



Briefing on Recent Developments In Iraq

Amb. Ryan C. Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq
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MR. CASEY: Boy, that's a full briefing room. How about that? Well, I could say we have the man who needs no introduction, but I'll give him an introduction anyway. We're very pleased to have with us this morning Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who's back on some consultations from Baghdad. We wanted to give him an opportunity to give you a little bit of an update on the situation there and give you a chance to ask your questions to him, rather than to us, about all the things going on in Iraq today. So let me just turn the podium over to Ryan and get started.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thank you, Tom, and good morning to everyone. I wonder how full the room would be if we had done this at 8:30 – (laughter) – which was my first proposal. I think --

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: You would have just spent the night here, eh? I really don't have an opening statement, nor do you need one. I'd just like to talk about whatever is on your mind.

Anne.

QUESTION: The Status of Forces Agreement negotiation and the Framework Agreement that goes with it, do you have a deadline in your own mind for when you want those things done? And to what extent do you feel any pressure from the U.S. political calendar to get it done and get it done early?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Like a number of things that we're dealing with in Iraq, my focus on this is more on getting it done right than getting it done quick. That said, the Iraqis have made clear they do not want to go beyond 2008 under a Chapter 7 Security Council resolution, so there's a clear deadline there. And both governments have also been clear that we would like to get the Strategic Framework Agreement done as early as we reasonably can. We've set the end of July as a notional date, and we're certainly going to try to meet that.

QUESTION: Does that – but the political element of it – do you feel any, you know, pressure to get the elements of everything done before the election, as opposed to before the end of the year?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, I've kind of got my focus on the Iraqi environment. I'm not really keyed to the American political calendar.

QUESTION: What's the political – can you gauge the political reaction and opposition to these agreements that are in the works right now in Iraq, and how it would affect Iraq's future and their political situation there?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: There has been a lot of debate. Certainly, one of the indicators that it is a new Iraq with Iraqis across the political spectrum expressing views on the negotiation and the agreement.

It is an important endeavor. Not only will this agreement deal with the status of U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq past 2008, we also intend for it to set the broad parameters of the overall bilateral relationship in every field – political, diplomatic, economic, cultural – the whole totality of the relationship. So it is an important negotiation and these will be important agreements.

But in terms of some of the criticism, particularly from the neighbors, Iran in particular, I think this is, you know, deliberately intended to make the negotiation difficult. There are a couple of guidelines that we're committed to as we proceed with this. One of them is full respect for Iraqi sovereignty. This whole exercise of moving from a Chapter 7 UN mandate to a bilateral agreement between sovereign countries is intended to reaffirm Iraq's full sovereignty. That's what guides us, and it certainly guides them. There isn't going to be an agreement that infringes on Iraq's sovereignty; the Iraqis are not going to accept it. And frankly, we wouldn't want it. If this is going to endure, as it must, it has to have the full support not only of the Iraqi Government but also the Iraqi people.

Yeah.

QUESTION: The *London Independent* reports today that there's a sort of a secret plan in the works in terms of this agreement and that you want to have 50 permanent military bases, control of Iraqi air space, and legal immunity for all American soldiers and contractors. Is this what you're looking for?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, as a matter of fact, it is not. (Laughter.) There are just a couple of things that aren't quite right about that story. First, there aren't going to be any secret provisions, attachments, protocols or whatever. This will be a transparent process. The Iraqi system requires that the agreement go before their council of representatives. It will have a full debate. It will all be out there in the open. Again, it's a negotiation in progress, so I can't tell you what it's going to look like at the end, but I can tell you that we are not seeking permanent military bases in Iraq. That is just flatly untrue. Nor are we seeking to control Iraqi airspace. That is another kind of enduring myth. Iraq is working hard at developing its air traffic control capacities, and as it does, we're handing over increasing responsibility to them.

With respect to the other issues, again, we've got something like 80 Status of Forces Agreements around the world. They deal with issues like jurisdiction. We expect to approach the jurisdiction issue here, just as we have in those other cases.

QUESTION: What about the issue of immunity, though, for contractors? I mean, this has been a big issue, especially with Blackwater and other issues that have emerged?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, this will all be part of the negotiations and that's in train and, you know, I can't really give you a sitrep as we go through it.

QUESTION: But is that what you'd like, though, immunity for contractors?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, again, the question of jurisdiction and immunity is part of any negotiation like this in 78 other countries and in Iraq.

QUESTION: Can you tell us --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Sorry. Let me get off the front row here.

Yes.

QUESTION: When you were here last time during your testimony and when you spoke with reporters, both you and General Petraeus seem to suggest that Iran was increasing its meddling in Iraq while, maybe that there was a dip for some time in the IEDs that there was a kind of tone that Iran was increasing its -- trying to increase its influence and malevolent behavior in Iraq. And I was wondering if you could talk about where you think Iran stands in Iraq, not only in terms of IEDs coming in that, perhaps, were in Iraq, but support for militias like the JAM and other things like that.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, that -- that was one of the -- the revelations, if you will, of the March-April confrontations between Iraqi security forces and Jaish al-Mahdi, both in Basra and in Baghdad, because that put into pretty sharp relief what we had believed was the case all along that Iran is directly supporting extralegal militias such as Jaish al-Mahdi. The weaponry they were using had its origins in Iran. It is clear that the Iranians were providing training to the Jaish al-Mahdi militia as well as funding.

I think actually it was good that that did get out in the open. Iraqis were able to see it, as well as the rest of the world. That produced a fairly substantial backlash in Iraqi public opinion against Iran among Shia Iraqis, as well as Sunnis. And one would hope that that will lead to a rethinking in Iran as to what its long-term policy toward Iraq should be -- to support a democratically elected central government or to support militias that are aligned against that government. I don't think Iran can really have it both ways. And most importantly here, that's -- it's not a U.S. position, it's what Iraqis themselves are saying. And it would behoove the Iranians, I think, to listen carefully to that, if they're interested in the long-term stability of their relationship with Iraq and with the region.

QUESTION: Where -- can I just quickly follow up, Ryan? Where do things stand with the next round of talks with the Iranians? Have they refused to give you a date? Is it scheduling? Do you anticipate another set of talks?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: The channel remains open. We certainly, from our side, have not taken the possibility of another round of talks off the table. But we would have to consider the circumstances and the objectives, I think, before we reengage.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Can you just give a big-picture assessment of where things stand right now in Iraq? Obviously, we've seen security improvements, but political, economic. What kind of an Iraq do you think you'll be leaving behind when you leave? And by the way, what is your last day on the job?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: (Laughter.) Well, I'll start with the last first. I don't have a last day on the job set. I have said that I would expect to leave early in 2009. But again, one thing I've learned in my 15 months in Iraq is you want to be a little careful about setting future concrete deadlines, including on one's own --

QUESTION: (Inaudible)

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Exit strategies are really tough. (Laughter.) So we're going to stay a little bit loose on that.

In terms of where Iraq is, it has been a very interesting period. And I was just reflecting on that recently, coming out of the Stockholm International Compact conference last week and listening to the speakers and seeing what a difference has taken place in Iraq over the 13 months since we launched the International Compact at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt.

You have what you might almost call a virtuous circle going on. And if you just wanted to pick a point, last spring in Anbar, as the citizens of Anbar, the tribes in particular, took their stance against al-Qaida, saying they had had enough of this foreign ideology, the violence, the brutality, and those that had been fighting against the U.S. and Iraqi forces were suddenly with us. That carried on into Baghdad. And as it did so, you started to see a change in Shia opinion. As al-Qaida was run out of Sunni neighborhoods, by Sunnis in many cases, Shia started asking questions about exactly why they needed Shia militias around running their affairs.

And you begin to see an erosion of support for Jaish al-Mahdi. And that crystallized, I think, at the end of August in Karbala when, you might remember, there was an effort by Jaish al-Mahdi to take control of the shrines. It left about 50 people dead and produced a significant backlash against Jaish al-Mahdi that precipitated Muqtada al-Sadr's call for a freezing of operations. He did that, in my view, because he could see that while, at one point, militia assertiveness may have attracted support, in this changing climate, it was having the opposite effect.

That kind of shift in opinion broadly among Iraqis against a backdrop of diminishing violence changed the political climate. And it's -- you know, it's no coincidence that you finally begin to see movement toward the end of the year and carrying on into the winter and spring of this year legislative achievements in the Council of Representatives that they just could not get to in the previous climate. There -- the diminishment of violence led to an improved climate across sectarian lines, which led to inability of Council of Representatives members to start to make the tradeoffs that produced the kinds of legislative achievements that we saw January, February and March with the amnesty, provincial powers, the budget. These were classic political deals and it was that changed climate that made it possible.

The other development that we saw, of course, was an increasing capability of the Iraqi Government and Iraqi security forces. And that -- that we saw play out, of course, in Baghdad, in Basra in the south, and in Mosul over the last few months. These operations may not be textbook teaching examples for the National War College, but they were put together and executed by the Iraqis themselves. And they produced results, which we saw most dramatically, I think, in Basra. And then those results, both in terms of capability and who the targets were, extremist Shia, gave you a full (inaudible) turn on the political circle, as Sunnis looked at the Maliki government in a new light. And that has produced rapprochement, for example, between the Prime Minister and Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi there, now negotiating the return of Tawafiq to the government and, in the interim, working quite closely together on issues such as strategies for Mosul.

And then a final point I'd make -- and aren't you glad you asked that question so I could give you a 15-minute answer -- is that it is starting to have an impact in the international community and, most importantly, in the region. Again, the tenor of the statements at Stockholm dramatically different than what we heard the previous year. And in the region, we're starting to see some movement, too, on the part of Iraq's Arab neighbors. The Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates is in Baghdad right now and has just announced that they are returning an ambassador and reopening their Embassy. You know, this reflects, I think, an appreciation on the part of the Arabs that things are different in Iraq, both in security terms and in political terms.

Now the challenge is keeping this all going. And there will be challenges, indeed, with that. We've got some important steps coming up in not only own bilateral negotiations, but also events like the provincial elections, which I think are going to be extremely important in Iraq's development as a stable representative democracy, particularly in light of the boycotts that took place during the last provincial election. So, again, lots to be done, but I think we've seen some pretty important progress and it links and reinforces.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Do you have any comment about the reports about the joint military action between Iran and Turkey in the Kurdish part of Iraq? And my second question is: There was talks about reshaping the Maliki government; do you know where we are on this track?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: On the former, I'm – I haven't seen the reports of the – of joint action. Both Iran and Turkey obviously have an issue with the PKK organization and its affiliates, but – and we have seen reports from time to time of both Iran and Turkey executing cross-border operations, but I'm not aware of any joint activity.

In terms of reshaping the Maliki government, as I noted just a moment ago, we understand that talks are underway between the Prime Minister and his team on one side, and the Tawafiq coalition of Adnan Dulaimi and Tariq al-Hashimi on the other, concerning the return of Tawafiq to government. Where that exactly stands, I don't know. But I do know there have been some very serious discussions to bring the Sunni alliance back into the cabinet.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Two questions. What would be the impact of a Sadrist victory in the provincial elections in some of these places? Would that pose a new challenge for the Maliki government?

And the other question is about the talks with the Iranians. There are some Iranian officials who say that one of the reasons they have been not so eager to have another round of talks is the public comments that came out from U.S. officials after the talks, including yourself, afterwards, basically saying, you know, belligerent or tough talk. What's your reaction to that?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, on the latter, again, the last round of talks we had were, I don't know, end of August. I think it was the end of August. Subsequent to that, the Iraqis made efforts to reschedule talks. We said we were ready. The Iranians said at various points they were, and then they weren't, and then they were again, and then it couldn't be X date, it had to be Y date. So we spent a couple of months going around in those particular circles, and during these discussions I do not recall hearing either publicly or via the Iraqis from the Iranians that they had a problem with our public statements after the last round. So I think this would be more than slightly revisionist if that's what they're putting out now. I also recall that we weren't the only ones having press conferences after the talks. My Iranian colleague was out there pitching, too, so I really don't think that's the issue.

With respect to the elections, again, I think the important thing is to have them. There are a lot of imbalances politically now in Iraq, a lot of groups asserting that they are not adequately represented. The only way you deal with those things in a democracy is to have elections and see what the people think. Now, I can't speculate as to what the outcome of those elections would be, except to say that given the – kind of the public climate in Iraq right now, having a militia on your ticket is not exactly a formula for broad popular support.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Can I ask you, from your discussions, what is the mood among Iraqi leadership about the U.S. election and the debate going on about Iraq right now? Are they nervous about a change of leadership? Are they anxious? And do they have a preference for one candidate over the other?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I haven't really had any detailed discussions with the Iraqis on that. Were they to bring it up, I would probably accuse them of outrageous interference in our domestic affairs. (Laughter.)

You know, I think they look to the United States broadly as a good friend and ally. That's the spirit that underlies the negotiations between us on both sides. And I think they're obviously watching our political process. But I think the broad expectation among Iraqis is that the United States has stood by them and will continue to stand by them.

QUESTION: Well, but just to quickly follow up without mentioning any candidate or anything like that, I mean, obviously there is a concern among Iraqis that should one candidate be elected president, U.S. troops will be withdrawn precipitously. I mean, that must be a huge concern to them.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, these are not concerns that they're voicing to me, probably because they know that I'm not going to be the one to entertain them. But although Iraq hasn't been a democracy very long, I think they look at their own debates as they look at ours, and recognize that politics in a democratic society, whatever society it is, is a contact sport; that you've got to appreciate and support that because it's the essence of democracy. But policies are set by administrations, and there's one administration at a time.

Yeah, in the back.

QUESTION: I wanted to go back to the SOFA that you just talked about, no permanent bases, but some Iraqis have said that the U.S. is seeking 50 long-term military bases. I mean, is this just a play on words here?

And then secondly, why do you think there's so much public opposition in Iraq now to this SOFA negotiation?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, this will be a serious negotiation and there aren't going to be any efforts to play around with words on this, precisely for the reasons I said. It is going to be a fully transparent process. This agreement will be scrutinized by the Iraqi parliament as well as Iraqi public opinion, and this therefore has to be a very straightforward process.

Again, in terms of U.S. and coalition military presence, clearly there is going to be a need for that beyond the end of the year. I would anticipate, though, that like many other agreements, that this agreement, when concluded, is going to have a review provision, that it is not going to be forever, particularly as it relates to the status and authority of coalition forces in Iraq.

So I'm very comfortable saying to you, to the Iraqis, to anyone who asks, that no, indeed, we are not seeking permanent bases either explicitly or implicitly by just intending to stay there indefinitely. Iraq mid-2008 is a very different Iraq in terms of its capabilities than Iraq a year ago, and I expect that Iraq 2009 will be far further advanced. And again, the more Iraqis are able to do in terms of their own security, the less requirement there is for outside support. That's what Iraqis want and that's what we want.

Yeah.

QUESTION: You mentioned, of course, it's the preference of both governments to get this done this year and that your notional date is July. But would it be – and of course, the UN mandate is expiring. Would it be so calamitous to put this off until next year so that the next U.S. government would negotiate this?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: The Iraqis took the position last summer and fall in a leadership declaration at the end of August, then in a declaration of principles that was signed by Prime Minister Maliki, other Iraqi leaders and President Bush, and finally with the renewal of the Security Council resolution in December – all three occasions, Iraqi leadership said we do not want another Chapter 7 resolution.

And we have said that we support them in this. This is an Iraqi position that they, desiring to assert their full sovereignty, believe that now is the time to come out from under a resolution. And you know, that's their position. We support it. And that's why we're having a negotiation now to have something in place by the time the resolution does expire.

Yeah.

MR. CASEY: We'll just do a couple more and then finish up here.

QUESTION: Okay. Can you tell us just a little bit about your visit to the U.S. right now? Was there any particular purpose? And what sort of meetings are you intending to have? And also, do you still expect the elections to be delayed until November, or is there a different timeframe at this point?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, as Tom said, I'm back on consultations here in this building. I've been over to the White House. But I have to confess, there's more to it than all that. I'm actually going to go out this weekend and see my mother in Spokane, Washington. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Was there a second part of that question?

QUESTION: The dates of the election.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: In terms of election dates, again, this will be up to the Iraqis. The Council of Representatives set an aspirational date when it passed the provincial powers law in February of October 1st. My understanding of their system is that that is not a binding date. The elections law currently under discussion will probably have a provision that requires the government to set a date 60 days in advance of the election.

So Iraqi leaders say they would like to have those elections by October 1st. As I said in a different context earlier, I think – and I hear this from Iraqis as well – once again, it's more important to get this right than it is to get it in a hurry. And there are a lot of complex issues that still have to be worked through, for example, on the system for elections. They want to move away from the closed list system of the last elections to some type of open list system. This is much more complex, both for parties, candidates, and for voters. So they've got to figure all of that out. They've got to work through issues of female and minority representation. So I can't say exactly when it will be. Iraqis say they'd like it by October 1st. There is a very strong commitment, just across the board, to get these elections done sometime this fall.

MR. CASEY: Charlie, why don't we make this the last one.

QUESTION: Okay. Ryan, can you talk about Prime Minister Maliki's trip to Tehran -- I've lost track whether he's there or going there later this week, and whether the U.S. encouraged that, what you – what he has told you or they've told you that he expects out of them?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I think the Prime Minister is traveling on Saturday. Iran and Iraq are neighbors. They clearly have to conduct a relationship. The question is: What kind of relationship is it going to be? And we talked a little bit about that before. I think the Prime Minister is going to be clear that he expects the relationship to be conducted on a state-to-state basis. And again, he doesn't need any prompting or encouragement from us on this. He was the one who was down in Basra literally leading Iraqi operations and, while doing so, having Iranian-made rockets bouncing off the Basra palace where he had set up his headquarters.

MR. CASEY: Thanks, guys.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Okay. Thank you all. Everybody, back to bed. (Laughter.)

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