

Iraq says to probe claims of Iran meddling

By Waleed Ibrahim

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BAGHDAD (Reuters) - [Iraq](#) on Sunday appeared to distance itself from U.S. accusations of Iranian meddling in Iraqi affairs, saying it would not be pushed into conflict with its neighbor and wanted its own inquiry into the evidence.

Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had ordered the formation of a special committee comprised of representatives of the various security ministries "to document any intervention in Iraqi affairs."

"The reason behind forming this committee is to find tangible information and not information based on speculation," Dabbagh told a news conference in Baghdad.

The Iraqis have repeatedly said they do not want their territory to become a battleground for a proxy war between the United States and [Iran](#). The arch-foes are at loggerheads over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"We don't want to be pushed into any conflict with any neighboring countries, especially Iran. What happened before is enough. We paid a lot," Dabbagh said, referring to the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war in which an estimated 1 million people died.

"It happened because the others pushed Iraq to take an aggressive stance with Iran. We want to organize relations with all neighboring countries to preserve the interests of Iraq."

Washington accuses Iran of funding, arming and training Shi'ite militias to attack U.S.-led troops and Iraqi government forces, despite its public commitment to stabilizing Iraq. Tehran blames the violence on the presence of U.S. forces

Dabbagh's comments were curious for the fact they came after a week in which the Iraqi government had appeared to be toughening its stance against fellow majority Shi'ite Iran.

An Iraqi delegation traveled to Tehran last week to urge Iranian security officials to stem the flow of funds and weapons, including rockets and mortars, to Shi'ite militias battling government troops in Baghdad and southern Iraq.

It followed fresh accusations by U.S. officials that Iranian-made weapons were found in Iraq during recent operations against militiamen loyal to Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Iran has in the past denied supporting Sadr's Mehdi Army militia.

SADR CITY FIGHTING

The U.S. military said on Sunday it killed nine militants in helicopter strikes overnight in eastern Baghdad, where battles have raged between security forces and Mehdi Army fighters.

Much of the fighting took place in and around the crowded Shi'ite slum of Sadr City, the anti-American cleric's stronghold in the capital.

"In one incident, four criminals were firing on a patrol and an Apache (helicopter) was called in," said Lieutenant-Colonel Steven Stover, a spokesman for the U.S. military in Baghdad.

Officials close to the delegation, dispatched by Iraq's ruling Shi'ite United Iraqi Alliance, said they had confronted the Iranians with documentary evidence of their support for Shi'ite militias, including training facilities in Iran.

Dabbagh declined to talk in detail about the delegation's visit, saying only that it had expressed "fears, suspicions and news about Iranian involvement in Iraq." "I believe the delegation received clear answers from the Iranians," he said.

Iran's ISNA news agency said on Sunday Iran backed efforts by the Iraqi government to disarm militiamen and would "make its utmost efforts to establish security in Iraq."

Analysts say Tehran wants to keep a friendly, Shi'ite-led government in charges but also wants to ensure rival Iraqi Shi'ite factions look to Iran as a power broker.

Despite an overall improvement in Iraq's security, levels of violence are still high.

The wife of Iraq's president, Jalal Talabani, escaped a roadside bomb attack on her convoy near the national theatre in central Baghdad in which four security guards were wounded.

Gunmen also shot dead a journalist in the northern city of Mosul after pulling her out of a taxi. A colleague said she had received a text message on her mobile phone three weeks ago warning her to stop reporting.

(Additional reporting by Tim Cocks, writing by Ross Colvin; Editing by Matthew Jones)