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KEYWORD SEARCH

[Subject Index](#)



[Home](#)

[Issues & Press](#)

[Travel & Business](#)

[Countries](#)

[Youth & Education](#)

[Careers](#)

[About State](#)



You are in: [Under Secretary for Political Affairs](#) > [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs](#) > [Releases From the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs](#) > [Remarks About Near Eastern Affairs](#) > [2007 Remarks About Near Eastern Affairs](#) > [May](#)

Interview of U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker With Jonathan Beale of BBC

Ryan Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq

Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt

May 3, 2007

QUESTION: The compact's been agreed, promise of more money. How's that going to stop the violence?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, clearly, economic progress in Iraq is good for the country. To the extent that violence has its origins in people who have no opportunities, nothing in front of them, I think it can make a difference. But I think also, we have to think very broadly in the international community of everything we can do to help Iraq get to a position of stability and security. So while debt relief may have no immediate linkage for the day after tomorrow on violence, it's still very important to do because it helps chart a long-term potential for prosperity in Iraq. So I think what happened today with the compact was important for Iraq's future.

QUESTION: It's true to say there's a lot of pressure, isn't there, for Iraq to deliver on issues like stopping the sectarian divide, the violence, and just reconciling?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, there is indeed and a lot of that pressure, of course, comes from Iraqis themselves. The overwhelming percentage of Iraqis do not want to live in this kind of sectarian strife and the violence that has done so much damage to Iraq's people and its cities. So I think it's an Iraqi demand in the first instance.

QUESTION: It's the neighbors' demand as well, though, isn't it?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, it certainly should be a demand of all the neighbors and I think at the same time, there are some real concerns that some of the neighbors are actually fueling the problem inside, allowing foreign fighters to cross, allowing weapons, ammunition, some pretty lethal projectiles that are used against our troops. So I think the neighbors have a real responsibility here.

QUESTION: And you would include Syria in that, would you?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Oh, certainly, we've got a problem with how Syria has facilitated the movement of foreign fighters.

QUESTION: And so is that why Condoleezza Rice met with the Syrian Foreign Minister for the first time?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, Syria is a neighbor. It is a neighbor that has a major role to play for better or worse. We would like to see it played for the better. What a neighbors conference is all about is interaction among those present to try to get the support that Iraq needs. So the Secretary's discussion with the Syrian Foreign Minister was focused exclusively on Iraq and on our concerns over how the Syrians have been playing a negative role and how they might play a better role.

QUESTION: But if she can have such a meeting with the Syrian Foreign Minister, the question -- the obvious question is why can't she have such a meeting with the Iranian Foreign Minister?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, neither we nor the Iranians came to Sharm el-Sheikh seeking such a meeting at this time. She did have an encounter, I understand, over lunch today with the Iranian Foreign Minister. And what we need to do is, again, not focus so much on whether the Americans meet with the Iranians, but focus on what steps, what measures can help Iraq get to a better place and -- you know, we'll keep our options open.

QUESTION: But is there evidence that Syria is tackling some of the issues that (inaudible) like the foreign fighters, whereas Iran is not and that's why the meeting with Iran isn't taking place?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, there was a statement out at the coalition today in Baghdad as they looked at the last month of incidents where they feel there has been a reduction in incidents that could be traced across Syrian border activity. Whether that means there's a trend or not, I don't know. That was a report that just came out today. Again, this is a highly fluid situation. We just have to decide, kind of, what steps, what meetings, what approaches make the most sense at a particular time and that's what we're doing.

QUESTION: I'm trying to find out why, though, a meeting -- a similar meeting that took place with the Syrian Foreign Minister hasn't taken place with the Iranian Foreign Minister. You say you're not seeking such a meeting, but I want to know why.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, we came here, again, looking for ways to use this neighbors process to move things forward in a better way inside Iraq. We didn't come seeking a specific meeting. We were very -- we were open with respect to Syria. That meeting developed once we got here. It seemed like a good thing to do. We had our agenda. The Syrians wanted to come to the table, so we had the meeting.

Now with Iran, we haven't come with any particular request. Neither have they. We'll see what happens in the future, but I don't think there's any linkage between the two. We'll just kind of decide, as we go, what makes sense on a case-by-case basis.

QUESTION: I mentioned at the start this pressure for reconciliation. You say that's coming from within Iraq itself, but how much time has Prime Minister Maliki got (inaudible).

I mentioned the pressure at the start of this for Prime Minister Maliki to reconcile his country. You say that's coming from within Iraq as well, but how much time do you think he's got to show progress?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I think the -- again, the pressures come not from us or anyone else trying to establish dates on the calendar or arbitrary deadlines. Progress is necessary inside Iraq because there's a real danger that if the Iraqi people, if those involved in Iraqi politics don't sense that things are moving forward, there's a danger that things will move back, that the centrifugal forces start to take hold again; that, no one wants to see. I can't say that if nothing happens by X date, this will set in, but that's the real danger. That's why we need movement, that's why Iraqis need movement. We need it in the near-term.

QUESTION: The near-term is?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, the near-term is -- I can't put a date on a calendar.

QUESTION: But it's months, is it?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I would say it's months, yes. There's also an issue in the international community and in the United States. We have said that our patience is not without limits and that's simply a fact. There's major debate now in the United States, as you know, and without some sense by the American people that things are moving forward again, over the period of the next several months, it's going to be very hard to sustain the kind of support that Iraq really needs.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Ambassador.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thank you.

2007/T6-10

 [BACK TO TOP](#)



[Updates](#) | [Frequent Questions](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Email this Page](#) | [Subject Index](#) | [Search](#)

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