

# The US holds talks with Iran in Baghdad

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US-Iranian talks—the first in nearly three decades—took place in Baghdad on Monday. American ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, met with his Iranian counterpart Hassan Kazemi Qumi in the offices of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad for four hours.

At Washington's insistence, the meeting was narrowly confined to the catastrophic situation confronting the US-led occupation of Iraq. Bush officials have repeatedly accused Tehran of "meddling" in Iraq and providing training and arms to anti-occupation insurgents. The Pentagon has made unsubstantiated claims that the Iranian regime is supplying armour-penetrating explosive devices that have been used against US troops.

For its part, Iran has been critical of the US occupation, calling for a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops. However, the willingness of the bourgeois regime in Tehran to enter into discussions with Washington over the stabilisation of the neo-colonial US occupation of Iraq demonstrates that its concerns lie with furthering the interests of the Iranian capitalist elite, not with ending the disaster confronting the Iraqi masses.

The meeting took place in an atmosphere of sharp tension. Last December the Bush administration rejected the findings of the high-level bipartisan Iraq Study Group, which recommended a diplomatic initiative, including talks with Iran and Syria, to salvage the US position in Iraq. Instead Bush pressed ahead with UN sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programs, provocatively detained a number of Iranian officials in Iraq and stationed a second US aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf.

In the immediate lead-up to the talks, the Bush administration called for the UN Security Council to adopt a third resolution imposing even tougher measures against Iran for failing to shut down its uranium enrichment facilities. To underscore the military threat, the Pentagon last week began a major naval exercise involving nine warships in the Persian Gulf. All these issues were strictly off the agenda at the Baghdad meeting.

Not surprisingly, four hours of discussion between

Crocker and Kazemi produced very little. No agreements were announced, no joint statement was issued and the two men pointedly held separate press conferences following the talks. Crocker rather apologetically told the press: "As you surely know among diplomats, you don't need a lot of substance to take up a lot of time." While both ambassadors described the discussion as "positive," an Iraqi proposal for a second round of talks remains up in the air.

The obvious question arises: why hold the meeting at all?

On the part of Iran, sections of the regime are clearly looking for a deal with the US to end a confrontation that is damaging economically, as well as generating sharp social and political tensions inside the country, and threatening a destructive military conflict. Even among so-called Iranian hardliners or conservatives, President Mahoud Ahmadinejad has been criticised for playing into the hands of the Bush administration with his anti-US and anti-Israeli posturing and his nationalist demagoguery over the nuclear issue.

Under Iran's constitution, it is the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, not the president, who has ultimate say over foreign and military policy. In recent months, Ali Larijani, the country's top nuclear negotiator and Supreme National Security Council secretary, appears to be playing a more prominent political role. He is due to meet today with European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana over the nuclear issue.

For all its anti-US bluster, the Iranian regime is organically incapable of waging a genuine struggle against imperialism. In 2001 and again in 2003, it quietly reassured US officials that it would cooperate in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In May 2003, Tehran proposed talks on all outstanding issues, including Tehran's support for the Hezbollah in Lebanon and its non-recognition of Israel—an offer that the US ignored. If Washington were to offer significant concessions, there is no doubt that Tehran would willingly assist in the Bush

administration's criminal enterprise in Iraq.

Speaking after Monday's meeting, Iranian ambassador Kazemi rebutted US allegations of "meddling" and was critical of "the American invaders". However, behind the rather mild rhetoric, Tehran had clearly made a serious offer of help. Kazemi told the media that Iran was willing to train and equip the Iraqi security forces to create "a new military and security structure" and to build Iraq's devastated infrastructure. He also indicated that Iran was prepared to establish a trilateral commission with US and Iraqi officials to regularly address security issues.

The fact that a US official was speaking to his Iranian counterpart at all marks something of a tactical shift by the Bush administration. In rejecting the Iraqi Study Group report last December, Bush rejected its recommendation for unconditional talks with Syria and Iran, insisting that Tehran had to suspend its uranium enrichment and Damascus had to implement US demands on Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian authority. Yet, as well as the Baghdad meeting, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke to her Syrian counterpart at an international conference on Iraq in early May in Egypt.

Despite their strictly circumscribed character, these talks reflect the profound political crisis confronting the Bush administration. Its military "surge" in Iraq shows no sign of achieving its aim of consolidating the US occupation, and US casualties have reached new peaks. The overwhelming majority of the American population is deeply hostile to the war in Iraq and the opposition threatens to take more political explosive forms following the craven capitulation of the Democrats to Bush's demands for war funding. As a result, the White House is under fire from sections of the political establishment who regard the war in Iraq as a disaster for US interests and a new military adventure against Iran as absurdly reckless.

The US decision to take part in Monday's meeting no doubt involves a strong element of political manoeuvring to blunt the criticism at home. But the depth of the crisis has also opened up tactical divisions within the Bush administration. Secretary of State Rice is cautiously promoting diplomatic initiatives, while the most militarist elements, gathered around Vice President Dick Cheney, champion a more aggressive stand, not only in Iraq, but against Iran. However, the US invasion of Iraq has had a deeply destabilising effect throughout the entire Middle East, opening up a myriad of political and strategic contradictions for which neither faction in the White House has any answers.

The statements by US ambassador Crocker following

Monday's meeting reflected the debate at home. On the one hand, he bluntly insisted that the US had "laid out before the Iranians a number of our direct, specific concerns about their behaviour in Iraq" and declared these activities "needed to cease". He carefully avoided any commitment to a second meeting, saying the US was "going to wait and see" whether the Iranians changed their "behaviour" in Iraq. At the same time, Crocker did not slam the door shut. He stressed that meeting had been "business-like" and indicated that he would refer Iran's proposal for a trilateral commission to Washington for further discussion.

An editorial in Tuesday's *Wall Street Journal* made clear that the proponents of "regime change" and war against Iran have no intention of remaining silent. The newspaper was openly contemptuous of Rice's diplomatic efforts, proposals for a new UN resolution on Iran's nuclear programs and Monday's meeting in Baghdad. After calling for America's economic rivals, France and Germany, to halt their export subsidies for Iran, it suggested: "Targetted financial penalties against key regime figures... should also be considered, along with financial support for labour unions and dissident groups. The three [sic] US aircraft carriers that recently shipped through the Straits of Hormuz in broad daylight are also a reminder to Tehran of our ability to use force against the nuclear threat if all else fails."

The US military exercise is also a reminder that having deliberately sharpened tensions in the Persian Gulf, the Bush administration has set the stage for a confrontation, which has the potential to rapidly escalate out of control, regardless of initial intentions.



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