

US, Iran Say They Will Not Send Troops to Iraq

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The US and Iran have declared their backing for the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki Monday, while both governments felt compelled to rule out sending troops to support regime forces in the escalating battle in Iraq's western Anbar province.

Fighting continued to rage in and around Ramadi, the provincial capital, and Fallujah, the scene of the bloody US military siege to crush resistance to American occupation in 2004.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, in the midst of a four-day diplomatic swing through the region—ostensibly centered on reviving the moribund Israeli-Palestinian negotiations—declared on Sunday at the end of a visit to Jerusalem that Washington would do “everything that is possible” to assist the Shia-dominated Maliki government and its security forces in suppressing the Islamist militants and tribal militias that have seized control of the two cities in the predominantly Sunni Anbar province.

He described the group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as “the most dangerous players” in the region, but insisted that, “This is a fight that belongs to the Iraqis.” He added: “We are not, obviously, contemplating returning. We are not contemplating putting boots on the ground. This is their fight, but we’re going to help them in their fight.”

Even raising the prospect of sending troops back into Iraq—more than two years after President Barack Obama boasted that nearly a decade of US war and occupation had created a “sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq”—is a damning indictment of the catastrophic conditions created by US imperialism's predatory interventions in the region.

The ongoing crisis in Anbar is a direct product of these interventions. On the one hand, it has been fueled by the policies of the sectarian and dictatorial regime of Maliki, installed under the US occupation, which has systematically marginalized, discriminated against and repressed the Sunni population, creating deep-seated anger that has given rise to popular protests and support for armed resistance.

On the other, it has been facilitated by the disastrous conditions created by the US-backed war for regime change across the border in Syria, in which Washington and its allies have supported Sunni Islamist forces in a sectarian-based insurgency against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. One of the leading armed groups in this insurgency, which has established its control over a wide area near the Iraqi border, is the ISIS, the same group described by Kerry as “the most dangerous players” in the region.

Kerry did not spell out what assistance the US was contemplating short of sending American troops back into Iraq. It has already shipped some 75 Hellfire missiles to the Maliki regime and has pledged to begin delivering drones. The US has provided extensive intelligence to

guide Iraqi military operations. Whether the US military may go further and begin conducting its own air strikes remains to be seen.

Reports from Ramadi and Fallujah indicate that Iraqi forces are already shelling the cities with artillery and bombing them from the air, killing scores of civilians and turning thousands more into internal refugees seeking shelter from the death and violence.

The *Washington Post* Monday quoted a local journalist in Fallujah as saying that the shells and bombs were falling on civilian areas of the city.

"It is back to the same as it was in 2004," he said, referring to the murderous US siege of the city. "Before 2004, there was only one cemetery in Fallujah. Afterwards there were four cemeteries. Now the people fear there will be eight cemeteries."

Meanwhile, in Tehran, the deputy chairman of Iran's Joint Chiefs of Staff said that his government was also prepared to aid the Iraqi army in suppressing the Sunni militants in Anbar, while, like Kerry, insisting that any such assistance would stop short of sending in troops.

"We have not received any official request yet, but if they make a request, we will certainly provide them with equipment and consultations," Brigadier General Mohammad Hejazi told reporters Sunday. He added that Iran would not conduct joint military operations with the US against Al Qaeda in Iraq.

The crisis in Anbar, which in large measure has spilled across the border from Syria, has erupted just weeks before peace negotiations scheduled in Geneva between the Syrian regime and the so-called "rebels" backed by the US and its allies.

While it is far from clear that the talks will take place, much less what "rebel" representatives Washington and its allies can cobble together to attend them, they have become a focal point in the political maneuvers following the US climb-down from its move toward direct intervention in Syria last September and the subsequent reaching of a tentative agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

Kerry on Sunday appeared to revise Washington's previous hardline opposition to any Iranian participation in the Syrian talks, suggesting that Tehran could "contribute from the sidelines." Both Russia and Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN envoy organizing the conference, have voiced support for Iran participating as a full party to the talks. But the US position has been that Tehran must first accept the Western position that the talks must result in removing Assad, a close ally of Iran, from power.

The Iranian government issued a curt response Monday to Kerry's remarks. Asked about his proposal for Tehran playing an apparently indirect and unofficial role in the Syria talks, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman responded: "Tehran accepts only suggestions which conform to the honor of the Islamic Republic." She added, "From the start of the Syria crisis, Iran has announced its fundamental stance based on the necessity of finding a political resolution. Any resolution must realize the rights of the people of Syria for determining their destiny and based on Syrian-Syrian talks."

The State Department followed up on the exchange Monday. The *New York Times* reported that a department official told reporters in Washington that Iran could improve the prospects for its participation in the Syrian talks by pressuring the Assad regime to take

certain steps.

“Those include calling for an end to the bombardment by the Syrian regime of their own people,” the official said. “It includes calling for and encouraging humanitarian access.”

The exchange makes it clear that the steps toward rapprochement between Washington and Tehran involve much more than the future of the Iranian nuclear program. Rather, at stake is a broader agenda of attempting to recalibrate the US-Iranian relationship in order to stabilize the US position in the Middle East so as to create more favorable conditions for the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and confrontation with Washington’s rising rival, China.

There was no apparent recognition at the State Department of the irony of the US request for an Iranian gesture of good faith. It wants Tehran to convince the Assad regime to stop doing in Aleppo precisely what the Maliki regime is doing in Fallujah and Ramadi—and against the same forces—with US and Iranian backing.

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