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Presenter: Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih

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Special Defense Department Briefing

(Via Videoconference From Iraq)

Moderator: Bryan Whitman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs

MR. WHITMAN: Good morning, sir, and thank you for joining us with the Pentagon press corps here today. For all of you, our briefer today is Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister for National Security Affairs, Dr. Barham Salih. *[note correction: Deputy Prime Minister]* He's here to discuss with you the preparations for the upcoming elections. He has got a few brief comments -- I believe, sir -- and then was going to open it up for questions for you here.

So with that, sir, go ahead.

MIN. SALIH: Good evening from Baghdad, and good morning to you in Washington. But point of correction. I am the deputy prime minister -- just the deputy prime minister, not for "national security."

Good to meet with you and brief you on the situation here in Baghdad. This is an exciting moment in our history. We are entering the final stages of the election process. On the 30th of January Iraqis will be going to the polls to participate in the first ever democratic elections in the history of Iraq.

Many people in the media focus on the problems, sometimes lose sight of this important context. We are talking about the first ever democratic elections in Iraq in the heart of the Islamic Middle East. It's an exciting moment in our history. It's a precedent that we hope will be the beginning of the end of the miseries and difficulties that the people of Iraq have endured for so many decades.

Emergency procedures will begin in less than one hour, part of the Iraqi government's effort to provide the best security possible for the polling process. There will be a public holiday from the 29th to the 31st of January. There will be a nationwide curfew from 1900 to 0600 hours from the evening of the 28th of January -- that is today -- until the morning of the 1st of February. No weapons may be carried by civilians on the 30th of January, even if they own weapons cards.

There are also restrictions on movement of vehicles that you may be aware of. Borders will be closed and the international airports will be closed, except for the returning flights from the Haj. Our security services,

both Iraqi and multinational forces, have been working very hard over the past month to make sure that we disrupt the ability of the terrorists to destabilize the political process.

My colleague Kasim Daoud earlier briefed you about the capture of two senior associates of Zarqawi. I am happy to tell you that our security services have also arrested a third high-level Zarqawi lieutenant. His name is Abu Ali (sp); his real name is Anab Mohammed Hamid al-Qas (ph), a 31-year-old Iraqi. He served as a military adviser to high-ranking Zarqawi affiliates and assisted in financing terrorist operations in Baghdad.

Abu Ali, together with Abu Hassan and Abu Saif, represents important successes for the security services and for our efforts to erode the capability of the Zarqawi network. Over the past two months we have arrested at least a dozen senior Zarqawi associates, and more than 20 other members and operatives of the Zarqawi networks have been also rounded up. In the last two weeks, our security services have arrested nearly 2,000 suspects, and we have been largely acting upon tips offered to us by Iraqi citizens, who are understanding that it is important that we all work together, government and people, to eradicate this terrorist plague and make sure that Iraq will be a safe and a secure place not only for the elections, but beyond.

With that I conclude, and if there are any questions I'll be delighted to respond.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, Mr. Minister.

We have several questions here. Let's start with Carl.

Q It's Carl Rochelle with NBC News, Mr. Minister. I wonder, for those of us in Washington who didn't hear Minister Kasim's briefing on the al Qaeda -- the Zarqawi lieutenants, if you could give us some detail about when they were captured and what the circumstances were and what sort of involvement in terrorist activities they were involved in?

MIN. SALIH: Abu Saif, he was arrested on December 31st. His real name is Salah Suleiman al-Loheibi. He was designated recently by Zarqawi as the "emir" of Baghdad operations. He has told us that he has met Zarqawi at least four times in December. And Abu Saif confirmed to us that Zarqawi's most lethal lieutenant, the notorious car-bomber Abu Omar al-Kurdi, was responsible for many of the attacks in Baghdad, and his attacks include the assassination of Izzedine Salim, who was a member of the Governing Council, and also many other terrorist operations that they have done, both in Baghdad and in other cities in Iraq.

The other one was Abu Hassan, who was arrested on January 20th. His real name is Ali Hamed al-Issawi, and he claims to be the gatekeeper for Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi, like a chief logistical officer, arranging meetings for Zarqawi. He alleges to have met Zarqawi up close approximately 40 times in the past three months and arranged meetings for Zarqawi with members of his networks and other people planning and acting on terrorist operations.

Q Just a quick follow-up, if I may. What effect do you believe that they're -- well, a couple points. One, what will happen to these men now? And what effect do you believe their capture will have on the terrorist operations in and around Baghdad?

MIN. SALIH: We cannot underestimate the threat posed by al Qaeda and its affiliate organizations, including Zarqawi. We are talking about a bunch of murderers, determined, resourceful, and have no qualms about human life.

So while we hope and we believe, as a matter of fact, that these arrests have helped erode the capability of Zarqawi and his ability to inflict damage upon the Iraqi people, we are taking this terrorist organization as a serious threat, and we are working aggressively to get Zarqawi and other lieutenants and to eradicate them from Iraqi scene. They have inflicted considerable damage upon the Iraqi people and on our political process, but I'm

hopeful, based on the evidence that we see, that we are moving closer and closer to decimating and eliminating that threat from our country.

MR. WHITMAN: very good - go ahead.

Q Sir, Joe Tabet, from Al Hurra TV. My first question is, Iraq's military chief of staff, General Zebari, said that 2,000 insurgents had been detained in the past three weeks, including some from Syria. Are those detainees -- do you think they are working alone, acting alone, or linked to any network outside Iraq? And who do you think is still financing those people?

MIN. SALIH: The intelligence assessment and estimate that we have of the security environment in Iraq and based on many debriefings that we have reviewed points to the fact that we're talking about the former regime loyalists. Having reorganized certainly the former intelligence, special forces, Saddam loyalists have reorganized and are working hard to destabilize the security environment. And they have entered into a lethal alliance with the Zarqawi and al Qaeda affiliates that are operating in Iraq. We certainly know of the existence of many senior leaders from the former regime, beyond the borders of Iraq, financing terrorist operations inside Iraq and directing terrorist operations inside Iraq.

But as I said, the arrests that we have made, whether they are with the Zarqawi group or the former regime loyalists, have been significant, and we hope that we have been able to erode their capability to inflict damage upon the Iraqi people. We are talking to neighbors as well to restrict the movements of these former regime loyalists and to bring them to justice before long.

Q Just to follow up, how much do you think the Iraqi government is close to arrest Zarqawi?

MR. SALIH: I hope close, but we cannot be complacent. We are after him. This is a dangerous man responsible for the death of so many Iraqis and coalition members, and we are after him. Sooner or later, we will get him.

Q Mr. Minister, Bret Baier with Fox News Channel. You mentioned that the first associate was Abu Saif, arrested December 31st, I think you said. He's been in custody for more than a month. You've had the other guy for eight days. Have they told you things about Zarqawi, about his movements, anything that you can share with us? You mentioned that one of them met with Zarqawi four times in December.

MR. SALIH: In fact, Abu Hassan tells us that he has met Zarqawi approximately 40 times in the past three months, and we are getting a better, better picture of the Zarqawi network based on the arrests that we have made over the past few weeks. And I don't, again, want to be complacent and I don't want to be overconfident. But all of us understand the importance that this issue presents for Iraq and Iraq's future, and we are after these terrorists, Zarqawi and his associates, the former regime loyalists who have engaged in acts of terror against the Iraqi people.

Q If I could follow up, sir. For you, when we talked in Iraq, you were very hopeful about this day. Personally what does this mean to you now that it's two days away?

MR. SALIH: This will be a major achievement for the people of Iraq and the political process. Osama bin Laden came out with a very clear statement a couple of weeks ago saying that elections should not be held in Iraq, and he has directed his terrorist network to do everything they can to prevent the people of Iraq from going to the polls. Saddam regime's loyalists have also tried very hard and continue to try. But the people of Iraq have demonstrated that they want to go to the polls and to prove to themselves and to the rest of the world that we can engage in a democratic political process.

This will be a turning point in the history of Iraq. Again, the context is important. This is the first ever democratic elections in the history of Iraq. My hope, this will be the catalyst for changing the course of history for the people of Iraq and turning our country from the country of mass graves and tyranny to the country of democracy, peace and security.

Q Yes, this is Vince Crawley with the Army Times newspapers. When do you anticipate the -- how long do you anticipate it will take to tabulate the results of the election? And how large a turnout do you think you need in order for the election to have credibility among the Iraqi people?

MIN. SALIH: On voter turnout and the credibility of the elections, these elections will be credible, I have no doubt about this. And if you are in Iraq and watch the advertising campaign, watch the election campaigns by the various candidates, watch the television debates, you would think that you are somewhere in Europe.

Obviously, this is all happening in the context of a tough security environment and many challenges that we are facing. But it is happening and people are taking it very seriously. And no doubt in my mind that these will be credible elections; maybe imperfect in certain ways, given the environment we're talking about, but nevertheless, a major improvement on what we have had before.

On voter turnout, I predict to you that voter turnout in the Iraqi elections will be better than voter turnout in U.S. elections. So we should use that as a base to judging the credibility of the elections, I would say. We are working hard to making sure that every Iraqi citizen will be able to go to the polling station. I have no doubt in my kind in Kurdistan there will be a heavy voter turnout; in the south there will be a heavy voter turnout. In the so-called Sunni areas, the information that we are getting is that more and more people are expressing an interest and are getting more confident about going to the polling station. I heard this morning from friends in the Independent Election Commission that people in Samarra are asking for more polling stations. And hopefully, with the security measures that we're taking, that day Iraqis will turn out in large numbers to prove to the terrorists and to prove to the doubters that we want to reclaim our country and we want to take part in deciding the future of this country.

Q A follow-up. I understand that the locations of many of the polling places have been kept secret from the people. When are they being informed, and by what means?

MIN. SALIH: It is an "open" secret. I think many people know where the polling stations are. Based on my conversations with the Independent Election Commission, information will be given out both in -- through television and other means of media so that people will know in time, in good time, where to go and how to go about voting.

It has been an amazing educational process as well. Iraqis have never had to vote before, never had the chance to vote. And you watch Iraqi TV and the number of programs of education about how to go, what the form looks like, and how to present the documents or whatever -- I mean, go to the list, it's quite phenomenal and it's quite exciting.

Q Sir, you didn't say how -- when do you think it will -- when will the results of the election be known?

MIN. SALIH: According to the Independent Election Commission, preliminary results -- I mean unofficial preliminary results, may be known between 24 to 48 hours from the closing of polls. It may take about a week to actually have the official results. But these are tentative figures. Obviously many of these things depend on the logistical situation. And also remember, this is unprecedented in our history. We have never done elections before like this. But I know that the Independent Electoral Commission is working hard to making sure that the results will be tabulated and will be announced officially as soon as possible.

Q Mr. Minister, Nick Simeone at Fox News. What do you think Saddam Hussein is thinking as these elections approach?

MIN. SALIH: Saddam Hussein is history. And this election will be a vindication of liberation, will be a vindication of our confidence in the Iraqi people. And with an elected government, we will be turning a sad page in our history. And Saddam Hussein will undoubtedly soon be seen in a court of law answering to the terrible crimes that he has committed against the Iraqi people. I cannot imagine Saddam Hussein being a happy man knowing that elections will be two days away from today.

Q Mr. Minister, this is Al Pessin from Voice of America. What's your expectation for the post-election period? We understand it will take weeks, probably months, for all of the steps to be taken to form a government and for the ministers to get to work. Is this going to be a particularly dangerous period from the point of view of the insurgency, as well as the point of view of building a new Iraq?

MIN. SALIH: On the terrorist threat, we cannot be complacent and we will be working with every resource we have in order to protect the people of Iraq and protect the security of our country.

On the issue of the transition, over the last few days I have been engaged in discussions with our chief justice about the legal procedures required for the transfer of authority. I was doing that with a sense of history and understanding what is at stake. In the past, governments would change in Iraq through a coup. Former government officials and prime ministers and ministers will be sent to the gallows. This time we are talking about a legal, orderly process by which authority and government will be transferred.

The chief justice has come back to us with a recommendation or an opinion, a legal opinion, about what needs to be done. With the election results being announced, the new assembly will meet, will be electing a president and two vice presidents. These will in turn nominate unanimously a prime minister, who will have to get the vote of confidence from the national assembly. And with the formation of that government, with that prime minister, the interim government will dissolve and hand over authority to the newly elected, democratically elected government of Iraq.

Q Mr. Minister, how long do you think that will take until you get to that point in the process?

MIN. SALIH: We hope it will not take long, but we are talking about a political process. The era of certainly of politics in Iraq is over. In the past, it used to be Saddam Hussein who would make decisions on behalf of every Iraqi. We need to wait for the outcome of the elections and the composition of the Parliament, and there will be a lot of political bargaining between the various blocks. And hopefully, it will not take long, but there will be some uncertainties involved. And that is what we have asked for. We have asked for a democratic process. And depending on the outcome of the elections and depending on the players in the new parliament and how they will view things and what will be their interests, the time will be dictated by that.

MR. WHITMAN: Tony?

Q Minister, I'm Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. What role do you see the U.S. military playing in a post-election Iraq? There's an expectation in the United States that the U.S. will be able to draw down forces as more and more Iraqi security forces are trained. Do you see our presence there for the foreseeable future?

MR. SALIH: Well, first let me say the following. These elections would not have been possible without the liberation of Iraq and without the sacrifice of the American and coalition forces in Iraq. And I hope the American public understand that those sacrifices have not been in vain. We're talking about democratic transformation in the heart of the Islamic Middle East, and it is a worthy objective.

In terms of the long-term presence of American and multinational forces in Iraq, this depends on the conditions in Iraq. It is our collective judgment -- collective -- by that, I mean both Americans as well as the Iraqi side -- we need to develop indigenous Iraqi security capabilities. At the end of the day, security in the urban centers of Iraq can only be assured by Iraqis. Iraqis have to step up to the challenge and assume direct responsibility for security.

We will be in need for international support for some time to come, because, on one hand, we're dealing with a security threat from terrorism, but at the same time we're talking about a tough neighborhood. And the overall security environment of Iraq would require continued international engagement.

My hope is that after the elections and the formation of an elected Iraqi government, the security dynamic will change, and more reliance will be placed on indigenous Iraqi forces. And that will undoubtedly change the dynamics of relations between the multinational forces and the domestic Iraqi security organization.

The exact nature and the time scale that we're talking about depends on condition. The prime minister recently spoke of a condition-based redeployment or rearrangement of international forces in Iraq, and I think this is the right thing to do. Instead of talking of a specific timetable, we need to talk about the conditions that will be required in order to change the arrangements and redeploy forces.

But all of us are in agreement that we need to focus more on expediting the training and equipping of Iraqi forces, so that Iraqis assume the responsibility of defending their own country. But we will be in need of the support of the international community for some time to come.

Q The United States has talked about embedding up to 10,000 troops in Iraqi units to help facilitate that accelerated training. What's your view on that? Is that a good idea?

MIN. SALIH: Can you repeat that, please? I did not hear the question well.

Q The United -- some in the United States military have talked about putting in as mentors as many as 10,000 U.S. troops into Iraqi units to help expedite the training that you seek. Is that a good idea, from your standpoint?

MIN. SALIH: We are working very closely with the command of the multinational forces at expediting the training and equipping program for the Iraqi military forces, including the utilization of military advisers and expertise with Iraqi units to help embolden the domestic indigenous Iraqi capabilities. That will undoubtedly be helpful, together with other measures that are being considered as we speak.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Mr. Minister, we have come to the end of our time, and we know that you're very busy. We want to wish you the best and let you know that all our eyes will be watching this week for this historic event also. Thank you.

MIN. SALIH: (Off mike) -- historic event, and history is being made by the people of Iraq, with the help of the multinational forces and the United States, the United Kingdom and other coalition partners. We'll make it. And thank you very much.

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