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**Presenter: Senior State Department Official**

**Tuesday, January 4, 2005 12:14 p.m. EST**

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### **Defense Department Background Briefing on Upcoming Elections in Iraq**

STAFF: Okay, folks. I think we're ready to go ahead and get started.

Our briefer today -- you have his bio, but this is a background briefing, and so I will identify him as a senior State Department official who is very familiar with the preparations that are ongoing for the upcoming Iraqi elections and the activities that are associated with that.

And as -- most of the time in this room we are talking about the security issues with respect to elections and the support that we're providing here in the Defense Department. Many of you have asked questions about some of the election processes and structure, and our State Department official here has been kind enough to offer some of his insight onto the preparations that are ongoing to help us all understand it a little bit better, as you're writing from a Defense Department perspective also.

He doesn't have an opening statement, so what we're going to do is he's going to bring his points in that he wants to make based on the questions that you have basically. He thought that was the most productive use of the time.

Obviously he can't see you, so it would be helpful if you would identify yourself and your news organization before you ask your question. And we'll try to get around to everybody, but we really have only about 25 minutes now. So let's go ahead and start with you, Rick.

Q This is Rick Whittle with the Dallas Morning News. I'd like to ask, are the elections actually going to be held on January 30th or is the security situation deteriorating to the point where they might have to be postponed?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: I think absolutely the elections are going to be held on January 30. I don't think there's any question out here in Iraq. And frankly, I don't think the security situation is deteriorating. I think the security situation is actually a little better than it was, say, six weeks ago. (Inaudible) -- most of Iraq the situation is not that bad, frankly.

STAFF: Jim? The mikes that you're using, by the way, are the ceiling mikes, so if you just kind of talk to

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Q Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. The Iraqi Defense minister said in an interview today

that the elections could be postponed if there was an agreement among the Sunnis to participate. Could you comment on that, please?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Sure. What I would say is that the government itself and the election commission -- and especially the election commission, because by law the election commission that organizes the election and carries it out, they are very determined to go ahead with the January 30 date. (They've ?) built an entire infrastructure from Basra in the south to Dohuk in the north to do the election. They are moving full speed ahead.

With respect to what the minister of defense said, I would simply say that -- (audio break) -- candidate in the election, may be doing a little bit of an electioneering posture himself.

STAFF: Go ahead.

Q George Edmondson with Cox Newspapers. One of the things about the January 30 date is it's really just the first in a series that culminates I think December 31st. Is the U.S. as committed to that -- the rest of the timetable as you are to the first elections on the 30th?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Absolutely. The Transition (sic) Administrative Law and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1546 are really the political signposts that we're working with here, with the Iraqi government and with the coalition. You're right to mention that there are some other benchmark dates. The next important one after this election will be the drafting of a constitution, which is supposed to be finished by August 15th. Transition law does give the possibility of a six-month extension, which would then take it from August 15th all the way to February 15th, (in theory ?). That, in turn, then would slide the entire timeline back six months, in theory. I think we would very much prefer that we move the constitutional referendum and the election of a democratic, legitimate and permanent government by the December 31 deadline if possible. But I do want to point out that the transition law itself provides for an extension.

STAFF: Let's go to Will.

Q This is Will Dunham with Reuters. How do you conduct the actual casting of ballots in Sunni cities like Fallujah or Ramadi, that have major security worries? And I've got a follow-up to that.

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: It is not going to be easy, frankly. It's going to be pretty hard. It's going to require an enormous security effort. Our colleagues over in the (multinational ?) forces headquarters here and the commands out in the field are working on that now 24/7. I do not want to underestimate the difficulties.

But I want to say that I was in Algeria during the mid-1990s. I was the political officer at the American embassy then, and the violence in Algeria in the mid-1990s -- (audio break) -- go back and look at it, really was not any less than what we're seeing in some of the Sunni provinces here. Yet they were able to conduct an election in those -- in the worst-hit part of Algeria, they got voter turnout 50 percent. I think the Algerian experience showed that people look at elections and look at democracy as a way out of the problem, not an intensification of it. So, if given a chance to vote, I think that they will turn out. And we're working very hard to get them that chance to vote.

Q To follow up on that, at some point will a decision have to be made whether it is even possible to go ahead with balloting in areas like the ones that I talked about in Iraq?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: That decision has already been made, and the answer is that we will have voting in those areas. So it isn't like a decision has to be made, the decision is made. We're going ahead.

Now, we are adjusting a little bit. For example, we may move the locations of some of the polling centers to ones that are -- to spots that are more easily defended. You mentioned Fallujah. One of the things that they're looking at with Fallujah is enabling people that have been displaced from the city because of the fighting to vote in other locations, and to facilitate it for them that way. So we had to -- not we, but the election commission had to adjust its plans because of the security situation, but they are definitely going ahead.

Q Okay, this is (Joe Saddich ?) from Al Hurra Television. Sir, what could you say about what the director of the Iraqi Intelligence, General al-Shahwani, said yesterday, that he is pessimistic regarding the timing of the election? And he mentioned that the Iraqi resistance -- that's what he said -- is now more bigger with 40,000 hard-core militants.

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Well, with respect to what General Shahwani said about the insurgency, I have to say the insurgency is obviously serious, there are obviously many people in it, but as to numbers, I don't think anyone knows, including General Shahwani.

With respect to what he said about the election date itself, what General Shahwani thinks is not as important as what the election commission here thinks. They are the legal authority. They are moving ahead. Ultimately, it is their decision, with the prime minister, and the head of government and the election commission are going forward. And it's them who encounter a little bit of static from other people, especially when they're traveling abroad. But it is full speed ahead here in Iraq.

Q This is AI -- (last name inaudible) -- from Voice of America. Considering the problems you mentioned a few minutes ago, what kind of turnout can you reasonably expect in Iraq in the election? And if you could break out some of the troubled areas from that figure, I'd appreciate it.

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: I think that's actually the most interesting question. I think that there is going to be an enormous turnout of southern or south-central and southern Iraq in the Shi'a areas. Ayatollah Sistani issued a religious edict, a fatwa, saying that it is an obligation for people to vote, men and women. Everyone that we are talking to from the Shi'a community is telling us that that edict is having a significant impact on people's thinking. And I expect to see a very heavy turnout among Iraq's Shi'a.

In the northern part of the country, in the Kurdish areas, of course they have already been having elections since they set up the regional government there several years ago. This is not their first election experience. They've already done this. They know how to do it. They have administrators who know how to do it. And again we're expecting a very large turnout there.

I should also note that it is not one single election that people are voting on here. There's actually two, and the Kurdish case is three. They are voting for a national assembly, parliament, if you will. And then in each of the 18 governorates, states, if you will, they're voting for a state legislature or what here is called a provincial council. And in Kurdistan they're also voting for a new regional government, a new regional assembly. And there's a lot of interest in these things.

So I think you're going to have very heavy turnout in the Kurdish areas, very heavy turnout in Shi'a areas. Those two parts of Iraq alone by themselves probably comprise 75 to 80 percent of Iraq's overall population.

In Sunni areas I think it's going to vary from location to location. Some places, obviously Ramadi (and Fallujah ?), are going to be less high than in Shi'a or Kurdish areas. There are some parts of the Sunni Triangle where the security right now, frankly, is not that bad. In parts of Diyala Province, some parts of Salahuddin Province, some parts of Nineveh Province, is not all blood and fire and destruction in all places every day. Some places obviously do have problems, but many places do not.

Does that give you a sense of it, at least?

Q Some. Thank you.

STAFF: Brian, go ahead.

Q Thanks. Brian Hartman with ABC News. Could you be a little more specific on something? You mentioned that you're thinking about changing some of the polling place locations. And does the U.S. government think it's a good idea to use schools as polling places anywhere in Iraq, particularly in the north?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: What I would say on that is I can't give you the details on, you know, which town they're moving which polling center to which place. Frankly, I don't get into that level of detail with them. What I would just say is the election commission is obviously aware of the security situation in some of the provinces, especially in the western part of the country, and they're reacting to that by making adjustments to their plan.

I think one of the things that you will see is you may see a smaller number of polling centers but more ballot boxes at each center so that they can concentrate on defending those centers more easily and also process people through more quickly.

But with respect to, you know, what the election commission chooses as the appropriate place to put a polling center, I'd say that's up to the election commission. They're legally responsible for making those decisions.

Q Vicky O'Hara, National Public Radio. Given all the problems you've had with Iraqi security forces, are you still planning to use Iraqi forces as the primary defense for polling places?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Well, absolutely. The Iraqi security forces are essential, in my understanding of the security plan, and they will very definitely be used -- both Iraqi police, Iraqi National Guard and Iraqi Army. Absolutely they will be involved; no question. Frankly, they will be working in coordination with coalition forces throughout the country.

Q John Lumpkin with Associated Press. If the Sunnis stay home in large numbers, is there any consideration or thought to providing Sunni leaders with positions that they may not have won in the votes to provide a more balanced government?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Well, I too read The New York Times article. And I can tell you that certainly none of us here in Baghdad are making any such offers. What I would say to you is this: I don't think anybody in the United States administration is looking at that at all. First of all, it's against the TAL. I mentioned at the start of my remarks, the TAL and the U.N. Security Council resolution really are our guideposts. I mean, that's our roadmap, folks. And we don't want to start wiggling out of that, because it's going to be a slippery slope, and Iraq is a country full of lots of people who have special needs, and they'll all come to us and say, "Well, if you took apart the TAL over here, can't you take it apart over here for me?" We really don't want to go there. So no, I don't think there is.

Now, I will note something which I found very interesting here in Baghdad a couple of days ago, which was a press conference given by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution Party, with Ahmed Chalabi. What Chalabi said didn't interest me all that much, but I was more interested in what Abdul Aziz al-Hakim said, where he talked about the need to bring the Sunnis into the election process. He encouraged them to vote, said that we are not trying to set up an Iranian-style theocracy here and that we

are trying -- that we will want to set up a government after the elections in which all communities of Iraq have a part. For Abdul Aziz al-Hakim to come out and say that, who is generally regarded here in Iraq as the most pro-Iranian, in some ways hardest-line Shi'a leader, for him to come out and say that, I thought was quite interesting. My takeaway from that is that Iraqis themselves understand the need to engage the Sunnis both before the elections, as al-Hakim did there -- that was a very clear gesture -- and to engage them after the elections. And that is an Iraqi process, that is not an American process. But I find it encouraging that people even like Abdul Aziz al-Hakim make statements like that.

STAFF: George?

Q Yes. George Edmonson, Cox Newspapers. Two questions, related. How are candidates actually campaigning? And do Iraqis understand this proportional system of representation?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: I'm going to answer the second question first. The latest polling data that I've seen suggests that, frankly, not even more than about half the Iraqis as of a month ago understood what they were voting for. A lot of them thought they were voting for president. That's what they always used to do. And so they have a long way to go, still, on voter education here and making sure that they understand what they're voting for, that they're voting for a national assembly. That national assembly in turn is going to choose the next president, the next vice president, prime minister, Cabinet. And I do not think enough Iraqis understand that now and there needs to be a better explanation of this on the part of the Iraqi authorities and the Iraqi political parties.

A little bit of good news on that side at least is that the election commission itself has seen this data and they are producing, even as we speak, several more spots for television to explain this to people. The voter registration was not as well explained as we would have liked, and I think that's a lesson for us that more attention has to be paid to voter education.

With respect to the campaigning, campaigning, of course, is an aspect of voter education. The campaign actually only officially started January 2nd. That's when legally the election commission said, okay, you know, the horses may take off, go ahead and run -- race. In some parts of the country they are in full swing, Shi'a parties and Kurdish parties in their areas.

What does that look like? It has several different aspects. There are rallies, usually organized in Shi'a areas by either nongovernment organizations or by husseiniyas (sp). How can I explain what a husseiniya (sp) is? It's like a Masons group or something like that. It's not Masons, obviously, it's Shi'a Muslim, but it is connected to the Shi'a religious establishment. Where they bring, at times, hundreds of people together, usually men, but there are occasional mixed sexes of these things -- I mean, they sit in different parts of the room, but they're in the same place. And so that's ongoing. And candidates will come and talk, and local notables will come and talk. So that -- I mean, we would understand that in the Western sense as a campaign.

And then there's a lot of just kind of quiet politicking going on with candidates and their supporters going to tribal sheiks, going to important clerics, going to local town or village notables and trying to get their support. That's going on in the Shi'a part of the country.

In the Kurdish part of the country, very similar but a little heavier role up there on non-government organizations. Kurdish civil society is a bit better established than it is in the rest of the country just because they didn't have the Saddam regime pressing on the civil society up there like they have had here. Also, the two main political parties up in the Kurdish area themselves have a very broad network of non-government organizations, ranging from women's groups and students' groups to labor groups. And so these people are all out on the hustings trying to get out to the voters. And there are posters and there are pamphlets, you know, speeches.

Here in Baghdad, in the central part of the country, it's tougher, frankly. There are posters all over town, and they usually list the number on the ballot and they say, you know, "Vote for Number so-and-so," and then the symbol of the party or the symbol of a candidate list. But you do not have the same kind of big gatherings of groups where you might have hundreds of people like they do down in the Shi'a areas or up in the north. It's much quieter, it's much more restrained because of the security climate.

Yesterday I talked to a guy who's heading a list of Sunni candidates, and I asked him how he was doing. He said, "Well, I can do it," he said, "but we do it quietly." He said, "Like we'll go to people's homes. Maybe it's somebody I know and he'll host a group of people there. And it will be 30 or 40 people," he said, "it won't be a real big group. And we talk." And then, he said, "We do a lot of this kind of going into houses. It's not door to door, it's -- you know, you're going into homes of people you know. They, in turn, are bringing people they know." And it's a little more discreet.

Q Yeah, Vince Crawley with the Army Times. A couple of questions. Who ultimately would have the authority to request or to have a postponement of the elections, if such a decision were to be made? And the National Assembly, would sovereignty rest with it once this takes place? Would it, for instance, have the authority to invite the American military to leave?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Well, the government already has sovereignty. I mean, that was transferred to them on June 28th. The Transition Administrative Law and the U.N. Security Council resolution say that when there is a permanent government -- (audio break) -- the one that is elected after the draft constitution is approved -- (audio break) -- they can -- (audio break) -- the coalition. Well, actually, at that point, when they have that government -- (audio break) -- mandate from the United Nations expires and at that point it is up to a government in the coalition forces to determine whether the coalition forces are still required. So I mean, that's in the U.N. Security Council resolution and that's in the transition law.

With respect to who can turn off the elections, it is the election council -- sorry, the election commission that is responsible -- (audio break) -- the decision first goes to them -- (audio break).

Q Rick Whittle with the Dallas Morning News again. I just wanted to ask -- I wanted to follow up on your answer to my original question about the security situation. Why do you say the security situation has gotten better in the last six weeks? I believe the governor of Baghdad was assassinated today and yesterday was quite a violent day. If you could just explain what you mean, how you see it that way.

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: (Audio break) -- to be simple about it, the number of attacks against coalition and Iraqi forces -- (audio break) -- six weeks ago was probably about double what it is now. (Audio break) -- number of -- (audio break) -- soldiers getting killed six weeks ago was much higher than it is now. They have changed their targets more to softer targets -- going after police, going after National Guard and things like that -- but the number of attacks themselves has dropped sharply.

In most parts of the country now, most provinces of the country there's only one, two or three attacks a day on average. I want to be clear about that. Mosul is not at all representative of -- (audio break) -- not at all representative of Iraq in terms of security. Do those two places have big problems? Oh, yes, they do. But to generalize from those two places, to say that all of Iraq has security problems, would just be completely inaccurate. It would be like saying Baltimore's crime problems are serious, and therefore, the crime problems in every other major city in the United States are very serious. You just can't generalize it.

Q Bryan Bender with the Boston Globe. Can you talk a little bit about how -- whether or not there are concerns -- if you have concerns that some of the Sunni political parties in particular may be infiltrated by insurgents? We're hearing reports of that, but don't know whether that's true or even if that's something you can

really know.

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: I'm not -- so the question is political parties are infiltrated by insurgents?

Q Either insurgents or allies of the insurgents have -- are participating in this process in such a way that they're joining some of these political parties.

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: It's an interesting idea. I certainly can't say that they aren't. I would say it's not only possible, it's even probable given that their insurgency is very large and they're all over. But I have never heard a political party leader or a candidate on one of these lists talk about that. I think they're much more concerned about infiltration of, say, the Iraqi police of the Iraqi National Guard and the Ministry of Interior. I hear that complaint from Iraqis very often.

STAFF: Sir, we have time for about one to two more.

Q It's Al Fessen (ph) from VOA again. You mentioned softer targets like police stations, you said. Won't a polling place be at least that soft a target, if not softer, with lines of people waiting to get inside? What can you really do to secure the polling stations and ensure that fear of terrorism doesn't counterbalance the encouragement that's been given out to people to go out and vote?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Sorry. I didn't -- if I said police stations, I didn't mean that; it's officers on the street, although they certainly attack the police stations, too. I don't want to --

With respect to protecting polling stations, what I anticipate you'll see is a set of rings around them. Obviously you're not going to let cars inside the inner ring. There will be probably screening of people as they get from one ring to another. I think it'll actually be pretty good.

Q How can you protect those locations while people are waiting to go through that security?

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: Well, I think there will be a series of screening measures and people will be lining up on the outside as they come in. My guess is that there will be different (needs ?) of screening depending on which ring you're going through. Remember that these will be in urban areas and some people will be entering a ring not to go vote, but they'll be going to the store or they'll be going to the friend's house or they'll be going to their office or whatever it is. So there will be different levels of screening as you go through.

But I rush to say that I'm a political affairs expert here, not a security expert. So don't quote me as the --

STAFF: Sir, I hate to end the conversation, but we must. We thank you for your time.

SR. STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL: It's been my pleasure.

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