

The US adopts belligerent posture in Baghdad talks with Iran

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In the second round of US-Iranian talks in Baghdad on Tuesday, US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, intensified the pressure on Iran over unproven claims that Tehran is training and equipping anti-US insurgents in Iraq. Against a backdrop of sniping against the State Department diplomacy towards Iran by more hawkish elements in the White House, Crocker's rhetoric was markedly more aggressive than at the first round of talks in Baghdad in late May.

In comments to the media, Crocker accused Iran of escalating, not de-escalating, attacks on US forces. "[W]e have actually seen militia-related activity that can be attributed to Iranian support go up, and not down," he said, stressing that Washington was demanding progress, "measured by results, not in principles or promises" and "thus far, the results on the ground are not encouraging".

In May, Crocker was cautiously upbeat about the outcome of the first face-to-face talks between US and Iranian officials for more than two decades. On Tuesday, the ambassador went out of his way to stress that he had forcefully placed US demands on the table. Describing the seven hours of discussion as "difficult," he declared: "I would not describe this as a shouting match throughout, but again we were real clear on where our problems with their behaviour were, and I just didn't hesitate to let them know."

According to the *Boston Globe*, several heated exchanges took place in the course of the discussions. When Iranian officials strayed outside the strictly delimited issue of Iraqi security, Crocker shot back, saying if they wanted talk about other topics, they would have to discuss Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah. In the course of another argument, he menacingly warned that Iranian Revolutionary Guards would "not be safe in Iraq". "We didn't pull our punches," Crocker told the media.

Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-Qumi,

emphatically denied that Tehran was supporting anti-US militias in Iraq. Pointing to the hypocrisy of American allegations of Iranian "meddling" in Iraq, he said Iraqis were being "victimised by terror and the presence of foreign forces". A foreign ministry spokesman declared yesterday: "It is crystal clear that the main objective behind repetition of such baseless accusations against Iran is to pursue the US propaganda fuss and psychological warfare against the country."

Over the past two months, US officials in Baghdad and Washington have maintained a steady stream of accusations of Iranian interference in Iraq. All these claims are unsupported by concrete evidence, apart from the occasional display of Iranian-made weapons and alleged admissions by prisoners held by the US military, in all likelihood made under duress. Earlier this month, US military spokesman Brigadier General Kevin Bergner accused the Iranian leadership for the first time of being directly involved in attacks on US troops—in particular, a raid in Karbala that resulted in the deaths of five US soldiers.

Last Sunday, another US spokesman, Admiral Mark Fox added a further accusation, claiming that Iran was not only smuggling Iranian weapons into Iraq, but Chinese-made missiles as well. "We have seen ordinance and weapons that come from other places, but we assess that they have come through Iran," he said. US claims to date are based on the simplistic equation: Iranian-made weapons must be supplied from Iran with the full knowledge of the clerical regime in Tehran. On the basis of this logic, Washington should now be accusing Beijing of "meddling" in Iraq.

Crocker arrogantly dismissed the suggestion that US allegations against Iran were unproven, declaring: "This is not something we're trying to, or we need to, prove in a court of law." In reality, US allegations are based on the repetition of bald assertions, rather than facts. The US

denunciations of Iran are in marked contrast to Washington's studied silence on the role of its regional allies. If the same arguments were applied, for instance, to Saudi Arabia—the origin of most suicide bombers in Iraq—the Bush administration would now be demanding Riyadh take immediate action and threatening Saudi intelligence agents, who are undoubtedly active in Iraq.

Crocker's belligerent tone reflects the sharpening debate in the Bush administration and US ruling circles over whether to attack Iran, rather than any convincing evidence of greater Iranian "meddling". For all its rather empty anti-US rhetoric, Tehran has repeatedly indicated that it is willing to negotiate an end to the confrontation with Washington. Despite its public criticisms of the American occupation, Iran proposed the establishment of a joint security committee to assist the US military in Iraq—an offer that the US accepted at the latest meeting. Yesterday, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki indicated that Iran would be willing to consider higher-level talks on Iraq—a proposal the White House flatly rejected.

The US claim that Iran is "killing American troops" is part of the campaign the White House has been waging against Tehran for months. The Bush administration is continuing to push for the UN Security Council to adopt a third resolution imposing tougher economic and diplomatic sanctions on Iran over its refusal to shut down its nuclear programs. Despite its denunciations of Iranian interference in Iraq, the White House has had no compunction in waging its own covert operations inside Iran, backing opposition groups and armed ethnic separatists in an effort to bring about "regime change". At the same time, the US military continues to maintain a huge and menacing naval presence in the Persian Gulf.

Within the White House, the debate over Iran takes place within a very narrow range. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the State Department favour an emphasis on diplomatic bullying and punitive sanctions to force Tehran to capitulate to US demands, but do not rule out the military option. Vice President Dick Cheney and the more hawkish layers of the Bush administration dismiss "diplomacy" as ineffective and continue to push for aggressive military action, possibly in league with Israel. According to the *Boston Globe*, some senior White House officials bitterly opposed even holding a second round of talks with Iran.

These differences find their reflection in the public debate. In comments to the *Boston Globe*, Michael Rubin from the right-wing American Enterprise Institute

criticised State Department officials for being so desperate to show progress in Iraq that they were willing to make dangerous compromises with Iran. "We think it is progress, but the Iranians are chuckling at their humiliation of us. We tend to show our desperation, yet Iran has yet to offer a single confidence-building measure," he said.

Far from opposing the Bush administration, leading Democrat contenders are queuing up to prove their tough credentials on Iran. In an article entitled "US lawmakers unite to demonise Iran", the *Asia Times* website reported the written statements of support sent by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to a press conference of a pro-Zionist lobby group, The Israel Project (TIP), last Thursday.

Obama, who recently introduced the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act to impose stiffer measures against Iran, declared that "allowing Iran, a radical theocracy that supports terrorism and openly threatens its neighbours to acquire nuclear weapons is a risk we cannot take". Not to be outdone, Clinton, who is pushing her own anti-Iranian legislation, condemned Iran, saying: "We cannot permit Iran to build or acquire nuclear weapons. We must not let go unanswered its state sponsorship of terrorism."

There is no more evidence that Iran is building nuclear weapons than supporting anti-US insurgents in Iraq. Behind the unanimity in the American political establishment over taking more aggressive action against Iran lie the same strategic and economic interests that drove the criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq. Whatever the tactical differences, there is broad agreement in US ruling circles that the US must establish its predominance over its European and Asian rivals in the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.



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