



Moving Forward in Iraq

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
Remarks en route Baghdad, Iraq
Baghdad, Iraq
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SECRETARY RICE: Okay, Iraq. Well, as you know, periodically, I think it's important for me to have a chance to go and see firsthand, talk to our people in the Embassy, talk to the military people there about the situation on the ground, make certain that we're doing everything that we need to with the civilian surge and with diplomatic support.

This is, I think, an important time because since the Iraqi Government has decided to go -- since the time that the Iraqi Government decided to go after the militias in the south and to begin to reestablish some central institutions in Basra, I do think you've seen a coalescing of a center in Iraqi politics in which the Sunni leadership, the Kurdish leadership and the elements of the Shia leadership that are not associated with these special groups have been working together better than at any time before. And I think that's an important development. And I would like just to see what we can do to continue to promote that kind of center that I think is clearly coming together.

QUESTION: How concerned are you about Sadr and his role at this point? And are you -- do you feel like you actually have a pretty good idea of what his goal is here? It seems a little bit scattered.

SECRETARY RICE: I think it's been very difficult to get a read on what his motivations are, what his intentions are. I assume the Iraqis may have a somewhat better view of that than we do. But I would just make the point that the Prime Minister has made, which is that he's looking to unite all Iraqis who are prepared to be a part of a political process, eschew violence and lay down their arms in favor of the authority of the central government and the proper security forces that belong to the central government. That's the point the Iraqis are making. So I think that the issue of Sadr, from my point of view, is an internal Iraqi matter to resolve at this point. But clearly, the Prime Minister has laid down some ground rules which any functioning democratic state would insist upon, having to do with, you know, arms belonging to the state, not to -- not in private hands.

QUESTION: But even as an internal Iraqi question, I mean, American troops got dragged into it and he can still be a spoiler.

SECRETARY RICE: No, I said what happens with his movement is an internal Iraqi question. But obviously, the -- it's not -- I wouldn't think of it as American forces having been dragged into it. I would think of it in the following way. There has not been a single state or element within Iraq, state outside of Iraq or element within Iraq, that has not been calling for the Iraqi Government to deal with militias, particularly with special groups and militias in the south. There are those who have questioned whether or not the Prime Minister was prepared to go after militias that were associated one way or another with political elements in his coalition, in his -- that were once part of his coalition. There have been questions from the Arab states as to whether or not they were prepared to go after Shia militias that were carrying out the violent activities in the south. And I think he's answering that question.

I think it is also renewing a confidence in the -- of the Iraqi people in their government that they aren't prepared to leave parts of the country in the hands of violent militias, but intend to reestablish government control. I also applaud the fact that he's gone at this not just in terms of the military side but making available \$100 million for the reconstruction of Basra, which is an important signal to the Iraqi people that this is a government of all the people. And it's difficult because these militias have become embedded. They use civilians and innocent people as shields. They have been connected to political movements. So this is a complicated process, but this is a process that has begun in Iraq. And everyone has long said that it had to begin. It absolutely -- as Ryan said, it has not been the smoothest of processes, but it is an important step that the Iraqis have taken, the Iraqi Government has taken.

Okay? And we'll see you on the ground.

QUESTION: Will you be able to go to one of the new embassies?

SECRETARY RICE: I have really limited time, unfortunately, this time because I've got to get to Bahrain. I was kind of hoping to put this trip, frankly, on the back end, but now Abu Mazen is coming so I just have a real limitation on time. I'm looking forward to seeing the new Embassy.

QUESTION: You need to walk around on another visit.

SECRETARY RICE: I've been out to the site. I've not walked around since it's been built. But look, it'll be very good to have a chance to see our people there. It's been a difficult time. And so I look forward to having a chance to do that, too.

QUESTION: What is the reason you're going to Baghdad right now? Is it the fact that the violence that (inaudible) to show that the level of danger may not be what it may appear to be to the outside world?

SECRETARY RICE: No, I'm not trying to send any message about the violence. I think everybody knows that it's still a dangerous place. It's very clear to me that security has improved a great deal. This comes out of -- the current circumstances come out of what I think is a very important and indeed appropriate action that the Iraqi Government has taken. But I do look forward to seeing our people and thanking them for the fact that they have stood fast and been tough in pretty difficult circumstances over the last few weeks.

QUESTION: Can I ask you about the oil law? Are you going to be discussing the oil law? And also with the provincial elections coming up, the hope is that there'll be more Sunni representation this time and that it will bring in a broader group, and then enhance that center that you're looking for.

SECRETARY RICE: I do think there'll be stronger Sunni representation this time. A number of Sunni groups have made clear their intention to contest in the elections, including, for instance, the Awakening movement, which is an increasingly very large movement. I do think -- I do hope that the provincial elections are being -- I believe that the UN is doing the work that needs to be done for the provincial elections. That's one thing I want to check on because that's going to be very important that those get done. But I think there will undoubtedly be Sunni -- larger Sunni representation.

In terms of the oil law, yes, I could discuss it. I would just note they actually are -- we're getting reports that they are working. Kurds have been coming down to work on it. You know, they still have some differences. This is a pretty important step. But just to remind that they are distributing budget revenues essentially on the basis of the formula that would be used there, and so it's a matter -- it's soon going to be a matter of making de jure what is already de facto.

There'll be some issues that they're going to have to resolve about contracting, but I think one of the things to remember is this is not just a matter between the north and the rest of the country, or the south and the rest of the country, but there are also embedded in this questions about how market oriented, how -- because it's state oil companies. I mean, this is also a kind of new model in the whole region, if you look at how the politics -- or the underlying structure of oil and gas in the whole region. So it's not surprising it's taking them some time to do these things.

QUESTION: Hasn't the frame of all of those questions been readily apparent for a year or more and you all have been saying they were going to get -- they were going to get a law?

SECRETARY RICE: No, but the thing is I think it may seem readily apparent if you're sitting outside and have no interests involved. They're not so readily apparent when your interests are on the table. Look, they're doing it in a way that is befitting a democratic process. They're discussing. They're arguing. Undoubtedly, they're horse-trading. This is a process that I think is quite familiar to any state that is trying to put in place a pretty fundamental piece of legislation. Ask yourself how it looks when the United States tries to put in place certain fundamental pieces of legislation, and everybody says, oh, the answer is absolutely clear.

QUESTION: (Inaudible).

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Regarding the provincial elections, do you have any reason to believe they may not occur on time and what are the primary obstacles at this point to getting them done on time?

SECRETARY RICE: No, I don't have any reason to believe they won't get done. It's just there's a lot of work to do. The Prime Minister spoke to this just a little bit ago and said that it would be -- you know, there would be voting outside the country. So that's -- he's right to do that but it's complicated to get the rolls right and do the work with the countries where people are residing. They -- I know that Mr. De Mistura is concerned to make sure that this time around the system that is used is one that is actually going to support the ability of representatives to represent constituents rather than just individual parties. I mean, there are a lot of matters to be solved. Arranging these elections always is hard and always takes time. And so that's what I mean. I don't see any reason they can't do it, but there's just really a lot of work to do.

QUESTION: Is it your assessment the Sadrist will do very well in this election?

SECRETARY RICE: That'll be up to the Iraqi people. Not for me to make the call.

QUESTION: Are you looking at the situation to see how they might --

SECRETARY RICE: No. You know our view on this. If people participate and participate in a way that is in line with the rules of the game, we're not going to try to determine the outcome. I think the Prime Minister and the leaders are laying down principles by which people should participate in elections.

QUESTION: You mentioned the UN. Do you feel that have all the resources put in there that are needed to get the elections (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: I've been very impressed by the special representative De Mistura. I think he's doing simultaneously the work on Article 140 and Kirkuk and the elections, and to my mind he's doing just an excellent job.

Thanks. Thank you.

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