

Clinton: Iran Continues to 'Fund Terrorism' in Lebanon

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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accused Iran's leaders on Wednesday of fomenting divisions in the Arab world and "funding terrorism" in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

"It is clear that Iran intends to interfere with the internal affairs of all of these people and try to continue their efforts to fund terrorism, whether it's Hizbullah or Hamas or other proxies," she said.

Her remarks, at the conclusion of two days of talks in Egypt, Israel and the West Bank, were notable for coming from an Obama administration that has raised the prospect of diplomatic engagement with Iran as part of a new direction in U.S. foreign policy.

Clinton told reporters aboard her plane en route from Ramallah to Brussels, Belgium, that in her talks with Arab foreign ministers and other leaders she heard "over and over and over again" a deep-seated worry about threat posed by Iran.

The sharp objections to Iranian behavior that Clinton enumerated are the same as those underlined by the Bush administration during its dealings with Tehran. The difference is that the Obama administration says it sees merit in pressing the Iranians to discuss these problems, even if talks fail or the Iranians refuse to engage.

In Tehran, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused President Barack Obama on Wednesday of following the same mistaken path as the Bush administration with his "unconditional" support of Israel. Khamenei also called Israel a "cancerous tumor" that is on the verge of collapse. He said Israeli leaders should be put on trial for its military offensive in Gaza, which ended with a shaky cease-fire in mid-January. He also called for global Muslim resistance against Israel to save Palestine.

On the same day, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas demanded that Iran stop interfering with their internal issues.

"We are sending a message to the Iranians and others -- stop interfering in our affairs," he said. "They are interfering only to deepen the rift between Palestinians."

After her visit to Ramallah, Clinton then flew to Brussels for a NATO foreign ministers' meeting Thursday that is expected to focus on developing a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan and prospects for improving relations with Russia.

In the in-flight interview, Clinton reiterated that Obama stands ready to engage in talks with Iran, with whom Washington severed diplomatic relations after Iran's Islamic revolution three decades ago.

"But we want to make sure it's constructive," she said.

Clinton offered perhaps her strongest criticism of Iran when asked about the administration's plans for building a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Clinton focused on the administration's assertion that the European missile defense system is not aimed at Russia but is necessary to deter Iran.

"Missiles not only with a nuclear warhead but a conventional warhead or some other chemical, biological weapon could very well be in the hands of a regime like Iran's, which we know will use whatever advantage they have to intimidate as far as they think their voice can reach, and who are actively pursuing a missile development program," she said.(AP-AFP-Naharnet)

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