

Iraq presents Iran with proof of support to militias: official

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BAGHDAD: An Iraqi delegation in Iran has confronted Iranian security officials with evidence that Tehran is providing support for Shia militias battling Iraqi government forces, an Iraqi official said yesterday.

“They presented a list of names, training camps and cells linked to Iran,” Haidar al-Ibadi, a member of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s Dawa party, said.

“The Iranians did not confess or admit anything. They claim they are not intervening in Iraq and they feel they are being unfairly blamed for everything going on Iraq,” he said of the talks, which took place on Thursday.

Ibadi said he had been in contact with the delegation. Washington has long accused Tehran of backing Shia militias, particularly fiery cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mehdi Army, providing them with weapons, funding and training. It has displayed some of the weapons, including rockets and mortars. The Shia-led Iraqi government, however, has generally been more restrained in its criticism of its Shia majority neighbour, which denies the charges and says it supports the government. Maliki launched a crackdown on the Mehdi Army in the southern oil hub of Basra in late March, provoking a furious response by the militia in southern Iraq and Baghdad, including relentless volleys of Iranian-made rockets against the Green Zone government and diplomatic compound in the capital.



A Shia youth carries a water tank decorated with Sadr and Lebanon’s Hassan -pictures of Moqtada al Nasrallah in Baghdad’s Sadr City yesterday

The US military said this week that “very, very significant” amounts of Iranian weaponry had been found in Basra and Baghdad during the offensive. Some of those arms were made in 2008, a senior US military official said yesterday. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said there had been a “sea change” in Baghdad’s view of Iranian activity in Iraq since the discovery of the weapons.

“Basra changed it for the Iraqis. I’m not sure they believed it before. But they went to Basra and saw it first hand,” he said. Maliki’s ruling United Iraqi Alliance, a coalition of Shia Islamist parties, sent the delegation to Tehran to tell Iranian officials to stop backing the militias. The delegation includes the deputy speaker of parliament, Khalid al-Attiya, Ali al-Adeeb, a lawmaker from Dawa, and Hadi al-Amari, a powerful figure in the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, one of the biggest Shia parties in Iraq.

Iran’s official Irna news agency said Tehran wanted to help end fighting in its neighbour and welcomed the opportunity offered by the delegation’s visit. “Iranian officials will be holding talks with the delegation with a view to helping resolve the differences and clashes in Iraq,” Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Mohamed Ali Hosseini was quoted late on Thursday as saying. “Tehran has generally emphasised stability and security in Iraq and the invitation to the Iraqi delegation has been for this goal, and Iran’s past measures has been to bring stability and security in Iraq,” he said without giving more details.

Analysts say Tehran wants to keep a friendly, Shia-led government in charge but wants to ensure rival Iraqi Shia factions look to the Islamic Republic as a powerbroker. They also say Iran wants a stable Iraq, after fighting a bloody war with its neighbour in the 1980s. But at the same time Iran does not want to give its long-time foe, the US, an easy ride lest it considers military action in its row with Tehran. Ijadi said the delegation had presented evidence showing that Mehdi Army leaders in Basra had escaped to Iran to avoid the assault by government troops. “The delegation also carried evidence of the smuggling of weapons and training of individuals in Iran to enter later into Iraq,” he said.

The senior US military official said the delegation had taken with them photographs of the recently seized weapons with markings showing they originated in Iran, as well as testimony from detained militants who had received Iranian training. In the talks, the delegation stressed Iran should have contacts only with the Iraqi government and not with other groups, Ijadi said. - Reuters