

Iraq: Upcoming Elections for the Iraqi Council of Representatives

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MR. BAILY: Welcome to the Washington Foreign Press Center. This morning we have a briefing from Ambassador James Jeffrey, who is the Secretary's Special Advisor on Iraq. We'll be discussing this week's upcoming elections and other developments in Iraq.

Ambassador Jeffrey.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Thank you.

I'm going to be very brief in my opening remarks because, first of all, our Iraq policy has been laid out in great detail by the President, Secretary Rice and other people in the last week or so; and secondly, the elections that we're here to talk about today are an Iraqi event, they're being done by the Iraqis and the Iraqis are in the lead, as they should be, on this.

What I do want to do is to underline what an extraordinary event we're facing. The fact that we've already had two votes in the last year should not in any way reduce the significance of this vote. This is the first vote in Iraq under an Iraqi constitution. It's the first vote where we think the vast majority of the population, including the Sunni Arabs, will participate in large numbers compared to the January election. The Sunnis did participate in large numbers in the constitutional vote, of course. And we believe that with any luck, as this is a four-year term parliament, we will be seeing an Iraqi government that will be in place for a long period of time, presumably a large percentage of all of the four years, as it is in other parliamentary systems.

To review with you, you know that we went through a variety of short-term Iraqi governments of either an advisory nature under the CPA period, then the Iraqi Interim Government under Prime Minister Allawi, and now the Iraqi Transitional Government under Prime Minister Jafari. So the new government that comes in will have a much broader mandate because it will have, we believe, stronger and more pluralistic support



from the Iraqi people and it will have more authority from an Iraqi constitution and it will have a longer period of time.

Taken in conjunction with the progress that's being made on the military and security front that the President and others have indicated and the growing international support that we have seen in a variety of forums recently, from the United Nations rolling over the MNFI mandate to the Arab League Iraqi pre-meeting in Cairo that brought together various groups and will have another meeting in February or March in Iraq as well, we believe that the elections form a very strong political pillar of the path forward in Iraq.

Thank you very much.

MR. BAILY: We'll take questions. If you could identify your organization and state your name before your question. Here in the front row.

QUESTION: I'm Vladimir Kara-Murza of RTV1 Television, Russia. The first question is does the United States -- you already said it's an Iraqi affair. Just to clarify, does the United States back -- the U.S. Government back any particular list or candidate in this election?

And secondly, in theory, just to clarify, the U.S. Government's position, should the new elected government asked for U.S. troops to withdraw, will the U.S. troops withdraw?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Let me take the -- well, let me take the first question first. The U.S. has stated repeatedly and it is carrying out these instructions in the field as it did last year when I was out there, we support no specific democratic party or no specific democratic candidate. We support all parties and candidates who are willing to participate in the political process, just as we did in the constitutional vote. You'll remember we did not take a position on the vote. We took a position on whether to vote. And that is our position now. We want to see every Iraqi who is eligible to vote, vote. And we'll let the Iraqi people then decide who will be in the government that would be formed on the basis of that. They have to decide.

In terms of U.S. troop withdrawal, we have stated in the recent letter that Secretary Rice wrote and in the UN Security Council Resolution 1637 that the United States -- that the coalition would withdraw upon the request of the Iraqi Government. This is a UN Security Council decision. It is a decision that we have supported and, most importantly, that we would live up to, like all UN Security Council resolutions.

QUESTION: Mounzer Sleiman, Al Mustaqbal Al-Arabi. Over the weekend, there was an initiative was announced by a well respected Iraqi and an independent one from Beirut calling for the withdrawal of the forces from Iraq within six months and ceasefire. And it seems that this initiative enjoyed the approval of a wide range of people close to the resistance in addition to political parties in Iraq.

What's your reaction to this initiative by -- his name is Dr. Haradin Hassid. He used to be a central bank director in Iraq formerly and he was detained for a period of time in Iraq before he was expelled from there. And it seems to be that he enjoyed a wide range of support.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, I mean, these ideas come up from time to time. And you know, as a general rule, we evaluate wide ranges of support not on the basis of this group out of Beirut or that group out of London or some group out of New York, but on what a democratically elected parliament that reflects the people decides. We know what the current parliament's position is. We will see what the new parliament and the new government's decision is on this and many other issues.

Our position is clear. As I said, in line with and following the guidelines set by the UN Security Council resolution, we are in Iraq along with our coalition partners in order to provide security for the development of the political process -- one important element thereof is the elections -- until such time and only until such time as Iraqi security forces have stood up. We are putting particular emphasis on fighting transnational terrorists who have found an area of operations in Iraq -- that is, the Zarqawi-al-Qaida group -- and we are particularly concerned about that. As the President said, this is a group that must be defeated and we're on the way to doing that.

So that is our position and we will deal with the new Iraqi government, not with one or another group announcing things from some outside capital.

QUESTION: Can you give us some -- could you elaborate on the presence of foreign insurgents, terrorists or whatever you call them? Where are they coming from? Are they coming from some places, such places even as Britain? There was a statement -- I'm asking because there was a statement by an Iraqi Interior officer or something this morning in Baghdad about the non-Arab insurgents. He touched on it but he didn't go into any detail.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: We have seen people who are citizens of a wide variety of countries, not simply from the Middle East but citizens of Western Europe and around the world, popping up from time to time among the foreign fighters in the insurgency, among the terrorist groups in particular. I don't want to give this too much emphasis because we still see the majority of the insurgency, the majority of the people who are fighting there against the Iraqi Government, against the coalition, are Iraqis. There are some people who are infiltrating in and we're very concerned about Syria, in particular, in this regard to strengthen particularly the role of al-Qaida. But I don't want to get into specifics of how many people come from which country, because then it looks like that we're blaming the countries involved. In fact, countries by and large, and this why Syria's been a problem, countries by and large are doing their very best to stem the flow of individuals but that's very hard.

QUESTION: Joyce [Karam] from Al-Hayat newspaper. My question is about the ongoing

talks with the Iraqi insurgency or the armed forces there. What are you hoping that would come out from these talks? And if you can also give us an update on Ambassador Khalilzad talks with the Iranians that are also ongoing now.

I want to follow up also on the Syrian border issue. We've been seeing reports that there has been some calm in the last two weeks on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Can you confirm these reports or give us also an update?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Mm-hmm. There are no formal talks between the coalition and the insurgency. Coalition military officials obviously have a wide variety of contacts in the areas where they're located with a variety of people, some of whom are disposed to support the Iraqi Government, some of whom are differently disposed. The lead in any such discussions has to be with the Iraqi Government, and we and the Iraqi government, as I said, are talking to people all over the country all of the time. I wouldn't characterize it as negotiations and I certainly wouldn't characterize it as negotiations with the insurgency.

On Ambassador Khalilzad, he has spoken about this and his words are on the record. The Secretary's words are on the record. He has been asked to have contacts with the Iranians on issues related to Iraq and I'll just leave it at that.

Oh, and you -- the Syrian border. I've seen some reports that there have been some improvements, particularly in terms of exercising some controls on people coming into the airports, but we'd have to look into that in more detail.

QUESTION: Samir Nader with Radio Sawa. Did the Iranians respond to the statement by Ambassador Khalilzad to have contacts with them? And also the Iraqi President said that he will be working toward a meeting between U.S. officials and members of the insurgencies. Can you tell us anything about this?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, on the first, I've said I think all I'm going to say on the Iranian thing. We have taken a position on the record on that and if we have more for you, we'll let you know at the time.

On the second, I think that we coordinate very closely with President Talabani, of course, and we're very, very willing to listen to his suggestions as well as those of Prime Minister Jafari. And on this particular issue, I think people should ask him.

QUESTION: Takashi Sadahiro with Yomiuri Shimbun. What do you think is the biggest danger or threat against free and fair election? Is it the insurgency or some intimidation by authority or political party?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I think that the thing that the United Nations, the Iraqi Electoral Commission and the international community will watch particularly closely will be intimidation by political parties, particularly those that happen to have militias. That's

been a concern in the past. It hasn't had a significant impact on the last two votes, but it's something that needs to be watched, particularly in areas where parties, given parties, especially those that have militias, are in the majority. And that's of concern.

Obviously, we're always concerned about insurgent efforts to torpedo any political step in the process and thus a great deal of effort has been put into tamping down the level of violence. The level of violence has dropped by almost any measure over the past few days and we hope that that trend continues. That was not the trend before the January 2005 elections. That might indicate that particularly in some of the Sunni Arab areas people are making a major commitment to vote, including among circles close to the insurgency, but this is just a speculation on my part.

MR. BAILY: Third row here.

QUESTION: Hello. Tsutomu Ishiai of Asahi Shimbun. I have a question about the PRTs. You have just started some PRTs in Iraq. And I heard you plan to expand it to all over the country. How does it link to the political process and what's the major goal of the PRTs? And also how do you plan to coordinate with the local government as well as central government in terms of PRTs and governments?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Sure. The PRT has several -- the Provincial Reconstruction Teams have several goals. First and foremost is to ensure a better coordination between the political side of what the coalition is doing, us and our coalition partners, and the military side under MNFI. We and our coalition partners have a large number of political offices, reconstruction teams and other civilian entities floating around in the field and we want to make sure that our efforts and those of the MNFI people, be they British or Italian troops in the south or American troops or Albanian troops or wherever in the north, are better coordinated.

Secondly, we want to use this as a vehicle to coordinate better the delivery of reconstruction assistance, particularly political capacity-building assistance to NGOs, to government authorities, training programs, retail level electrical, water and other programs with the local governments. We think that's important because the local governments have to have a say for things to be effective and we also think it's important to strengthen the local governments.

So in conjunction with the Iraqi central government we're looking at the PRTs to help us deliver these reconstruction programs better to the various provinces and other political entities throughout the country, but with particular emphasis on those areas where we're in a post-conflict environment

MR. BAILY: Let's go in the back row, please.

QUESTION: Mohammad Dalbah with ATN Productions TV. I have been told that you -- in your last meeting with the Arab ambassadors to United States, you urged the Arab

Government to support Iyad Allawi. And my question is why United States Government prefers Allawi to be the next prime minister in Iraq.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: You heard wrong. I already said what the U.S. position is. The U.S. Government has absolutely no favorite. It neither supports nor is opposed to any of the parties or any of the candidates. We will let the Iraqi people take that position. This has been the position that is argued at every point behind closed doors as well as in the open at every level in the American Government and in the governments of our allies to anybody who wants to listen.

MR. BAILY: In the front row here.

QUESTION: [Mounzer Sleiman, Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi] It's a kind of follow-up, Ambassador. Judging from previous political processes, given the Cairo meeting, it seems to me many major parties, they are declaring that boycotting the election, the next election, that they participated in that Cairo meeting. At the same time, there is the tendency in Iraq to see fragmented political parties and more fragmented result from the election. The upcoming election also needs to deal with the constitution. There is many issues were postponed to be discussed by the future parliament. And at the same time, the process that before took to come up with the new government.

So taking all these into consideration with the disintegration or more fragmentation of the political parties in the coalitions that they were built before, what kind of assurances that even this political process that we are banking on too much that going to lead us to something different than what we had in the past, that the security situation, political situation and the reconstruction situation is not going to go forward?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Sure. I think as I understood it, what you mean is that what we've seen in the Cairo conference is many groups that previously had boycotted it are now participating in the political process, so the issue is which is true. We did not see -- we have not seen any significant political group, including the Ulema Council or others who have been represented in the Cairo conference, call for a boycott. In fact, quite the opposite. People across the board are calling for participation in the electoral -- in the vote.

I think that -- but I do take your point that because there will be a higher participation by many more groups, then will you not have a potentially more divided parliament and will that not make it even more difficult to stand up a new government? A new government -- there are certain timelines to the standup of a new government and the most sensitive of them this time, as it was last time, will presumably be the election of a presidency council, a three-person presidency and vice presidents, because there was no time limit on that and that was the biggest delay in the process in the January/February/March period in Iraq last time. So we'll have to wait and see. That is a possibility.

But I think that this is a problem that any democracy has to face is fragmented parties,

difficulties of forming coalitions. I was just in Germany. They had to go through that themselves with a far larger number of parties than they have ever had in the past. Up until the 1980s, they only had to deal with two large and one small, and now they have a large -- a great many more parties. Italy, Israel -- many democracies face this and they have to work it out.

But the beauty of democracy is that as long as the democratic principles are adhered to, people get another chance a year later or a couple of years later, as the Iraqis are getting another chance. Many Iraqis think that either they made a mistake in boycotting the elections, other Iraqis feel that they made a mistake in not bringing in enough Sunni Arabs. So now, a few months later, they have a chance to do it again. That's the benefit and the beauty of democracy, among others.

QUESTION: You have new disclosures about additional detention centers run by the Iraqi Interior Ministry, presumably predominantly Sunni detainees. What can you say about those reports and what impact might it have, do you think, on Sunni participation in the elections?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: On the last point, I wouldn't want to predict. I think that Sunni participation remained strong after the very serious discoveries at the first detention center. We're looking into this one in more detail to find out what went on there, why these people were being detained there, why they were not turned over to the Ministry of Justice, and whether and to what degree they may have been mishandled. But it's still early on this case.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MR. BAILY: Microphone.

QUESTION: You said you're looking into --

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: We're looking into -- no, the Ministry of Interior has detention facilities all around the country for people who have been rounded up but have not yet been turned over to the Ministry of Justice. The issue is whether those people (a) have been abused and (b) whether the detention rules that are established in Iraq -- and the Iraqis are looking into that and we and others are helping them, but they've got the lead -- whether these detention authorities, if you will, have been strictly adhered to. And in this second camp there are some questions.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. BAILY: Go here to Turkey.

QUESTION: Reha Atasagan with Turkish Public Television. How do you as coalition and

the Iraqi officials ensure that there are no candidates which have kind of connection with the terrorist groups? As you know the terrorist group, PKK has roots in northern Iraq and they are also trying to make political, you know, to be in the political process in a way. How is it being ensured?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The responsibility for that is with the Iraqi Election Commission and ultimately with the Iraqi Government. On that particular case, for PKK front groups, we have repeatedly told the Iraqis to take a look at that, watch it and made soundings with them on that issue.

More generally, however, the Iraqis have a tendency to allow any political group that can register and meet the registration requirements to participate and you've got two competing principles. One is to exclude groups such as PKK front; the other is to ensure that in a country that has been fragmented by war and oppression for 30 years and is just beginning to learn the ropes on a democratic process, that you don't give the government too much authority to start ruling out this group or that group because of this or that accusation. So it's a tension. But on the particular case of PKK front groups, we're very aware of Turkey's views and our own views on the PKK.

MR. BAILY: Can we go to the -- the woman, please.

QUESTION: Thank you. Naichian Mo from Phoenix Television of Hong Kong. For the upcoming election I will assume you hope for the best and prepare for the worst. Can you share with us the best and worst scenarios you can think of?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: What I'll do is share with you the best scenario, which is I think the most realistic scenario. I do believe that there will be a very high turnout from all groups in the country. We hope but cannot guarantee that violence will be down. But I believe that even if the level of violence were to spike, that the Iraqi people, as they've shown already twice in the past year, will in large numbers go and vote.

Our particular hope is an Iraqi representative government that can deal with the many problems the country faces, not just but beginning with the insurgency, but also the subsidies, the tremendous expenditure of hard currency for food and fuel imports and other political problems. I think a gentleman mentioned the constitutional issues that were postponed back in October. Those are very important, too.

All of these need to be dealt with. They need to be dealt with quickly. And they have to be dealt with by a democratic Iraqi Government, not by the outside world, not by the UN, not by anybody. So therefore, we hope that very quickly a government that is both representative and effective can be stood up. That is our best-case scenario and that's also what we think will happen.

QUESTION: Samir Nader with Radio Sawa. The summit of the Organization of Islamic states in Mecca issued an important communique last week, included like denunciation

of terrorism and calling for the support of the political process in Iraq. How important do you think this communiqué is and what impact do you think will have on the situation in Iraq and on encouraging the Sunni to participate in the election?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I think very important. I believe I opened by noting increasing international political support, diplomatic support, for this process. That is one good example of it. I think the earlier Arab League actions, including sending a mission to Baghdad, two missions actually, and then holding the pre-meeting of Iraqi political parties resulting in a final communiqué, which was very similar to the one that the OIC issued, had an even more important effect because it was earlier on the decision of Sunni Arabs to trust in the system and to organize themselves, and we will see on the 15th to actually go out and vote in large numbers.

MR. BAILY: Down in the front row here.

QUESTION: Thank you. Just a quick question. Will Saddam Hussein and other high-ranking prisoners be allowed to vote in this election?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Prisoners are allowed to vote. I won't -- I don't want to comment one way or another on Saddam Hussein. In fact, that vote is happening today. Soldiers, armed prisoners and several other categories, some 300,000 people, will be voting today.

MR. BAILY: Another one in the front row.

QUESTION: Mounzer Sleiman with Al Mustaqbal Al-Arabi again. I was visiting the region, just came from there. And, Ambassador, the impression that I got from hard information that the Cairo process, the Arab League process, is not successful and some of the constituency of the Sunni Arab are declaring that they're not happy with the final communiqué and what the people after the communiqué, what they said about it, and they are calling for boycotting the election.

Also there's accusation of the election commission that they rigged the last election related to the constitution. So there is some obstacle here about how, from what you said, that there is the majority going to participate. There is a chance that they will not, that a majority will probably will not participate from the people you're attempting to drawing them to the political process.

One other last issue. People in the region ask why United States willing to speak with Iran and assigned the Ambassador Khalilzad to speak with Iran publicly while Iran has influence on Iraq, and at the same time will not be able to talk to other parties, like Syria, in open dialogue with them.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: In terms of Sunni groups, as somebody who spent a lot of time in Iraq looking for Sunni groups, there wasn't a day that went by that five new Sunni

groups, each of which could muster hundreds of thousands of supporters, did not come to my attention. Most of them were willow wisps. I'm basing my comments not on the fact that there are not Sunni Arab Iraqis; in fact, there are Shia Arab Iraqis and Kurdish Iraqis, all of whom are saying this political process is not for me and urging people not to participate in it.

What I'm doing is first of all, based upon the major groups that we look at, the Dialogue Group, (inaudible) the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Olama Council and their position on the elections now as opposed to their position on the elections back in January of 2005. And they have gone from opposing it and urging a boycott to one or another degree of participation or support or tolerance, depending upon which group. And I'll leave it up to you folks to track all of these down because they're hard to keep track of.

We also look at the polls that we and other people do in Sunni Arab areas where we see a very high percent of the people -- certainly 50 percent or more -- indicating they're going to vote. We did not see that before the January vote.

The third thing is we take a look at the constitutional vote and the number of people in Sunni Arab areas, particularly in Mosul and in Baghdad and in Tikrit and in Fallujah, who voted. It was very high, particularly Fallujah, which was because it's a protected area you have a pretty good idea of what's going on there.

So I mean, you don't know -- this is like a football match or another sporting contest in a way or like any other election in your own countries; you cannot predict what will happen until it actually happens. I'm just saying that I can only go on what evidence we saw last year and what evidence we've seen today and we certainly weren't seeing these things before January about the Sunni Arabs. So we'll see.

In terms of the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Commission is closely watched and closely supported by the UN which has a crackerjack team in there. As I've said before, the UN's role in Iraq is absolutely extraordinary and deserves praise at every turn, as well as a variety of American and other nongovernmental organizations that are providing support, but also advice and counsel. And the overall view is that this is a very effective, very even-handed organization with a great deal of integrity.

In terms of talking to the Iranians, the specific issues to be talked about are issues related to Iraq. There is precedence, as the Secretary also said in her testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on us talking to the Iranians about Afghanistan in the past in the group of six. And it's in that context that this should be looked at.

MR. BAILY: Go to Germany.

QUESTION: Christoph von Marschall from Der Tagesspiegel from Berlin. As you underlined, the elections, free and democratic elections, are still a new phenomenon for Iraq and for the region. So when you do something the first time or the second, the third

time, you still need support and advice. Could you just give us two or three examples where you think advice from America or other democracies was especially helpful or needed because otherwise it might go in the wrong direction?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I think that the advice that's being given to the Iraqis is being given by the UN. The UN talks to us, they talk to the British, they talk to a variety of other important UN countries of Permanent Five and such. We exchange views with them. But that's the primary vehicle for giving advice.

But as I said, most of it is on technical things, almost the forensics of looking into allegations of voter fraud and this kind of thing. The international community can be helpful, based upon its experience in many other elections in the Balkans, in the Middle East and elsewhere. And that experience in various ways is deployed through the United Nations to the Iraqis. But -- and there's a variety of logistical help that we in the UN do provide people both for in-country and out-of-country.

But I think now that they've done this three times, both the logistics and the way that they are actually dealing with the various political problems that come up, who to exclude and such, they're doing very well. For example, the Electoral Commission took a decision not to remove candidates who have been challenged by the de-Baathification commission. We think that that was a good decision under the circumstances, but it was their decision and they took it. And there are a variety of such decisions like that where they're showing very, very good judgment and the international community's role is to support their good judgment, I think.

MR. BAILY: Time for one last question.

QUESTION: Thank you. Sara Hussein, Saudi Press Agency. You said that the coalition would be willing to withdraw if asked to do so by the Iraqi Government. Has there been a contingency plan made for that possibility? Is it something that's been planned for or considered as a possibility?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: We don't discuss contingency plans. And I'm glad you raised that question. We don't think that -- again, we're hesitant about predicting the future, but we don't think that the Iraqi Government or a Iraqi government will take that step anytime in the near future, and the reason is that the reason that coalition forces are in Iraq is clear to everybody. The Secretary when she traveled there three weeks ago was briefed by many groups, including Sunni Arab groups, on the security situation and on the interest in an eventual transfer.

But this was underlined very, very strongly, nowhere more strongly than by Sunni Arabs, that they should not be withdrawn until there are capable Iraqi troops that can move in and take care of the security situation.

So I think that's the view of the Iraqis. I mean, people have to ask each of the Iraqi

parties or Iraqi groups, such as Mukhtar Al-Sadr who are advocating for a timetable for withdrawal as opposed to a withdrawal per se, and there are many other groups that reject that. And once again, we'll see. That's the beauty of democracy.

MR. BAILY: Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you very much.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay. Thank you.

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