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Iranian diplomat assassinated in Iraq amid mediation mission

By Abdul Hussein Yousef
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NAJAF, Iraq — Gunmen assassinated an Iranian diplomat in Baghdad on Thursday just as Iran, with tacit U.S. approval, attempted to mediate with a radical Shiite cleric defying American forces in this southern Iraqi city.

The slaying of diplomat Khalil Naimi, shot in the head by unknown gunmen while he drove near his embassy, cast a shadow over Thursday's unusual negotiating mission to Najaf by the envoy from neighboring Iran, which fought an eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s and does not have diplomatic relations with Washington.

Iranian Embassy officials were investigating whether there was a link between the assassination and the envoy's visit. Naimi was not a member of the Iranian negotiating team.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said "it's probably premature to draw any conclusions about whether it reflects anything about the role that Iran has played one way or the other in Iraq."

The Iranian effort to mediate with anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was arranged by Britain and appeared to have the approval of the United States, reflecting an eagerness to find a solution that would avert a

Envoy sent to resolve Najaf standoff

An Iranian envoy headed to Najaf on Thursday to try to resolve the U.S. standoff with radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Iraqi militants, meanwhile, executed an Italian security guard, one of four taken hostage Monday.

Car bomb exploded near a U.S. patrol
A soldier was killed in an attack Wednesday
Samarra
Baqouba
Fallujah
Baghdad
Najaf

Marines and U.S. warplanes struck insurgents
Militiamen moved onto rooftops and into buildings; U.S. troops remain on the outskirts ready to move against al-Sadr.

SYRIA
JORDAN
IRAQ
SAUDI ARABIA
UNITED STATES SECTOR
POLISH SECTOR
UNITED KINGDOM SECTOR

Top Iranian diplomat shot death near Iranian Embassy
Three Japanese hostages taken a week ago were released

SOURCE: Associated Press

U.S. assault on Najaf — the holiest Shiite city — aimed at capturing al-Sadr.

But it was not clear whether al-Sadr would agree to meet with Iranian envoy Hossein Sadeghi.

Al-Sadr was accepting mediation only by an Iraqi political party picked by Iraq's top clerics, said al-Sadr aide Sheikh Qays al-Khaz'ali.

Shiite Governing Council member Ibrahim al-Jaafari said he saw "flexibility from al-Sadr's side" and called on the Americans to show "similar flexibility."

Iraq's top U.S. administrator,

L. Paul Bremer, was involved in "multiple channels" to negotiate an end to the standoff in the south and in the city of Fallujah, said Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Myers warned there is a lot to how long the Marines can hold off a resumption of operations in Fallujah. "At some point somebody has to make a decision on what we're going to do, and we certainly can't rule out the use of force there again," he told a news conference.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Bush's endorsement gives Sharon boost in support

JERUSALEM (AP) — President Bush's strong endorsement of Israel's "disengagement plan" lifted support Thursday for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon but left angry Palestinian leaders scrambling to galvanize international opposition to the U.S. stance.

At a White House meeting with the Israeli leader Wednesday, Bush expressed support for

Sharon's plan to withdraw from all of Gaza and a handful of West Bank settlements.

While voicing support for an independent Palestinian state, Bush also gave unprecedented U.S. backing for Israel to hold on to some settlement blocs in the West Bank. He also ruled out allowing Palestinian refugees to return to Israel after a Palestinian state is created.

Those concessions enraged the Palestinians, who want an independent state in all of the West Bank and Gaza, which Israel captured in 1967 Mideast war.

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