



Trip Briefing

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

En Route Shannon, Ireland
April 19, 2008

SECRETARY RICE: (In progress.) This has been a format for...this has been a format that we found very useful for addressing all of the regional issues that confront us with our close allies. As a matter of fact, this began at the United Nations General Assembly almost two years ago now. It will be two years in September. We've had a number of meetings. The meetings always give us an opportunity to focus on the entire region. So we talk about Lebanon, we talk about support for Iraq, we talk about the Palestinian situation, the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and the Annapolis process.

We also continue to talk about Afghanistan, about Sudan and what can be done there, and so it provides a forum in which we can talk about a whole range of regional issues. I think it's been one of the most useful formats that I have found for addressing these issues. We also recognize that there is a Gulf security dialogue that is underway led by our people and the Defense Department. And this provides a kind of political part, a better political umbrella for that dialogue as well. Secretary Gates has come out and done the security dialogue a couple of times.

We'll go on then to a meeting in Kuwait, which is the third neighbors meeting. The first one was held, of course, in Sharm, then in Istanbul and now in Kuwait. It has an agenda that has been predetermined for some time, which is to work on practical issues associated with the efforts to help stabilize Iraq: refugees, issues of borders and security. There is an internal, a smaller group of neighbors, the direct neighbors of Iraq, but this is an expanded meeting with the P-5 and a number of others. And so it's a very useful forum also for states to come to terms with the fact that they are all better served with an Iraq that is stable and moving forward, and to address what each and every one of them can do to help with the stability of Iraq.

Obviously, Syria and Iran are there. We continue to hope, particularly with Iran, for behavior that would be in line with what Iran says it wants, which is to support the Maliki government and to have a stable Iraq. But I have to say that the arming of militias and activities that end up killing both innocent Iraqis and threatening coalition forces don't seem to be in line with that goal. But it gives Iran a chance to be at the table as well and to hear from the states around the region how important it is that Iraq be stable.

So that's the purpose. I'll have a number of meetings, as I always do, on the sidelines.

QUESTION: Can you talk a little bit about the difference between the last Iraq neighbors meeting and now? Have you seen any progress from any of the neighbors, including (inaudible) Iran and Syria, as you mentioned, toward increased stabilities?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we do go into this meeting in a different context than, certainly, Sharm and even Istanbul, because there has been progress on the ground in Iraq, both in terms of the security situation and in terms of Iraqi political reconciliation. And I think that this meeting is going to have to take note of that. The neighbors kept making a case that the security situation needed to get better. It has. They kept making the case that political reconciliation needed to make strides forward. It is making strides forward.

I think it's fair to say that the neighbors could do more to live up to their obligations because I do believe the Iraqis are beginning to live up to theirs. And one of the points that we'll continue to make a number of the -- a number of the people at this meeting, for instance, will have done debt relief. Well, Iraq's neighbors ought to do that debt relief. The debt relief has come from the Paris Club, not from Iraq's neighbors.

It's also the case that they need to -- we need to keep pressing on political representation from the Arab states. I understand that there is a concern about the security situation, but there are ways that that could be managed. I do think there has been some improvement, not enough, but some improvement in the flow of foreign fighters across various borders. I'm not speaking now of the Iranians, I'm speaking instead about the Syrian border.

And then we have, of course, the refugee issue, and there we need to start to move toward a resolution of that issue that is also going to include Iraq doing more for the refugees in these countries, but also beginning to develop homes for them to come back to. There are signs that a lot of people would like to go home, but right now, there are no homes to come back to.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) said yesterday that Iraq was still, to use his word, a messy place and that the security situation really needed to improve quite a lot more before they started thinking of sending anyone in. But you're saying that you think -- do you think the security situation is safe enough for these Arab countries to open embassies?

SECRETARY RICE: I think they'll have to make their own choices and I recognize that each in particular, who has an ambassador assassinated there feels strongly about this. But look, the security situation in Iraq is very different than it was. Now, it's true that in recent weeks, the action that the Iraqi Government took in Basra to begin to deal with militias has caused -- has brought about some new violence. But in fact, if you think about it, one thing that all of the people around this table kept saying is you've got to take on the militias, you've got to take on the militias. Well, now, they're taking on the militias.

And so at some point, the Arab states need to take yes for an answer in terms of Iraq's commitment and Iraq's commitment to its Arab identity. I believe that there are ways that political representation could be carried out, even if you didn't have permanent and continuing presence, and that's one of the ways to think about it. But -- and even (inaudible) representation in Baghdad.

QUESTION: Do you expect some new commitments during this trip? And I know the Saudis and the Bahrainis and others have said that they plan to open embassies, but it never seems to happen.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I don't expect that there are going to be new commitments on that side, but I do hope that we're going to make some further progress along the line in terms of debt restructuring and some of the things that would really help have some humanitarian assistance. I don't think there will be announcements coming out of this meeting, but as you know, this is a process by continuing to press the case.

As to when missions can open, again, I think it's a good step that Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have said that they're going to do it. I hope they'll do it relatively soon.

QUESTION: The issue of compensation claims dating back from the 1990 -- '90/'91 Gulf war, part of what you mean by debt restructuring, it's not exactly debt restructuring, but --

SECRETARY RICE: No, no. I think the Kuwait situation is somewhat different in terms of the claims. That's a UN matter; I think it has to be resolved in a different context. We would like to see it resolved, but I understand it has to be resolved in a different context.

SECRETARY RICE: Let me say just one other thing about the region. One other – one other advantage to the more high level visits from the neighbors to Baghdad.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) high-level visits from the neighbors to Baghdad?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I would – that's one way that neighbors can show their interest and their support. Also, there have been a number of visits that have been offered to Iraqis coming the other way, and that's also very important.

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QUESTION: Offered, but not --

SECRETARY RICE: No, they'll take (inaudible) in some cases.

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