



Remarks With Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Baghdad, Iraq
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FOREIGN MINISTER ZEBARI: (Inaudible.)

I would like first to warmly welcome again Secretary Rice here in Baghdad. It's always a pleasure to see you. We know you have so many other preoccupations, but thank you for making the time to visit us.

We had a very good meeting with Secretary Rice. We discussed a number of regional Iraqi internal issues, and also we discussed the strategic framework agreement. That there has been a great deal of progress, in fact. Secretary Rice meeting this morning with the Prime Minister was positive. And we are very close to finalize this important agreement for Iraq, for the region, and for the friendship and the partnership of Iraq and the United States.

Of course, again, I warmly welcome you, Secretary Rice, and I hope this will not be your last visit again, and to see you again. But you are mostly welcome, so thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you. Thank you very much, Minister Hoshiyar. Thank you very much for hosting me here. We have indeed had very good and fruitful discussions, including about the significant progress that Iraq is making and also the significant progress that you are making in connecting with your neighbors in very important ways. I want to congratulate you on the excellent visits of King Abdullah, of Foreign Minister bin Zayid of the UAE, and then just yesterday, of the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Siniora. Indeed, the program that you, as Foreign Minister, have outlined for reconnecting Iraq with the region is very successful, and congratulations on that.

We've had very good discussions on a number of other issues, including the strategic framework agreement. It is an important agreement to allow Iraq and the United States to continue the cooperation that we've begun to lay a foundation for future cooperation and to make certain that we solidify the significant gains that have been made in this country in the recent year. And so, thank you for your hard work on that. I did have very good meetings with the Prime Minister and with other leaders. And we look forward to moving forward to agreement.

Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER ZEBARI: Thank you.

MR. MCCORMACK: We have time for a couple questions. Let's start with Jonathan Landay.

QUESTION: Jonathan Landay with McClatchy Newspapers. Madame Secretary, to you, on the issue of immunity, will the United States ever agree to allow U.S. troops to be tried in Iraqi courts or is that non-negotiable?

And to you, Mr. Foreign Minister, you appear to be running out of time to conclude these agreements. You have to put it through your political and national security committee, your Parliament, and Ramadan falls early this year. What will you do if you can't get this done by December 31st? Thank you very much.

SECRETARY RICE: First of all, I'm not going to go into, obviously, the details of our negotiations. I think that would be inappropriate at this time. We are working together as partners to make certain that we cover the concerns of both parties for sovereignty for the Iraqi Government. No one is more pleased and happier to see the emergence of a sovereign, strong Iraqi Government than the United States.

And so everything that we will do in this agreement will fully respect that sovereignty. We will look at how the arrangements will go forward. We have a number of agreements around the world; this is not unknown to people – how to negotiate the status of various forces on the soil of a sovereign ally. And so the agreement will be in accordance with those principles.

FOREIGN MINISTER ZEBARI: Yeah, I would say in reply to your question, in fact, what we have accomplished in this agreement is the most advanced version of any SOFA or strategic agreement between the United States and any other country in the world. Because the U.S. negotiators indeed showed a great deal of flexibility and understanding. And this issue, as you know, is also a sensitive issue that deals with sovereignty, that deals with Iraqi interests, the stability in the region. That's why it has taken us a long time this time. We were hoping to conclude it much earlier. But because of the internal and dynamic politics also, really, it has taken us more time than we thought that (inaudible).

But again, as I said in my initial remarks, really we are very, very close to close this agreement. I think it would be in the interest of the Iraqi people of the region, and we said from the beginning that there is no hidden agenda here. I mean, this agreement finally would be presented to the Iraqi Representatives in the Council of Representatives, and also, people would be able to have a hard look at it.

Now, we are moving to present this draft to the Executive Council, which is an important body, in fact, to have their say on what the negotiators have done. So time is of essence, I agree with you, but really, we are redoubling our efforts to bring this to a final and a successful conclusion.

MR. MCCORMACK: Perhaps an Iraqi journalist?

SECRETARY RICE: There are several over there.

MR. MCCORMACK: Yes, sir.

QUESTION: (Via interpreter.) (Inaudible) newspaper of Iraq. Are there any pressures from Iran to delay a conclusion of this agreement?

FOREIGN MINISTER ZEBARI: (Via interpreter.) I think that a decision is a sovereign decision related to the elected constitutional Iraqi Government. The – Iran and the neighboring countries have the right to ask – or to ask for clarifications of some issues. But the – this agreement includes very clear languages, that – Iraq that will not be used as a base for aggression (inaudible) any aggressive acts against any neighboring country. We have carried this opinion to the Iranian officials very frankly.

SECRETARY RICE: A mike right there.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary and Mr. Minister, there are reports out today that you have agreed on a certain timetable for withdrawal, and that it includes some provision that for the number of troops to depend – the number of troops that are withdrawn and those that remain would depend on Iraqi needs. What can you tell us about that and what can you tell us about your position on that issue?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have always said that the roles, missions, and size of the American forces here, the coalition forces, was based on the conditions on the ground and what is needed. We have agreed that some goals, some aspirational timetables for how that might unfold are well worth having in such an agreement. Now, obviously, the American forces are here, coalition forces are here at the invitation of the Iraqi Government. It is a sovereign government.

What we're trying to do is to put together an agreement that protects our people, that respects Iraqi sovereignty, that allows us to lay the kind of foundation that we need for making certain that we complete the work that we've all sacrificed so greatly to see accomplished, and that work is being accomplished. But the goal is to have Iraqi forces responsible for the security of Iraq. That is the goal. It has been the goal from the very beginning.

And I have to say, if I could just make the point, the reason we are where we are today, talking about this kind of agreement, is that the surge worked, Iraqi forces have demonstrated that they are strong and getting stronger, we are making progress together in the defeat of Iraq's enemies of all stripes, and we can look forward to an agreement or we can look forward to a set of circumstances in which we know what is needed in the future in terms of roles, responsibilities, numbers. But this is a terrific basis from which to be proceeding, and that is the success that we have achieved. We're not sitting here talking about an agreement to try to get out of a bad situation. We're talking about an agreement that is going to build a firm foundation for building on the significant success that we've had together in the last year and it gives more and more responsibility to Iraqi forces. There are provinces here in which Iraqi forces are completely in control. They are by themselves. There will be more of those. And so this agreement is based on success.

FOREIGN MINISTER ZEBARI: I would just add really that this agreement determines the principal provisions, requirements to regulate the temporary presence and the time horizon, the mission of the U.S. forces. I mean, this is the scope of this agreement. So we are talking about time horizon. And this is a sign of confidence in the Iraqi military and security that they are overtaking more and more responsibility and they're showing more self-reliance and professionalism in combating terrorism and dealing with internal threats. So because the agreement has not been signed and finalized, really, won't be able -- at least I won't be able to give you any specific dates. But yes, indeed, we have discussed very seriously, negotiated about the time horizons that is important for us and for the U.S. forces.

QUESTION: (Via interpreter.) (Inaudible) forces that opposed the agreement, what if it has been sent to the (inaudible)? Would the American side be able to approve such amendments or is – would it be (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I can't speculate on the course here. We think it's a good agreement. We recognize that the government still has to review this agreement and the Iraqi Government in a number of fora. And we'll await that process, and then it obviously has to go to the Council of Representatives. But I am not going to speculate about the future. We think this is a very good agreement. As Hoshiyar has said, the United States has gone very far in this agreement. It is a very advanced SOFA. It's an advanced SOFA, and it's an advanced strategic framework agreement because this is a different kind of relationship, a different set of circumstances in – and we want it to be reflective of what is really needed.

So the United States, I think has shown great flexibility. I think the Iraqis have shown great flexibility. And this is an excellent – it will be an excellent agreement when we finally have agreement. And I just want to emphasize we'll have agreement when we have agreement. So all of those stories and rumors that are in the newspapers about what the agreement says probably ought to be disregarded until you see a final agreement. Not that you will, I just thought I would make the point in any case. (Laughter.)

Yeah, good. Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER ZEBARI: Okay.
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