

Update from U.S. Embassy in Iraq

Philip Reeker, Counselor to Ambassador Ryan Crocker, U.S. Embassy Baghdad

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MR. DUGUID: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Washington Foreign Press Center. We have the honor today to welcome Mr. Philip Reeker, who is the counselor to Ambassador Crocker in Baghdad. He's here to talk to us about the ongoing conflict in Iraq and the U.S. and coalition efforts there. We are very grateful that Mr. Reeker has taken the time out of an extremely busy schedule to come here today. And we also want to recognize that he has been one of the more outstanding Foreign Service Officers who has been giving a year of sacrifice of his time in Iraq over 2007-2008.

Philip.

MR. REEKER: Thank you, Gordon. Thank you very much. It is a true pleasure, really an honor, to come back to the Foreign Press Center in Washington, where I recall spending many a happy afternoon. I think, at one point, in an earlier incarnation, I came over here almost weekly to engage with our foreign press colleagues, and wanted to make sure that we did that this week, too.



As Gordon indicated, I have been the counselor for public affairs at U.S. Embassy Baghdad for almost a year now. I went out to join Ambassador Crocker and his team the beginning of June in 2007, overseeing our press and information operations as well as our Cultural and Educational Affairs Office at the Embassy there. And during that time, obviously, working very closely with Ambassador Crocker, including in September and again this week, he and Commanding General Petraeus have come back to Washington to provide an assessment report to the United States Congress, really to the American people, of their views of developments in Iraq. And that's, of course, what we've been doing this week. If you haven't had enough after close to 20 hours of testimony that the Ambassador and the General have delivered, a press conference this morning, we did just want to make sure that our colleagues in the foreign press corps here in Washington had another opportunity to ask any questions, and I'm happy to do that.

Just a few comments. I'm sure you've heard from the testimony and the commentary on it, the Ambassador came back really to present to the Congress his judgment as to whether our goals in Iraq are attainable; that is, can Iraq develop into a united stable country with a democratically elected government, operating under the rule of law. And I think the Ambassador presented in his testimony and the questioning that followed, and certainly I've seen in my time in Baghdad, developments over the past seven months, certainly since his report in September, have strengthened that sense of a positive trend in Iraq.

There are still -- let no one be mistaken -- immense challenges. Progress is often uneven and, as the Ambassador said, very often frustratingly slow. What has been achieved is substantial, but it's also reversible. Gains can be considered fragile. And I think we've seen Iraq emerge from a period of sustained violence in 2006 and early 2007. Now, we see the reason to sustain the commitment and the enormous investments that we've made there in terms of treasure and, of course, the lives of our brave young men and women.

So all of us at Embassy Baghdad work very closely with our military counterparts, Ambassador Crocker's team. The Ambassador and the Commanding General have forged a one team, one mission approach to this. And of course, the Ambassador, as you've heard in his testimony, is focused on the political, economic, and, indeed, diplomatic or regional developments as part of the joint effort. Obviously, security plays an enormous part of this effort, and really all of those issues are very intertwined.

We have seen since September the Iraqi Government and Council of Representatives, their parliament, take quite a bit of action in terms of passing legislation that deals with some of the vital issues of reconciliation and nation building, the pension law, the Accountability and Justice Act, that is the de-Baathification reform, the amnesty law. Very importantly, the provincial powers law, a major step forward in terms of helping to define the relationship in Iraq between the central government, the federal government, and the governments of the provinces.

As Ambassador Crocker has pointed out many times, I think it's worth noting, particularly for those of you here looking at the United States, that this effort at forging the relationship between local and federal government is very much like what we went through in the United States in terms of debating states' rights and the issues involved in that issue.

So let me not go on. You've all heard the testimony. We can certainly make copies available. You've heard the President speak earlier this morning, announcing his way forward after he had consulted, obviously, with the Ambassador and with General Petraeus. And I am happy, then, to take your questions and we can go from there.

Sir.

QUESTION: Thank you. My name is Talha Gibriel from *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper. The President mentioned today that Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus are going -- in the way to Iraq to (inaudible) Saudi Arabia. Could we have more information about exactly what they are going to discuss, the Ambassador and the General, in Saudi Arabia? Thank you.

MR. REEKER: Well, as the President indicated, Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus do plan to stop in Saudi Arabia on their way back to Baghdad. Clearly, they'll be discussing Iraq. I think you heard the Ambassador say in his testimony, and frankly he's been quite consistent in saying this for some time, that it's very important for the region, the Arab countries in the region, to step up to do their part to support the Iraqi people, to support the democratically elected government in Iraq. It is in their strategic interest, as it is for all of us to see the gains that we've witnessed consolidated. And it's high time that countries in the region took note of that and began to play

their part.

As the Ambassador has noted, there is a distinct absence of other ambassadors from Arab countries in Baghdad. His Majesty the King of Bahrain announced when he was here in Washington recently that Bahrain would be sending an ambassador. Other countries, including Saudi Arabia, have indicated such, but that's something we would like to see.

Iraq is very much an important part of the Arab world. I don't think I need to remind you or the readers of *Asharq al-Awsat* that Iraq was a founding member of the Arab League. It is a multi-ethnic state and indeed, a multi-sectarian state, but it is very much a state with a strong Arab identity and has played an important part in the Arab world throughout its history, frankly, going back millennia.

And so it is quite clear to us and, I think, clear to Iraqis that Iraq's neighbors have a major interest in Iraq's future, and that is what the Ambassador and the General will be talking about when they visit Saudi Arabia.

Sir. Behind you.

QUESTION: Lambros Papantoniou, Greek correspondent, *Eleftheros Typos*, Greek daily. Mr. Reeker, the recent developments in Basra have been proven that the Maliki government is very weak. How do you explain this phenomenon?

MR. REEKER: I think, in fact, if you listen to what the Ambassador and others have said about the developments in Basra, you have seen, since the actions that Prime Minister Maliki took on his own as the leader of a sovereign Iraqi Government, that, in fact, he has experienced some strong political gains. His actions against criminal militias, against those who were subverting the authority of the Iraqi state, have been widely applauded.

And you have seen, across the board and across the ethnic and sectarian framework of Iraq, support for the strong efforts that the Prime Minister took. I think you saw on Saturday, in fact, a statement from the Council for National Security in Iraq, which is made up of all the key leaders and leaders of political parties across the spectrum there, that it is time for rule of law to be enforced, that it's time for these militias to stand down, that weapons should be in the hands of the government security forces. And so Basra is an ongoing situation. It's been, in some areas, an area of concern for some time now in terms of the lawlessness, in terms of various militias, controlling elements there, criminal elements, smuggling, smuggling of oil, drugs, other things that have been - been described.

This was an effort to exert the control of the state and to show that the central authorities in Iraq are not going to tolerate that kind of lawlessness, that kind of disrespect for the national government, which, after all, operates under a constitution, under a democratically elected government.

So I think this may, indeed, be a very positive step in many ways. As the General and Ambassador Crocker noted throughout their conversations in Washington this week, Basra remains a work in progress, and we'll see that. But I think if you look at the actual results of that, not just the on-the-ground military efforts, but what it's meant politically, what it has represented in terms of Iraqi public opinion, you see a message being given that the people of Iraq, whether Shia or Sunni, are tired of this violence and this criminality. And it was an important message that showed that a Shia prime minister was willing to take action against other Shia groups who were acting outside the law.

QUESTION: Another question. How do you assess the cooperation between U.S. military forces and Kurdish forces for the stabilization of Iraq?

MR. REEKER: Well, I think you have to look at how U.S. forces work with Iraqi security forces, that is, the national security forces of Iraq, both on the training level and the cooperative level. Of course, that includes, as well, coalition forces. Kurdish forces, in terms of the Peshmerga you're referring to, work under the authorities granted to the Kurdish region under the laws of Iraq and under the constitution of Iraq. We do not operate in Kurdish territory; that is, U.S. forces do not operate in the Kurdish region. Those are areas that are under their own provincial control and under the control of the region of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Sir.

QUESTION: Hi, my name is Gabor Steingart. I'm a correspondent with *Der Spiegel* from Germany. I have a question on something that came up in the hearings on Tuesday. It's about the executive agreement on the further presence of the U.S. in Iraq after the UN mandate will expire. I mean, there has been a disagreement in the hearings on whether that should be considered as something that required advice and consent in the U.S. Congress. But what is your take on that? How is that going to develop over the next months?

MR. REEKER: Well, I think, first and foremost, we need to be very clear about what we're talking about. It appeared to me certainly in the questioning that we saw this week, and some of your colleagues have also seemed confused about exactly what we're talking about. We are, at the request of the Iraqis initially, you'll recall last August, pursuing a long-term strategic relationship. In August, there was a joint communiqué issued by the Iraqi leadership asking for such a relationship to be developed and a framework developed. So there are really two processes at work.

You'll also recall that November 26th, President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki and other Iraqi leaders signed a joint declaration of - that we would move forward on that. This is something that's now underway, in terms of a process of reaching a strategic framework agreement with the Iraqis, and also link to that a separate document known as a Status of Forces Agreement. This is something that we have, as you know, with some 80-odd countries around the world. And the Status of Forces Agreements are executive agreements. That's what they are; that's what this is designed to be. You have to keep that separate, of course, from your strategic framework agreement, work on which has not really moved forward at this point. That strategic framework agreement will cover the entire range of our relationship in terms of economic, political, cultural, scientific, and, indeed, the broad ideas of a security relationship.

But a Status of Forces Agreement is really, in essence, an accord that affirms very much Iraqi sovereignty and will permit the continued assistance of U.S. forces in the progress to security and peace in Iraq. It lays out the series of procedures for a relationship to move smoothly. It makes a lot of our activities, for instance, transparent to the host government. And the reason for having a Status of Forces Agreement at a bilateral level, of course, is that the authorities under which we currently operate are under a UN Security Council mandate which will expire at the end of this year. And Iraq's government has made very clear that this is the end of the Security Council, the Chapter 7 resolutions under which we've operated. This is about Iraqi sovereignty, and that's really what we're focused on.

The Ambassador in his testimony, I think, made quite clear what this agreement is not. He talked about - let me just cite it for you. This agreement will not, for instance, establish permanent bases in Iraq. And in fact, we anticipate that the agreement will expressly forewarn permanent bases. That has been the policy. As the Ambassador reiterated this morning, after his visit to the White House, that is the policy of the U.S. Government is that we do not seek permanent bases. And that is the policy of the Iraqi Government as well.

The agreement will not specify troop levels. It will not tie the hands of the next administration. Indeed, the goal of this is to create a situation giving the next president the full range of abilities in terms of making the decisions that he or she chooses in terms of where we go after January of 2009.

So I think these are obviously negotiations that needed to take place. Like any negotiations, we have a team that comes out to Baghdad and also works in Washington. We have people on Embassy staff who work closely with the Iraqi team on the Status of Forces Agreement. And like any other negotiation, it will take time and it goes back and forth, but that process is moving forward under the overall watch of Ambassador Crocker and he works very closely with Ambassador Robert Loftis, who was an expert on the Status of Forces Agreement.

I would just point out, getting back to your specific question, that of all of these Status of Forces Agreements which we have with other countries, they are all executive

agreements with the exception of the agreement under the NATO charter, which is one that required Senate ratification as a treaty. So there are clearly differences and we have no intention of making this anything other than an executive level document.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Can you give an assessment, because you were talking about the ongoing negotiations, for what time are you expecting an agreement on the -

MR. REEKER: In all of our conversations, we've talked about aiming for midyear. Clearly, it's something we are working diligently on. I couldn't give you a specific readout. These things take time. But clearly also, you know, as I noted, the UN Security Council resolution will end December 31st. So to prepare this, to have this done in good order, we're working quite diligently towards a sort of midyear time for the Status of Forces Agreement.

The strategic framework agreement, which we really haven't moved forward on yet, as the Iraqi Government works out the team and the composition of the team that it wants to have negotiating this, we'll continue to move forward on, but I don't have a specific timeframe other than to say that, as we've said quite publicly before, the goal would be to do this by midyear. I think that within the joint declaration and very much something that the Iraqis have wanted to stick to as well.

Sir.

QUESTION: Yesterday, at Congress, a lot of - I'm sorry, this is Salih Zeki Saridanismet, *Dogan News Agency*. Yesterday, at Congress, a lot of congressmen asked similar question, why we are still there. And one time, General Petraeus started his answer with U.S. interest. Can you explain us what is the U.S. interest there?

MR. REEKER: Well, I think you heard from both the General and from Ambassador Crocker that the U.S. has had interests in the region for a long time. We've been involved in the region, certainly since World War II, and our goal is to see a stable Iraq. As I mentioned to you, we now have an Iraq operating under a constitution, under a democratic form of government, to see that as stable, sustainable, operating under the rule of law. That is obviously not only in our interest but the interests of those in the region, as we talked about a little bit earlier, and frankly, to the international community, their economic interests in a part of the world which is obviously key to the world economy, their humanitarian interests, moral interests in seeing Iraq be a stable country where its people can prosper and live peacefully.

And as we've discussed at great length, there has been a real threat to direct American interests, that is, to our own homeland from al-Qaida in Iraq. You certainly are aware of that. Al-Qaida is, by its own statements, the sworn enemy of the United States and has made quite clear their goal to threaten our security and, frankly, those of all of us in the West and around the globe, certainly in the region, who oppose their extremist ideology. And so we all have an interest in making sure that al-Qaida, which has taken severe hits and been dealt severe blows by our efforts with Iraqi security forces as well over the last six, seven months, to make sure that they cannot be resurgent, they cannot live up to the goal that Usama bin Laden himself has stated, and that is to establish themselves with a bulwark in the Arab world in Iraq.

Ma'am.

QUESTION: I have two questions. Ahu Ozyurt from, CNN Turk. We understand that U.S. welcomes the role of Iran when it brokered some sort of a ceasefire in the Basra region. Could you clarify your position in terms of how the U.S. sees Iran's policies inside Iraq? Don't you think it undermines, in the long term, Prime Minister Maliki's strength?

And the second one is, what is the status of the hydrocarbon law at this point? Why is it taking so long to get it?

MR. REEKER: On your first question, I think you used the words that the Ambassador used in his testimony: Iran continues to undermine the efforts of the Iraqi Government to establish a stable, secure state because of their arming and training of criminal militia elements who are engaged in acts of violence against Iraqi security forces, against coalition security forces, and, indeed, against Iraqi civilians. That is quite evident and that was very evident in Basra. And that is what we saw a popular backlash against. That's what we saw Prime Minister Maliki taking action against.

And the extent, really, of Iran's malign influence has been dramatically demonstrated when they clashed with legitimate Iraqi security forces in Basra and also in Baghdad. Part of the announcement of the surge strategy, when the President announced last January the new way forward, was a pledge to seek out and destroy the Iranian-supported lethal networks inside Iraq. And we have - General Petraeus and my colleagues in Baghdad have regularly demonstrated we have seen more and more about these networks, about their sponsors in the Iranian Quds Force.

And, you know, I think it needs to be noted, though, that at the same Ambassador Crocker has quite consistently said, the United States Government has said, that we support constructive relations between Iran and Iraq. Iran and Iraq are going to be neighbors. They are neighbors. They have a long and often difficult history. And it is certainly in the strategic interest of both countries, including Iran, to have peace along that border, to have constructive relations.

And Iran, in their stated policy, has said that that's what they want. We have seen evidence, quite clearly, quite (inaudible), that counters that. We have also been willing, and continue to remain willing to sit down with the Iranians and the Iraqis in a tripartite arrangement. As you know, we've had three rounds of talks to discuss security in Iraq. So really it's a question, as the Ambassador pointed out in his testimony, of Iran making a choice as to how they want to relate with their neighbor. And I think the Iraqi people are increasingly noting that as well.

And your second question -- just remind me.

QUESTION: On the --

MR. REEKER: On the hydrocarbon law. Obviously, the hydrocarbon law remains an important piece of legislation. It's important for Iraq why? Because the international community, the investors and those who can bring to Iraq the modern technology and investment in infrastructure that Iraq needs to see its oil industry continue to grow and expand and modernize, they need to see a clear playing field. They need to know what the rules are for operating throughout Iraq.

And so all Iraqis, I think, political forces identify the need to have this comprehensive hydrocarbons legislation. It's been difficult because everything in Iraq is difficult. These are difficult laws. These are somewhat existential in many ways. You're talking about a vital resource, Iraq's main resource, which should provide and indeed is providing a great inflow of revenue that is shared among all of the Iraqi people. And in fact, even in the absence of a hydrocarbons law, the Iraqis are successfully distributing those funds. They are budgeting their oil revenues, and because of the high price of oil they're able to even look now at a supplemental budget, even after the record 2008 budget that the Government and Council of Representatives passed in February.

So this remains a high priority. I think the speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mr. Mashhadani, has said quite publicly that this is something he wants to see progress on, that he wants to bring a draft before the Council of Representatives, and something they need to continue working on.

MR. DUGUID: I believe we have time for two more.

MR. REEKER: Okay. Lambros.

QUESTION: Mr. Reeker, one more question. It was reported extensively in the Turkish press that somehow after the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq, you are going to

deploy in the area Turkish forces, like in Afghanistan. And I would like to know -- have your comments since such development, the Kurdish people will be very concerned.

MR. REEKER: Maybe it's because I don't read Turkish, but those are reports I'm not aware of. I think the Ambassador and the Commanding General has made quite clear our views on the U.S. forces and coalition forces that are involved in Iraq right now. And I'm aware of no plans. I would refer you to Turkish officials to discuss their plans in terms of those efforts.

I think it is worth pointing out that most governments, the Iraqi and Turkish Governments, have been working together to strengthen their ties, and I'll remind you that Iraqi President Talabani visited Turkey just last month.

Sir.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) U.S. paying multi-three hundred dollar (inaudible) peoples, is also -- is U.S. also paying for Kurdish and Shia peoples anything?

MR. REEKER: Well, I think what you're referring to are the so-called "Sons of Iraq" or what were also called Concerned Local Citizens groups, who voluntarily approached us, first in Anbar, as you know, through the Awakening process, about joining together to fight al-Qaida, our common enemy. And so there are some 90,000 of these Sons of Iraq, as they're referred to now. About 70,000 of them are Sunnis. I believe about 20,000 are Shia. Maybe - I may be a little off on those numbers. And we have had a program through which they have provided funding. But what we're seeing also, importantly I think to note, is that the Government of Iraq is going to begin paying salaries under sort of what really amount to short-term security contracts. And the Government of Iraq has already put forward \$300 million for that, so they're taking over some of that.

It is a broad-based effort, the Sons of Iraq effort. There are some 300-plus different organizations involved in this. And as I said, they have a multi-sectarian makeup there, Shia groups as well as Sunni groups. And I think it's also worth noting that the plan, of course, is to integrate these groups into mainstream security forces, Iraqi national forces, perhaps some 20 percent of them. What most of these people want besides security for themselves and their families in their neighborhood is a job. They want income, so that they can support themselves and their families, and that's why they transition into legitimate national security forces. Some 20 percent or so may be absorbed that way. Others will be funneled into the vocational and technical training programs, educational opportunities for - so that they can be prepared for joining the civilian economy as well. That is an important part of this process. But in the meantime, that has made a very big difference, certainly, as you heard in the testimony, has made a difference to what we've seen on the ground. It's been one of the key factors into bringing down the levels of violence and increasing security in many areas of Iraq.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) other similar thing for Kurdish people?

MR. REEKER: I do not believe that the Concerned Local Citizens has involved the Kurdish people. Of course, as we've all seen in the Kurdish areas of Iraq under the Kurdish Regional Government, they have a different dynamic in terms of the security there, in terms of the economy. And they have been - this is not something that has emerged for which there's been a need in those parts of Iraq.

MR. DUGUID: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR. REEKER: We can - sure, I don't want to cut anybody off. Sure, go ahead. One more then.

QUESTION: Do you see Jaish al-Mahdi becoming a part of this whole security architecture as well? I mean, apparently, President Talabani has called for that a couple of days ago.

MR. REEKER: Well, I think what you heard the President, President Talabani and the Prime Minister call for and what you've seen strong support for is the disarming of militia groups, the end of militia groups and the turning over of arms and weapons to the legitimate government security forces. And that would go for the Jaish al-Mahdi as well. They have a choice to make in this. There is a clear difference, I think it's worth pointing out, between the political trend, led by Sayyad Muqtada al-Sadr and militia forces. There is a place absolutely for the political trend, the Sadrist trend. It has a strong history in Iraq, a strong following, and that's why local elections, national elections, and, indeed, the current Council of Representatives includes that trend. They can have a very legitimate and important political role to play. But you've heard the calls from across the spectrum of Iraqi politics for an end to this kind of militia behavior, disarming and the handing over of weapons to legitimate government security forces.

MR. DUGUID: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you, Mr. Reeker. That's all the time we have today. This concludes our briefing at the Foreign Press Center.



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