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

Baghdad, Iraq
May 28, 2007

OPERATOR: Hello, and welcome to today's teleconference. At the request of the company, this conference is being recorded. Mr. Casey, you may begin.

MR. CASEY: Okay, thank you, everyone, for joining us. Sorry it's taken us a few minutes to get to you. Appreciate you joining us on Memorial Day and appreciate having with us as well Ambassador Ryan Crocker from Baghdad. As you know, he has met today with his Iranian counterpart to discuss some of the common concerns and issues that the United States and Iran have related to Iraq. And I'll just turn it over to you, Ryan, let you make a couple of introductory remarks, and then we'll go right to questions.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thanks, Tom. Good afternoon, I guess it is, for you, everybody. I'll be brief here. You've already seen a lot of this on the wires. I met this morning with my Iranian counterpart at an event hosted by the Iraqi Prime Minister. We spent about four hours in total in talks. The Iraqis were part of the discussion throughout. The Prime Minister hosted the first session and the subsequent discussion was hosted on the Iraqi side by the National Security Advisor Dr. Rubaie. So these were not U.S.-Iranian bilaterals. The Iraqis were not only present and participating; in a very real sense, they took the lead in organizing discussion.

I would repeat what I said earlier, that I would call these discussions businesslike. At the level of policy and principle, the Iranian position, as articulated by the Iranian Ambassador, was very close to our own: support for a stable, secure, democratic, federal Iraq that is able to control its borders, is at peace with its neighbors and is bringing prosperity to its citizens. Though again, on that level, there was fairly broad agreement.

We agreed as well that there should be a focus on security, and there we made it clear in some detail where we see Iranian behavior inconsistent with stated Iranian policy. We told the Iranians today that their support for armed militia groups that are challenging the authority of the Iraqi Government and attacking coalition soldiers needs to stop, and we were quite, quite clear on that point.

The final thing I'd say before I go to your questions is that the Iraqi side indicated that they would want to issue an

invitation for another meeting sometime in the near future. Once we receive that invitation, obviously we'll give it close consideration, but nothing was fixed in this meeting with respect to a follow-on meeting. And with that, I'm happy to take your questions.

OPERATOR: Thank you. At this time, we will begin our Q&A session. If you would like to ask a question, press *1 on your telephone touch pad. You will be prompted to record your name for pronunciation purposes only. If at any time you wish to withdraw your question, press *2. Once again, that's *1 to ask your question. Please record your name in order that your question will be addressed.

Our first question comes from:

QUESTION: Sue Fleming, Reuters. Yes, hello. I wonder, do you think that this meeting marks a sort of a change in your relationship, in the relationship between the United States and Iran? And did you discuss at all that the next meeting could be at a ministerial level or higher than the envoy level?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thank you for asking that. The subjects and focus of the meeting was Iraq and how the United States and Iran can help and support the government and people of Iraq in improving conditions here, particularly security conditions. There was no other item on the agenda; nothing else was discussed.

In terms of level, there was no discussion on any change in the level. Since the subject is Iraq, it, I think, seems quite appropriate that the respective ambassadors to Iraq handle the dialogue.

QUESTION: What was the -- you said the mood was businesslike. I mean, is this someone you think you can do business with? Do you think that they will act on the requests that you made in terms of trying to reduce violence and stopping support for militias?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, that is what we need to see. Again, we were quite clear on what we see on the ground and quite clear in describing how damaging we believe it is to Iraq's own efforts to establish security and stability, and that it needs to stop. So we'll obviously be watching closely to see what the results are.

QUESTION: Thanks.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from:

QUESTION: Jonathan Beale, BBC. Thank you, Ambassador. You said no other issues were discussed, so I take it that you didn't raise the issue of the Iranian Americans who have been arrested by Tehran. And also, I'd just like to ask you when you said that when you told them that their policy was inconsistent with their actions, was there any acknowledgement that there was an inconsistency there, that they had been involved in supporting militants -- militia in training and arms?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: On the first, you're right; the meeting was exclusively about Iraq. We're dealing with the issue of the detained American citizens via the Swiss Government, which is our diplomatic -- formal diplomatic channel to the Iranians. And through that channel, we've made it clear that the Iranians should let these private citizens go; they are not a party to any policy differences between our governments. But that was not on the agenda here in Baghdad today.

And remind me -- it's been a long day -- what the second part was?

QUESTION: The second part was about -- you mentioned the inconsistency between the states policy of Iran and

their actions. I think I'm just trying to get to whether there was any acknowledgement that there may have been inconsistency, any acknowledgement that they were involved in supporting militants.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: No, there was no acknowledgement. In fact, there was very little comment on the issue from the Iranian delegates. They reserved their right to respond at some point in the future, but made no detailed response during our discussions today.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from:

QUESTION: Eli Lake, New York Sun. Hi, Ambassador Crocker. I wanted to ask if you could get into any more detail about the presentation that you made to the Iranians. And also, can you give us a sense -- I mean, there have been talks with the Iranians on and off for a long time at certain levels in Iraq. What gives you -- do you have any sense of -- are more optimistic that this time they'll stop what you say they are doing?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, on the first part, I laid out the fact that we have solid evidence linking Iran to the support of armed militant groups that are attacking our soldiers, Iraqi security forces and innocent civilians. We made clear we are aware that Iraq is supplying -- Iran is supplying such groups with arms and ammunition and explosives, including explosively formed projectiles; that we know this, that we know the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force is the lead instrument in pursuing this policy, and that they need to stop this behavior that is killing our soldiers, Iraqi soldiers and innocent Iraqis.

This was not a presentation of judicial quality evidence. It was simply making it clear to the Iraqi -- the Iranians that we know what they're doing. They already presumably know what they're doing, so this was a way of making it clear that we know what they're up to.

In terms of contacts, you know, there have been very brief contacts here in Baghdad in March at a working level meeting of neighboring countries and others, and a brief contact when I was in Sharm el-Sheikh but -- earlier this month. But essentially, we have not been in direct discussions with the Iranians.

Whether that will actually produce results, I think right now is up to them whether they choose to align their behavior on the ground with their stated policy, because right now it isn't.

QUESTION: Can I just follow up? Can you say what groups you said they were providing the explosives to and can you say whether you're -- when you say armed militant groups attacking our soldiers and coalition forces, are you referring to groups that we would consider Sunni groups?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: We believe that the Iranians have variously supported both Sunni insurgent groups that are attacking us, as well as radical Shia groups such as some elements of the Jaish al-Mahdi.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from:

QUESTION: Barbara Slavin of USA Today. Hi, Ryan.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Hey, Barbara.

QUESTION: Thanks for doing this. I wanted to ask, the way you portray this is you say it's not bilateral. I mean, did we do

this really just because the Iraqis were urging us to do this? Did we agree to do this because the Iraq Study Group proposed it? Why now, when there had been a reluctance to have these kinds of meetings so much in the past?

And also just on the atmospherics, was there anyone in the room that you had met before? How would you compare this with the talks that you conducted that were not publicized back in 2001 and 2002? Did you speak in English? Did you eat together?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Okay. On the first, we see these talks as growing out of the neighbors conference initiative, that you remember in March there was a brief direct exchange here in Baghdad. We had another brief direct exchange in Sharm el-Sheikh in which we discussed the possibility of sitting down more formally. The Iraqis made clear that they thought that would be a good step, so we've done it. But again, the progression is it flows out of the neighbors conference initiative. That got started in March and so here we are at the end of May having this meeting. As I noted, the Iraqis did urge it and that's obviously -- we take their positions on this and other matters, obviously, very seriously. But it really fits in, I think, to the neighbors conference initiative.

No, I had not previously met any of the members of the Iranian delegation. The talks that we had had previously on Afghanistan were, I think, you know, less formal in nature. They were under UN auspices rather than any governmental auspices, and I think for those reasons maybe a little less formal in their nature than we were today.

QUESTION: Did you speak in English? Did you break bread together?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: We -- well, we drank tea together. How's that? Actually, a variety of languages; English, Farsi and Arabic were all in play at various times.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Bob Drogin.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, hi, it's Bob Drogin with the Los Angeles Times. Thanks for doing this. I just wanted to go back to something you said at the very beginning, which is that the Iraqi side said they would issue another invitation and once you get it, you'll consider it. And I'm just wondering if that's suggesting some hesitation on your part, whether there's some reluctance to continue this or why you're using that language, whether there's some question as to whether these talks were useful or not.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, simply because, as I said when asked about this before the meeting, it still applies: We're taking this step by step. Again, the point of these discussions is not about U.S.-Iranian relations. It's about what can make things better in Iraq.

We've laid out some concerns. We'll be watching to see what action is taken. We'll be looking at the overall situation and, you know, we'll keep all of our options open. Again, we don't have a formal invitation to respond to just yet, so it doesn't make sense to respond to what's not there. You know, we'll just kind of take this as it comes.

QUESTION: And if I could just follow on that, you said you'll be watching to see what action is taken. What are you anticipating or what will you specifically be watching for?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, what we would obviously like to see and I think the Iraqis clearly would like to see is action by Iran on the ground to bring what it's actually doing in line with its stated policy. Its stated policy is very close to our own. Their actions don't support the policy. That's what we'd like to see change: the support for the militants and so

forth that I was describing earlier.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from:

QUESTION: Zane Verjee, CNN. Thank you, Ambassador Crocker. Could you give us a little bit more detail on what this idea of a three-way mechanism is that Iran proposed to you in the meeting? What specifically did they propose? Can you give us details about that?

And secondly, was there any more ground that you wanted to cover in this meeting but you didn't?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: The Iranians proposed a security mechanism to deal with issues relating to security, and that's about all the detail that there was. My comment at the time was that that sounded very much like the meeting that we were sitting in, since we had agreed that since we had reasonably good alignment at the level of policy and principle, the area that required our focus was security both because it is a critical concern for Iraq and because there we obviously have differences. So it was not apparent to me exactly what the distinction was between what they were proposing and what we were already doing.

And again, you'll have to forgive me. I have managed to forget the second part of your question.

QUESTION: That's okay. Was there any more ground that you wanted to cover in the meeting but didn't?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: No, we had the opportunity again to lay out pretty clearly and at sufficient length what our concerns were and what we thought needed to change. It obviously would have been good to have had more response from the Iranians, but we had the opportunity to say what we felt needed to be said.

QUESTION: Were you disappointed with the extent of their response, at least detailing to you their own perceptions, for example, on the security mechanism? Would you characterize it that way? Were you a little bit disappointed?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I wouldn't say I was disappointed. I think it would not have been reasonable to expect that going into this meeting that a single meeting was going to produce instant, measurable, positive results. I just don't -- I didn't think that was realistic before and therefore I'm not particularly disappointed now.

I was, you know, again, somewhat encouraged that the Iranians took the opportunity to lay out their policy in positive terms. And again, as I said, it matched pretty closely to our own. They obviously could have come at this in a variety of different ways, you know, many of them negative. They didn't do that. They led with a positive policy declaration. So, you know, I found that, you know, somewhat encouraging. I wouldn't make a huge amount out of this single meeting and what was said in it either positive or negative. Again, what really counts is what actually happens that affects for the better security in Iraq.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from:

QUESTION: Dan DeLuce, AFP. Yes, I just wanted to know, was there anything beyond what you've described, any kind of tentative suggestions or notions that were -- both sides saw as possible areas for future exploration or discussion or even action?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: No, I can't really pick anything. The Iraqis put forward several topics for discussion on

a security level that I'll let them articulate if they care to do so. I won't do it on their behalf. It seemed to me to have some promise as an agenda. We'll see whether, if we have a follow-on meeting, whether those develop into a concrete agenda and so forth. But you know, this was basically an exchange of policy views on the part of all three of us, and then on our side an iteration of the dissonance that we see between policy as stated and policy as implemented, and on their side basically this proposal for a security mechanism.

MR. CASEY: Okay, I think we've got time maybe for just one more here, so why don't we take the last question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from:

QUESTION: Guy Dinmore, Financial Times. Ambassador, thank you very much. Guy Dinmore from the FT here. At the weekend, Muqtada al-Sadr gave this very powerful speech, his first appearance in some months. Can you say whether or not you discussed his role in Iraq and his relationship with Iran? And did the Iranians raise at all what they have said in public, which is that they have accused both U.S. and British forces of also destabilizing Iran across the border by supporting anti-Iranian elements? Thank you very much.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Let's see. Working back to front, no, the Iranians did not raise in this meeting their public accusations of the last day or so.

With respect to Sadr, they did not address him at all. I addressed the problem of Iranian -- specifically Quds Force -- support for radical elements in the Jaish al-Mahdi. As you know, Guy, the Sadrist movement is a highly diversified one, not to say fragmented, and it is by no means clear to me, for example, that Muqtada al-Sadr has control over some of these elements in Jaish al-Mahdi. But it's pretty clear to us that the Iranians do.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. CASEY: Okay. And I think with that, Ambassador Crocker, thank you again very much for taking the time to talk with everyone today. And to all of you out there, thanks for joining us and I hope that we all enjoy the rest of Memorial Day weekend. Talk to you all later.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thanks, Tom. Thank you, all.

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