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## On-the-Record Briefing: U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker on His Meeting With Iranian Officials

Baghdad, Iraq  
July 24, 2007

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*(Via Teleconference)*

(11:40 a.m. EST)

**OPERATOR:** Good morning and thank you for standing by. At this time, all participants are in a listen-only mode. After today's presentation, we will conduct a question and answer session. To ask a question, you may press the \*1 on your touchtone phone. This conference is being recorded. If anyone has any objections, you may disconnect. At this time, I'd like to turn the conference over to the host for today's call, Mr. Tom Casey. Sir, you may begin.

**MR. CASEY:** Okay. Thank you very much, everybody. I think many of you have already seen some of the comments that have come out of Baghdad following on to Ambassador Crocker's meeting with his Iranian counterpart. We wanted to have this call today to give those of you here in Washington an opportunity to discuss this as well. I'll warn you in advance his time is very limited, so we won't have time for that many questions. So for that reason, I want to turn this over to him. I'll let Ambassador Crocker make a couple of quick introductory comments and then we'll get right to people's questions.

Mr. Ambassador.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Thanks, Tom. Hello to everybody. We spent about -- oh, seven hours counting breaks, coffee breaks, other breaks and lunch with the Iranians today. The meeting was at the invitation of the Iraqis, as was the one in May. The Prime Minister of Iraq was present to greet everybody. He then handed it over to the Iraqi Foreign Minister

to chair for the Iraqi side. As was the case in May, I led the U.S. delegation and my Iranian counterpart, Ambassador Kazemi-Qomi, chaired for them.

Just very quickly, on the course of the discussions, we established again, as we had last time, that we were all guided by certain principles of our policies toward Iraq and both we and the Iranians stated our policy in familiar terms. And we made it clear that the subject was security and stability in Iraq, not a broader agenda. We made clear to the Iranians that in the two months since we had last met, we had actually seen an increase, not a decrease, of Iranian activities in support of radical militia elements and their violent activities directed against Iraqi security forces, Iraqi civilians and coalition forces.

We also raised the problem of al-Qaida and the threat al-Qaida poses to Iraq, U.S., Iran, and the broader region. We stressed that what counted were not statements of principle, but actions on the ground, that that is what we needed to see an improvement in and we have not seen it thus far.

The three of us did agree in principle to the establishment of a security subcommittee to focus at an expert level on issues such as support to extremist militias and al-Qaida. We'll still need to work through the modalities of compositions, numbers, timings, which I would expect in the next day or so. So that's just a very short summation. I'm happy to take your questions.

**MR. CASEY:** Okay. And if we can ask the operator to come in and move on to questions.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. At the same -- if you would like to ask a question, please press the \*1 on your touchtone phone. You will be announced prior to asking your question. To withdraw your question, you need to press \*2. Once again, to ask a question, please press \*1. One moment, please.

Our first question comes from Zain Verjee.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador Crocker, thanks very much. There was one report quoting an Iraqi official saying that there was a pretty heated exchange between yourself and your Iranian counterpart. Could you tell us what happened and would you describe it that way?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, there were several heated exchanges in the course of the day. Again, I made it as clear as I possibly could that we're seeing direct Iranian support to extremist militias, both training and in actual weapons that we've got the proof. We've added a brief summary of the proof. He took exception to that. I said that we're not here to move something in a court of law. We're here to let them know that we know what they're doing and it needs to stop.

There were also some heated moments when Iranians sought to broaden the discussion and I noted that a broad discussion would certainly need to take up issues such as their support for terrorism throughout the region, including Hezbollah and Hamas to which again they took exception. So I would not describe this as a shouting match throughout, but again we were real clear on where our problems with their behavior were. And you know, I just didn't hesitate to let them know.

**QUESTION:** Would you describe it as much more tense than the last time -- the atmosphere?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, it -- again this went on for some hours. It -- there were moments certainly of tension. There, you know, were also some lighter moments. Overall, I would say that it was a difficult discussion. The difficulty occasioned by the -- just the lack of any action on the ground to back up Iran's stated policy.

**OPERATOR:** Our next question comes from Charlie Wolfson.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Ambassador Crocker, Charlie Wolfson with CBS. Did either you or did the Iranians bring up the plan that is talked about in a story today in *The New York Times* about a pullout of American troops and whether they brought it up or not? Do you have any comment on whether that is a plan under consideration?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** I'm running a little bit behind the press, because I've been at this all day today. No, the Iranians did not at any point raise the withdrawal of coalition forces. Both the Iraqis and the U.S. made it clear that those forces are in any case present at Iraqi request and under a Security Council resolution. The Iranians did at one point say that it was not at all their policy or their intention to "defeat" the U.S. in Iraq.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Our next question comes from Libby Leist.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Mr. Ambassador. How are you? It's Libby Leist of NBC. I'm just curious about two things. One is do you think that there's value in meeting with the Iranians again, given how heated it was today and how stubborn they appear to be? And also just to follow up on Charlie's question, the *New York Times* report today says that you and Petraeus have written this joint campaign plan, and several people at NBC have been reporting on this and have heard that it's a -- a big part of it is that it's a political plan which wasn't really fleshed out in the article. So I'm wondering what you can tell us about that.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, on the first, as I said, we have agreed in principle to the establishment of a security subcommittee, so we'll go forward with that and see how it goes. You know, we'll pursue this as long as we think there may be a prospect for steps that improve Iraqi security. This is only the second meeting so I'm not leaping to any conclusions and, frankly, I certainly walked into the room today expecting that discussions would be difficult. There's -- you know, we've got a lot of problems with the Iranians and, you know, face to face we're not going to pull any punches. They've got problems of their own, so I don't read anything too negative into that.

Again, I haven't had a chance to read the *New York Times* article. You know, clearly something you do when you set about a mission as big as this one and General Petraeus and I did it pretty much at the same time, you do sit down with your colleague and your teams work through what your evaluation of the situation is and what your plans are to deal with it. And he and I did that over a fair period of time and in a lot of detail. That's a classified document. I'm not going to go into it in any -- to any extent except to say that obviously when you're talking about a joint campaign plan between the Commanding General and the Ambassador, an awful lot of it is going to be political.

**OPERATOR:** The next question comes from Daniel Dombey.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Daniel Dombey from the *Financial Times*. Ambassador, can you tell us a little bit more about how operational you expect the security subcommittee to be? You said that it's going to deal with the support for extremist groups and al-Qaida and you're going to be working out issues like timing over the next day or so. But do we expect this

to meet fairly regularly and have an impact on policy? And are you worried that the Iranians have in any way tried to leverage their presence or their activities, their support for people in Iraq to a seat at the table in this way?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, with regard to the latter point, you know, we agreed to these talks with -- in coordination with the Iraqis because of our concern over what the Iranians were already doing on the ground, though, I don't see any indication that they're trying to use these talks, in some way associated with violence, to keep greater political advantage.

That isn't going to work in any case. I mean, we've made it clear that what we're there to talk about is security in Iraq, not beyond that. So it's -- if it were a tactic they were contemplating, it is not one that would work in any case. And as far as modalities, they said those remain to be worked out. We're going to have to figure out, again, as I said, level, composition, size. The group will then need to meet and I think out of that process will come determinations on what sort of frequency makes sense.

It would not be an autonomous body, obviously. It would report to the -- you know, our larger group. But we'll just take it a step at a time.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Our next question comes from Farah Stockman.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ambassador. Thank you for being with us by phone. I was wondering if you could give us more detail about the increases that you've seen. You mentioned an increase in Iranian activities. Could you give us some more detail about that? And if there is an increase, why agree to create this working group, this subcommittee?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, a lot of the evidence we've got has been laid out publicly through various briefings mainly done by the multinational force out here in Baghdad. You know -- and a lot of this is -- are snapshots, if you will. We don't have full visibility on everything that's happening, but we've certainly seen an increase, for example, in the rate of indirect fire into the international zone over the last month or two and the overwhelming majority of that fire emanates from Sadr City and is carried out again by the special groups and the secret cells of Jaish al-Mahdi, that we know Iranian -- has a connection to. And again, it's not guesswork. Detainee debriefs, you're familiar with the Khazali brothers and more recently, with the Iranian -- the Lebanese Hezbollah trainer who has freely admitted that the Iranians are training these teams in Iran.

In terms of moving ahead, again, we believe that we want to take every opportunity that reasonably affords itself to try to bring the level of violence down. And if the Iranians are, in fact, preparing or are prepared to line their practice up with their policy and use this forum as a means of doing so, then we obviously want to see if that's what will happen.

**MR. CASEY:** Before we move on, I think we've probably just got time for one or two more here, so why don't we go to our next question, then see what we -- whether we have time for one last one after that.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. James Rosen.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, how are you?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Hey.

**QUESTION:** You told us that in this meeting, you made it clear to the Iranians that you know what's going on and it has to stop. I wonder if, as a first of a two-parter here, you also conveyed some message, either explicitly or implicitly, about what will happen to Iran if this activity does not stop.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Do I get the second part now or do you want to --

**QUESTION:** We'll do the second part after the first answer for sake of orderliness.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Yes, well, order counts. I laid it out just about -- very much as I described it to you. I also made it clear that Quds Force officers and their surrogates are not going to be safe in Iraq. That's something the Iranians should already know, but we made that clear. That was pretty much the extent of the discussions.

**QUESTION:** And you also told us earlier that when you were describing a heated moment, that when you brought up Iranian support for Hezbollah and Hamas, you said they took exception. Can you tell us, when you say they took exception, what actually did they say about -- in response to your assertions about Iranian support for Hezbollah and Hamas?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** They did not go into any detailed refutation, which they may have found the challenge to have been overwhelming in trying to refute it, but that's my speculation. I can't remember frankly -- this was toward the end of the discussions -- precisely what their response was. But it was, you know, along the lines of seeking to blame Iran for everything that happens in the region -- that sort of thing.

**QUESTION:** Thanks very much.

**MR. CASEY:** Okay. And I think let's make one last question here and then I know that Ambassador Crocker has other things he has to move on to today.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Our last question comes from Stuart Grudgings. Sir, your line's open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Mr. Crocker. Yeah, I just wanted to ask, given your very negative comment on Iran's role in terms of actually increasing its support for militia in the past few months, what real grounds of optimism do you have that they will actually contribute in any meaningful way throughout the (inaudible?)

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, again, I -- you know, don't approach this from that perspective. As somebody said once, that hope is a nice sentiment, but it's a pretty poor policy. We'll see what they do. You know, over the last two months we've seen, if anything, an increase. They maintain and they're serious about assisting Iraq to improve security and stability. So you know, the opportunity is in front of them. You know, we'll just -- we'll measure it by actions on the ground and I was clear as I could be on that today. But that's what's going to count, not expressions of political support. It's going to be actions on the ground and I'm not going to express either optimism or pessimism. I know what we've seen

in the past. We'll be watching closely to see what we see in the future.

**MR. CASEY:** All right. And with that, I know we've pretty much run out of the time we had this afternoon. I want to thank everyone for participating. I apologize for not being able to get in more of your questions today. And I want to thank Ambassador Crocker for making the time to talk with us here after what I know is a very long day for him. So Ryan, thank you very much.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Okay. Thanks, Tom. Thanks to you all.

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Released on July 24, 2007

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