

# IRAQ INCREASINGLY FINDS ITSELF CAUGHT BETWEEN U.S. AND IRAN

**The US military in Iraq says Iran continues to aid militants, but Iraqis now say that they want their own evidence.**

By [Scott Peterson](#) and [Howard LaFranchi](#) | Staff writers of The Christian Science Monitor

from the May 5, 2008 edition

*ISTANBUL, TURKEY; AND BAGHDAD* - Iran says it will back Iraq in its ongoing fight against its Shiite militias. That pledge came after a delegation from Iraq's ruling Shiite bloc pressed its neighbor on what it called fresh "evidence" it was arming and training militants.

The five-member group sent by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki returned to Baghdad Saturday, saying it had received a "positive" response after confronting officials with US and Iraqi intelligence on Iranian weapons caches that US officials say included weaponry manufactured in 2008.

"The delegation saw a positive stance from the brothers in Iran to support the government's efforts in extending the sovereignty of the state and to fight outlaws," Iraq's deputy parliament speaker Khalid al-Attiya, who visited Iran, said Saturday.

But the next day, the Iraqi government appeared to back away from its claims of Iranian meddling inside Iraq, highlighting the complexity and confusion over Iran's exact role in the Iraq war, its relationship with Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia, and the dilemma facing Mr. Maliki as his two chief allies – Washington and Tehran – engage in an ever-increasing war of words.

"We do not want to start a conflict with Iran," says Iraqi spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh. "We need our own government documentation of this interference, not from the Americans, not from the media."

He suggested Sunday that Iraq had no "hard evidence" of Iran's involvement or of the 2008 markings on seized weaponry, and that a top-level committee would be formed to investigate.

The Iraqi visit to Iran coincided with the release of the annual US terrorism report, which declared Iran, as in years past, to be the "most significant" state sponsor of terrorism. It also quietly raised the official number of US and Iraqi soldiers allegedly "killed" by Iranian actions in Iraq from "hundreds" to "thousands" – a surprise to analysts skeptical even of the lower figure.

Iran denies malicious meddling in Iraq, though an attempt by Iraqi military forces to take on Shiite militias in Basra in late March uncovered caches of Iranian weaponry. The fighting drew in US forces and was in fact halted only when the commander of Iran's Qods Force – which is accused by the US of spearheading "malign [Iranian] influence" in Iraq – intervened with Mr. Sadr.

But the result of those weapons finds, many discovered by Iraqi forces, has been a growing determination by Maliki to challenge Iran to get them stopped, Western diplomats and Iraqi officials say.

The Iraqis met with the Qods Force chief, Brig. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who wields significant influence inside Iraq. During the fighting in late March and early April, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani appealed for the Iranian general's help to end the violence at a meeting on the Iran-Iraq border. Mr. Talabani, an ethnic Kurd who fielded his own Kurdish militia against Saddam Hussein from northern Iraq, has known General Soleimani for years, when Iran was Talabani's primary conduit of cash and arms.

Within a day fighting stopped. The Iraqi president also returned to Baghdad with a message to the Americans that Iran wanted to begin discussions on all issues – not just Iraq, Western diplomats say. Apparently viewing it as a stalling tactic, the Americans did not accept. Gen. David Petraeus told the BBC last week that the number of weapons found "in the Baghdad area is even greater [than those found in southern Iraq], so there is huge concern." He listed more than 1,000 artillery rounds, "hundreds and hundreds" of rockets, and a number of explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) that the US claims are made in Iran.

In mid-April, the US commander for Baghdad displayed numerous mortars and rockets—both 77mm and 122mm—and EFPs that he said bore markings tying them to Iran. But US officers say they have held off making a bigger show until after the Iraqis visited Iran with the "evidence." Iran's declarations of support were presaged by Hussein Shariatmadari, a representative of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and editor of the hard-line Kayhan newspaper in Tehran. "When the Americans and Iraqis bring such accusations ... they are facing difficulties in Iraq. When they face difficulties, they blame Iran for them and not themselves," Mr. Shariatmadari told the London-based Asharq al-Awsat newspaper, saying the "evidence" presented by the Iraqi delegation was "not conclusive."

"Today the Iranians and Iraqis want one thing: to end the [US] occupation and to see a stable and secure Iraq," asserted Shariatmadari, as translated by Mideastwire.com. "The truth is that we support the government's effort to end all armed militias."

The US State Department reports a very different picture about Iran. The US charges that in Iraq, military hardware from Iran including "advanced rockets," sniper rifles, and sophisticated roadside bombs "have killed thousands of [US-led] Coalition and Iraqi Forces."

The report further charges that the Qods Force – an elite branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for operations abroad – has conducted training in advanced techniques both inside and outside Iraq. Western sources say the numbers involved are few, perhaps numbering dozens of trainees.

Amid the charges against Iran, former President Mohammad Khatami said that exporting violence was "treason" against the ideals of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution and its leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

"What did Imam [Khomeini] want and what did he mean by 'exporting the revolution'? Taking up arms and causing explosions in other countries and establishing groups to carry out sabotage in other countries? Imam was strongly opposed to these behaviors," Khatami said in a speech published in Tehran's Kargozaran newspaper. "This is the biggest treason to Islam and the revolution."

Sadr's office downplayed the significance of the Iranian military hardware, in an area where rival Shiite militias have been fighting each other for years for political influence and control of petroleum profits. Spokesman Salah al-Ubaydi was quoted in Asharq al-Awsat saying the Iraqi government was "trying to find excuses" for poor fighting in Basra by blaming Iran.

The weapons caches in Basra are "quite normal because Iran sells weapons to anyone who wants and [the] al-Sadr movement, Al Qaeda, and the parties in Iraq's political process have Iranian weapons," Mr. Ubaydi told the newspaper. "Therefore it is quite natural to find Iranian weapons because they are sold and bought and any party can buy them."