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Were we wrong?

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The intricacies of regional diplomacy and a strenuous American denial

LAST week *The Economist* ran an [article](#) entitled "A regional cockpit" describing how the influence of Iraq's neighbours—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Syria—was waxing as that of America waned. To illustrate the evolution of a new balance of power, we pointed to an alleged meeting between the commander of Iran's infamous Quds Force, Qassem Suleimani, and the American commander in Iraq, General Raymond Odierno, along with the American ambassador, Christopher Hill.

Our correspondent in Baghdad had been told of this meeting, which was said to have taken place in early September, first by a leading Iraqi politician with close ties to the Iranians. This was confirmed by a senior American official in a position to know whether such a meeting had taken place. Just before publication, General Odierno and Mr Hill officially denied that the meeting had occurred.

In our story we cited these denials, but in retrospect the way the story finally appeared (after editing) too readily gave the impression that such a meeting probably did happen. The previous American ambassador, Ryan Crocker, was known to have met less senior Iranian officials in Baghdad; but meeting General Suleimani would be much more controversial.

Since publication, both General Odierno and his superior officer, General David Petraeus, at the United States Central Command, have denied that the meeting took place in such strenuous and unequivocal terms that we decided to remove our article temporarily from the web edition. As General Odierno's [letter to *The Economist* this week](#) makes clear, this denial covers not just those that we cited, but intermediaries as well. General Petraeus is also happy to stake his own credibility on the same account. Noting the integrity of both generals, we are happy to accept their denial.

General Odierno claims that we were manipulated by the Iranians. Sadly for him, that is not true; we would not have run the story without the confirmation from the American source (and the corroboration of other Westerners present when the information was confirmed). Even so, we should plainly have given greater weight to the original denials of General Odierno and Mr Hill.

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