



Remarks With U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Roundtable with Press
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SECRETARY RICE: All right. Since we have somewhat limited time, why don't we just turn to you. Anne, do you want to start?

QUESTION: Yeah, I was struck, Madame Secretary, about your remarks just now to the Embassy employees and to Iraqis in particular that you had thought that (inaudible) was a very hopeful message. Certainly, that -- when President Talabani described this as "a spring," that sounds hopeful, but there's also been such an upsurge in violence. In the -- just in the last few days -- on Tuesday, I think it was the deadliest day in Iraq in months. How do you square the two?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, there are going to be days when the extremists manage, despite the fact that they clearly are weakened, particularly in terms of their relationship with the population, there are going to be days where they manage to pull off a cowardly attack against innocent people. That is, unfortunately, going to happen. I would note that some of the violence is related to the -- is a byproduct of what was a very good decision by the Iraqis to not let Basra continue to be under the control of criminals and militias. And that, I think, is what has given the sense to the Iraqis that they have a new political opportunity, a window of opportunity, because I don't think you would have seen the kind of unity among the forces, the various political forces that you've seen today. But they really united around the Basra operation and I think they now see an opportunity to conclude a number of other elements of national reconciliation, to get the elections planned, to move forward on those elections. And they're also, quite rightly, proud of their security forces and the way that they've performed. And so that's why I think there is tremendous political -- you know, tremendous political opportunity here. They have to seize it. But there will be times when the extremists manage to pull off a car bombing or a suicide bombing against innocent people. Unfortunately, that will be the case.

QUESTION: Yes. What do you make of Sadr's threat for all out war against Maliki for his actions unless he backs off?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't know. I know he's sitting in Iran. I guess it's all out war for anybody but him. I guess that's the message. His followers can go to their deaths, and he'll sit in Iran.

QUESTION: So you don't take him seriously when he said that?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't know whether to take him seriously or not. But you know, I think people understand that there is a Sadrist trend movement which has run in elections. And the Prime Minister and his people and the other leaders were saying that, you know, any Iraqi who is willing to lay down their arms and come into the political process and contest in the arena of elections is welcome to do so. And I think that would include the Sadrist trend. But I don't know what to make of Muqtada's statements except they keep being issued from Iran, not from Iraq.

Yes.

QUESTION: Secretary, Erica Goode from *New York Times*. I was curious what your analysis was of why the Sadrists in Basra stepped down at some point, whether you thought it had to do with the elections, and also, why there's been, you know, such a stark difference between Basra and Sadr City.

And then secondly, I wondered what the plans are for Sadr City. How long do you think American troops are going to be, you know, in Sadr City on the ground doing what they're doing? What are the goals there?

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah. Well, the goals in general -- and it doesn't relate just to Sadr City or to Basra, but the goal in general really is a goal set by the Iraqis, which is that they want the entire country to be a place where the legitimate security forces of Iraq are in control, not militias. I think they understand, and this speaks both to what they've done in Basra and what I hope they will do in Sadr City. They understand that the populations in these places have very often been subject to militia control, but that when the government reestablishes control they have to reach out with reconstruction assistance and economic assistance to their own people. And I think that it's just a classical counterinsurgency, in that sense; you have to help defeat the extremists, but you also have to give people a better lease on life and better prospect on life. And so I heard a lot today about the \$350 million reconstruction package. I think it's 100 million for Basra, 100 million for --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: 100 million for Sadr City.

SECRETARY RICE: -- for Sadr City, and then 50 million for Shula. And so that's how I think this will go. But I can't really -- look, I think it's going to take a while to really analyze what happened in Basra as well as what's happening in Sadr City. But clearly, the strategy, I think, is the same, which is that these are places that should be held by the security of the Iraqi security forces, not by militias.

QUESTION: There have been attempts -- I'm sorry. There have been attempts to do reconstruction in Sadr City before that have not been particularly successful. Can you talk about why you think this attempt is different and --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I do think that as the -- it probably is going to take some time. And as I understand it, they can't think of it as one -- as one task, but there are several different parts of Sadr City that have different configurations in terms of the strength of the militias. And so they're going to go at it carefully. But I do think that it has a better chance this time because you actually have enough security forces to begin to provide population security, which I think in the past there have been attempts to have reconstruction but they've usually been reversed by further outbreaks in violence. And so I think this is a more classical case of trying first to clear, and then to hold and build.

Yes.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you mentioned earlier that -- on the plane on the way over here that you were looking at this visit as an opportunity to take advantage of some of the progress that has been made and figure out ways of moving it forward and supporting it. Did you find -- did you think of anything? Did anything new come up today (inaudible) that could be (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah. Well, really, I did have an opportunity to review with the Iraqi leaders where they are trying to go in terms of getting the elections arranged. They have a very good relationship with the UN and also with our election experts, and that work is proceeding because I think they know the provincial elections need to be held before October 1, as has been the announcement.

We talked also about the reconstruction package that they are putting forward, because what is happening is that Iraqis are now taking the lead in terms of the funding of reconstruction. The United States played the major role for many years, but now Iraqis who have resource are spending those resources. And that's going to have to accelerate, and we will try to help them do that.

The final point I would make is I did get quite a lot of advice about the meetings in Bahrain and Kuwait, that Iraqi leaders believe that they have made some tough choices and some tough decisions, and they want that acknowledged and they want to move forward with their Arab neighbors. And I think everybody is very glad that Iraq is going to be represented at the GCC plus 2, plus Iraq, so it'll now be GCC plus -- let's see, Jordan, plus Egypt, plus Iraq, plus the United States, so it's getting to be a bigger and bigger group. But it's clear that they believe, and I agree with them, that Iraq, really now starting to find its footing internally, needs to have neighbors that are helping it to find its footing inside the Arab world.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, did you talk at all today about the strategic framework agreement? And I know when Ambassador Satterfield testified last week, and I think also when you testified, the question was whether the Iraqis were going to submit the agreement for a vote in their own parliament. And my understanding is that the Foreign Minister said last weekend that, yes, they are. And I wondered if that has caused you to think any more about whether this is something that should be submitted to the American parliament. And also, if you could just give us a little bit of an update if that's something you talked about.

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah, we talked mostly about what I would call technical matters, how the committee is going to relate to one another, nothing particularly substantive on that.

But look, I think there are a few pieces to this. One is a strategic framework agreement, which I think is a kind of statement of political and economic and other cultural, scientific intent for the way that the relationship will go forward. We have a similar agreement with Afghanistan, for instance. And I don't think that there's anything in it that's binding in the way that one would expect, for instance, a treaty to be and therefore need to be submitted to Congress.

When it comes to the SOFA, we've done many, many -- you know, tens of SOFAs around the world, and that's simply a way for our forces to continue to operate legally in Iraq after the Chapter 7 resolution goes away. The one thing the Iraqis did talk about today is they reiterated their firm intention to have the Chapter 7 resolution not be rolled over again, which means we do have to complete the SOFA. It's -- it also is not something that commits the next president to troop levels or anything of the like, but it is a way for our forces to operate legally. And again, those are not documents that are submitted to Congress.

QUESTION: If I could just follow up on that, one of the things that came up on both sides of the aisle in Congress over the last two weeks -- and there was some intention expressed to have some kind of legislation on this -- was asking the United Nations to extend the mandate for three months or six months or something like that. Did -- was that --

SECRETARY RICE: I'll tell you, the Iraqis are firmly against it. And frankly, I think it's time to move on from the UN Security Council resolution. This is becoming a normal country. It's a country that ought to be building state-to-state relations. And the Chapter 7 resolution -- resolutions carry other elements that also need to be gotten rid of. So I am strongly -- we're all strongly in favor of not having to have a rollover, if at all possible.

QUESTION: In your talks with leaders today, did they talk about inducements with you to get the Arabs here, what more could be done to get an Arab --

SECRETARY RICE: I'm sorry. What?

QUESTION: Did they talk about ways to get Arabs -- Arab diplomatic presence here?

SECRETARY RICE: No, we talked more about the -- how the neighbors, who are not represented here, could begin better to understand what is going on here. And I think it's extremely important that Iraq's neighbors, who have been saying that the government needs to behave in a nonsectarian fashion and go after Shia militia, takes note of the fact that that is precisely what has happened in Basra.

And so the discussion that I hope to have tomorrow at the GCC plus Egypt and Jordan, with the help of the Iraqi Foreign Minister, is to have a real clear look at what is really going on here. This is not the Iraq of the Sharm el-Sheikh neighbors conference. This is not the Iraq of the Istanbul neighbors conference. And I think adjustments are going to have to be made in the way that Iraq's neighbors think about it and deal with it.

QUESTION: What I wanted to ask you about was -- I mean, with the Sadr movement and the Mahdi army, do you -- when one talks to the Sadrist and with others -- Westerners and people working for diplomacy -- is the fact that with the election some believe that the government, which is two major Shiite parties that are rivals of the Sadr movement, there is concern that the campaigns right now in many ways could be used to weaken the Sadr movement, that it's not just strictly -- I mean, clearly they're in Basra, law and order is being brought, but -- and beyond that there is a real question brought up by many people about whether or not there is a danger here that this is also -- it's a fight for the new COR, what comes next in Iraq, and it's not just about law and order but about Shiite political parties that have -- that have had rifts or feuds over a long period of time, SCIRI-HSCI versus the Sadrists. I'm curious as to both yours and the Ambassador's thought on that.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, perhaps I should have the Ambassador start since he follows these things very closely, but let me just tell you my sense of it. First of all, I didn't hear anybody say that the Sadrist trend, which is -- you know, was elected, shouldn't try again to get the votes of the Iraqi people, as long as they're prepared to do it not armed. That was -- that militias need to break up. Eventually, all armed force has to be under the state, and that's true for any society, any democratic society.

Now, the Jaish al-Mahdi, and particularly the special groups, have the following characteristics. You're right; they've completely practically destroyed law and order in Basra; and somebody had to deal with that, and so the Iraqi security forces are dealing with that.

QUESTION: One follow-up --

SECRETARY RICE: They're armed -- well, let me just finish here. I think you will see, and we're getting evidence every day, of the arming of these forces by Iran. And I don't think it was for purposes of self-defense. It is also the case that you've seen attacks even on the Green Zone that have emerged from this -- from these forces. And so at some point, somebody had to deal with the security situation that they had caused. And that's what it seems to me what they did in Basra.

Do you want to add anything, Ryan, to that?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I think that's exactly right. Iraq is at the point in its development where the events of Basra and Baghdad are the state asserting its authority against an extralegal or illegal militia. That's certainly how Iraqis broadly are viewing this, and in that sense it is a defining event. The politics of Iraq will go on. The competition between the Supreme Council and Dawa and the Sadr trend and Fadhila just to name a few on the Shia side, that's going to be part of the political landscape and that's what elections are all about.

What I think you're seeing here is something fundamentally different. It is the state asserting itself against those who would attack the state in Basra, at the same time they're doing a very similar operation up in Mosul against extremist Sunnis and al-Qaida. That's how I frame this. And I think in that sense it is a -- it really is a defining (inaudible).

QUESTION: One follow-up. Well, the one thing I wondered, or that critics might say, and that's why I ask this, is that up through -- well, in February, Sadr renewed his ceasefire. And then obviously the Mahdi army is a divided organization, disorganized to begin with, but that in some ways if Sadr himself -- and some think that there

were elements in the Mahdi army who were trying to reform and get rid of the special groups, the Iranian-backed cells, they themselves were bothered by the fact this operation in many ways empowered more radical elements. And that's the one thing.

The other thing I just wanted to ask is what is the distinction that all of you make between groups like the Badr Organization, which has for all intents a militia and in the past has been involved in events here that have been troublesome, even in 2005, 2006, not at the same level as the Jaish al-Mahdi, but clearly involved? So what's the distinction you make between the Badr Organization? Why are they now different to the Jaish al-Mahdi?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: The Badr organization made the choice a while back that they were going to step away from a militia identity and move into politics. That's why it's the Badr Organization. It used to be the Badr Brigades. They have opted to be, again, part of mainstream politics here. That's the choice that's now in front of the Sadr movement.

QUESTION: When would you say that they really changed to that? Because in 2005, there was the Jadriya bunker incident which was clearly linked to the --

SECRETARY RICE: We're three years past that. And --

QUESTION: So when was the transition? In 2007, there was a case of a member of the Badr Organization threatening Hussein Kamal when he was here --

SECRETARY RICE: Look, I don't think you can say that there won't be an individual here or there who may break this -- that decision to move in that direction. But Badr as an organization has decided to be an organization, not to be a militia.

Jaish al-Mahdi has taken a quite different turn. And we're not talking about just criminal gangs. We're talking about a regime of extortion, for instance, at the port, at Um Qasr, that is -- that was known across the world. So this was a level of lawlessness in Basra that had to be taken care of. It doesn't mean that there don't remain things to be done. It doesn't mean that there may not be those who still have to be convinced to join the political movement. It certainly doesn't mean the end of politics. I mean, the advantage to a democratic political system anticipating provincial elections is that people can begin to organize themselves to contest in the elections, not contest in the streets. So that is -- that is all there.

But I think that the special groups, which clearly are the most violent of the elements, but Jaish al-Mahdi as a militia, the kinds of things that they were doing in Basra and at Um Qasr were very well known, and it had to be dealt with.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, there's been a lot of just -- I'm sorry.

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah -- yes?

QUESTION: I just wanted to just follow up on a question I asked you before about the distinction between what we've seen with the Sadrists in Basra, where there was, at some point, some kind of indication that there was going to be a stepping down and things did seem to quiet down after that. And so, number one, how that relates to elections; is this -- the Sadrists sort of, you know, trying to make sure that it can participate in elections? And what is the difference between what -- the decision, the actions set aside (inaudible) in Basra and what's going on now in Sadr City? Do you see -- Ambassador, Madame Secretary, do you see differences between -- can you outline what you see as the differences between them?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I'll start with one -- one similarity that goes back to my earlier comments. The Prime Minister, Iraqi Government, the broad political leadership since the Basra and Baghdad events that began last month have been unified in the view that the time has come for an end to militia presence. We heard that again today from the whole leadership spectrum and that's a similarity. You know, how this will proceed further in Basra, in Baghdad, Sadr City, Shula, Kadumiya, I can't predict. The Iraqis are in the lead on this.

What is clear is their determination that, at the end of the day, it will be an end of the militia era in Iraq. And again, that's -- that is broadly supported and you saw that in the political council of national security meeting on the 5th of April, which Iraq's entire political leadership would be accepted and the Sadrists signed onto a statement that said enough, an end to militias. That was the theme in Friday's sermons down in Najaf, that power -- legitimate power can rest only in the hands of the government.

So, again, how long it will take and how it will progress, I can't tell you. What decisions the Sadr trend and Jaish al-Mahdi will take in different places, I can't -- I can't predict either. But there is a clearer determination that I think links the fights wherever they are: Baghdad, Basra, or, again, in Mosul for that matter.

QUESTION: And are you saying, then, that they made clear the intention on the part of the Iraqi Government to follow through to the end on this, as long as it takes to have Jaish al-Mahdi or anyone else who has a militia, that (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I think that is the clear intention. That's why I think what we're seeing during this interval is of real importance. It is -- Iraq has been through a lot over the last five years. I think we're now seeing an Iraq that has the will, the unity and the ability to say: We're done with the militia (inaudible).

QUESTION: The Bush Administration has blamed a lot of this fighting on Iran, but we haven't heard similar public blame from the Iraqi Government. Did you discuss this in your talks and would you expect them to be more outspoken since they're the ones that have a relationship with Iran, not us?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I am less concerned about how outspoken people are. I'm only concerned that people are acting on the basis of the -- what is actually happening, and that means that we make information available to the Iraqis and to others, as a matter of fact, publicly, about what the Iranians are doing.

Now, I think we have to remember, and this was emphasized several times to me today, that Iraqis are, first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth, Iraqis. Whether they are Sunni or Shia, they are Iraqis. And so the sometimes implication that -- not in your question here, but when people -- we hear it, for instance, sometimes in the neighborhood that because this is a Shia majority government, it would necessarily have strong links with Iran that would allow Iran to play a nontransparent role for influence in this country, I think, is just not borne out. This is a country of -- the Shia are nationalists, they're Arab nationalists. And so I do hear expressions of concern about any neighbor that is, so to speak, meddling in the affairs of Iraq.

And what we have made available to everybody who will look is the clear evidence of Iranian training and equipping of militias and, by extension, special groups that are costing the lives not only of coalition forces, but of innocent Iraqis. And I think that that is an argument that Iraqis understand.

QUESTION: But did this Iraqi Government share your view that Iran is a principal, if not the principal cause of this?

SECRETARY RICE: I think there's a lot of concern about their neighbors.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, following up on what you said on reconstruction, there was a lot of discussion in Congress, certainly when you testified, that's why I know you've been hearing it too, (inaudible) about there being a budget surplus in Iraq while the U.S. is spending, what it is. Did you discuss that concern in particular today? And what's your view of the emerging call -- this is on the Democratic side -- to attach some strings to the next 108 billion?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't think we're going to have to attach -- attach strings. I don't disagree with the idea that Iraqis ought to, given their own situation, their own

financial situation that they ought to be bearing more of the costs, indeed, the – most of the cost for certain kinds of activities. I believe they're now spending – outspending us in reconstruction 10 to 1 and I think that number's only going to go up over time. And the funding that we are providing, for instance, through the State Department, would provide – through the State Department request goes principally to capacity-building so that they can actually spend the money effectively. It goes to our PRTs to be able to do, kind of, quick-acting projects in support of our counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts. So it's a sort of civilian card of the counterinsurgency effort accompanying General Petraeus's forces. There is some funding in there for governance and democracy programs of the kind that we run in new democracies around the world.

But we're essentially out of the reconstruction business and we don't have any intention to get back in. The Iraqis also are bearing more and more of the cost of their security forces and actually beginning to buy their own equipment. And so I think as they become more capable of actually executing their budgets, which is something we're working with them very hard on, you're going to see them bearing most of these costs.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay.

QUESTION: Are they aware of the level of discontent with – that it's taken this long?

SECRETARY RICE: They are certainly aware that all of us believe that Iraq ought to be – ought to be bearing these costs, but I – again, this is a country that's been through a lot in five years. I think it's remarkable what they have achieved. And this is a country that was left with essentially no ministries that were able to execute anything and it takes some time to do that.

MR. MCCORMACK: All right, last question.

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, yes.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) Madame Secretary, this is intended for Ambassador Crocker as well. With this threat of open war by Sadr, what is his capability? What do you assess – what, in your minds what's he planning for, fighting, or what is he capable of doing around the country in terms of a threat? Is it in terms of fighting? Is it major – is he weaker now? Does he pose the same kinds of threat in terms of his force, his fighting, like he did in 2004 (inaudible) described by the (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: There is – there are a number of important differences, obviously, between '04, '05 and now. And one of them is a far stronger Iraqi state and a far more unified Iraqi state, but another is the change in popular attitudes. I think as the state has strengthened and as we have shown that – through the surge that we're a partner who can be counted on, you've seen a popular rejection of militias: Sunnis against al-Qaida and al-Qaida supporters, but also the Shia against Jaish al-Mahdi extremists. That was the story of Karbala last August that led to the announcement by Sadr of the ceasefire.

I felt at the time and I still believe that he did that because he realized that these actions were extremely unpopular. There was a public backlash against it and I think you're seeing very much of the same thing right now. And that, I think, obviously, has to limit his options, that it's not just the state asserting itself against extralegal militias. It's Iraqi people saying: We don't want this anymore. So I don't think he has a context in which he is going to be able to operate at all with the kind of freedom we've seen – we've seen in the past.

As to his capabilities and so on in the operation yesterday in Basra, enormous caches of Iranian-supplied arms that were picked up which Jaish al-Mahdi didn't – was unable or unwilling to do then. And I would think that their capabilities are certainly less than they used to be, but I think the context is perhaps more important than that. This is just not an environment in which people are going to get behind a militia anymore.

QUESTION: You seem to be portraying it as a not very disciplined force involved in criminal gangs. You were in Lebanon. It doesn't look like it compares, from your view, to, say, Lebanon's Hezbollah, which is much more motivated, much more disciplined. Is that how you see it?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yeah, I actually haven't spent a lot of time with either Hezbollah or Jaish al-Mahdi, so I can't pretend to understand their order of battle to integrate (inaudible) but I think clearly, Jaish al-Mahdi is a more disorganized, less cohesive force than Hezbollah is going to be.

MR. MCCORMACK: All right. Thanks, guys.

SECRETARY RICE: Thanks, everybody. Bye bye.

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 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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