

Walker's World: Iran wins again

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Published: April 09, 2008

WASHINGTON, April 9 (UPI) -- The testimony on Iraq before the U.S. Senate Tuesday of Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker has, at least for the moment, brought Iraq back to the top of the agenda for the feuding Democratic candidates.

But over one of the key themes raised by the testimony of the top military and civil U.S. officials in Iraq, Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are in agreement. Each of them has said that they would not rule out "the military option" when it comes to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Last week, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad celebrated his country's national day of nuclear technology with the announcement that work had begun on the installation 6,000 of new centrifuges to enrich uranium at its main nuclear plant at Natanz. That is twice as many centrifuges as Iran already had functioning.

After he spoke, and while the president was inspecting Iran's improved new model of centrifuge, Iran's state-run TV stations showed schoolchildren around the country celebrating the national day by parading to martial music and chanting "nuclear power is our natural right."

But Iran's nuclear ambitions are not to the only way that Tehran is likely to feature more prominently in this year's U.S. presidential election campaign. Petraeus and Cricker both warned in their Senate testimony that Iran is a major part of their problem in Iraq.

Iran is "funding, training, arming and directing the so-called special groups," which left unchecked, "pose the greatest long-term threat to the viability of a democratic Iraq," Petraeus said.

Crocker said that while the U.S. was seeking "aggressively to uproot and destroy" these forces, diplomacy remained essential, implying that Iran was now too important a player in internal Iraqi politics to be ignored.

"We support constructive relations between Iran and Iraq and are participating in a tripartite process to discuss the security situation in Iraq. Iran has a choice to make," Crocker said.

U.S. officials disagree on the course that Iran is taking. The military tends to see Iran as the problem, the diplomats tend to see it as a potential part of the solution. They may both be right. That became abundantly clear after last month's fighting between Moqtadr al-Sadr's Shiite militia of the Mahdi army and the Iraqi military in Basra died down.

The battle for Basra had been launched on the orders of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, backed up by Ayatollah Abdul Aziz al-Hakim of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, whose own Badr Brigades militia were not targeted. Indeed, many of the Iraq army units used in the abortive attacks were largely composed of Badr Brigade veterans.

The attempted crackdown on the Mahdi army was a political battle, intended to weaken Sadr and his forces before the elections scheduled for October, and to establish the Maliki government's control over Basra and the key oil export routes.

When Maliki's forces proved unequal to the task, he started negotiations. Ali al-Adeeb, of Maliki's Dawa party, and Hadi al Ameri, head of the Badr Brigades, made a secret trip to Iran's holy city of Qom on March 28, where Sadr was "pursuing religious studies."

Accepting Sadr's demand for an end to attacks on the Mahdi army, the three men agreed a cease-fire. But their agreement had to be agreed by a fourth figure, Brig.-Gen. Kassim Suleimani, commander of the Quds Brigades of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, the Pasdaran.

In short, peace in Basra was bought on Iranian sufferance, in a deal brokered in Iran and by Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Seldom has Iran's new influence in Iraq and in the entire region been so clear. And seldom has that unintended consequence of President Bush's war, the empowerment of Iran, been so apparent.

And this is where it starts to get interesting in terms of U.S. domestic politics. One of the notable differences between Obama and Clinton on whether or not Iran's Suleimani should be seen as a terrorist. Last year 75 U.S. senators (including Clinton) voted to accept the Bush administration's claim that the general's organization, the Revolutionary Guards, was a "specially designated global terrorist." Obama did not vote for that.

But this also gets interesting for the Republican champion, Sen. John McCain. He stressed Sunday, ahead of the Petraeus-Crocker testimony, that even though he knew the two men would warn about Iran's arming and training of America's enemies in Iraq, this did not mean necessarily that the United States should do anything about it.

"Let me say categorically, because I'm worried about Iranian influence doesn't mean that I'm ready to go to war with Iran," McCain said. "Please, I'm not."

McCain, who argues that the only thing worse than bombing Iran would be sanding by as Iran developed a nuclear weapon, is now realizing just how complex the Iran-Iraq equation has become. On the one hand, he sees Iran as a dangerous enemy. On the other, he knows Iran now decides whether Iraq goes up in flames or it doesn't.

McCain has staked his presidential campaign on his support for the U.S. military "surge" and the reduction in Iraqi and U.S. casualties it has brought about. But if Iraq falls apart before November, so does McCain's campaign. It begins to look as if Iran's Revolutionary Guard leader has McCain's presidential campaign in the palm of his hand.