opportunity to deliver a face-to-face ultimatum, it's unlikely that anything productive will result.

But some harm could. Treating Iran and Syria as part of the solution, when in truth they are the problem, gives them unmerited credibility, and perhaps leverage for reaching their nefarious goals.

More good might come of a meeting that excluded Iran and Syria and focused on what pressures can be brought to force the two troublemakers to behave themselves.

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