

On-the-Record Briefing on Iraqi Political Developments

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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(11:35 a.m. EDT)

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay, everybody. Thanks for joining us. Secretary Rice is going to have some brief opening remarks and then we'll go right into questions. Everything is on the record. Secretary Rice.

SECRETARY RICE: Good morning, everyone. I just wanted to take note of the important milestone that the Iraqis have reached today in their formation -- the next steps in their formation of a government of national unity. By selecting the presidency council and the speaker and deputies and having nominated now a candidate for prime minister, the Iraqis are now well on their way to the formation of this government of national unity. And as I said, it is an important milestone. There will obviously be now a lot of work to do to get the rest of the cabinet in place, but the most important thing is they now have a government, they will now have a government of national unity that can take on the challenges that they will have. And in this transition period as they start to address the many challenges and problems and concerns of the Iraqi people, the United States is looking forward to working with them as their program develops and as their efforts to really begin to address these questions begin.

So this is a good day for Iraq, it's an important day for Iraq, and we wanted to take note of it.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay, we can go into questions.

MODERATOR: Once again, if you would like to ask a question, please press *1 on your touchtone phone. We'll be just a moment for the first question. The first question is coming from Andrea Mitchell.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Can you tell us more about Maliki and your view of him, whether he has been too partisan, too sectarian in the past to really form this coalition government and what role he played behind the scenes in the drafting of the constitution. Was he helpful as far as the Ambassador and you were concerned?

SECRETARY RICE: Fine. Hello, Andrea, I'm happy to answer. First of all, I think the most telling point is that Mr. Maliki was immediately supported by other members of the new government, by the Sunnis and by the Kurds as well as by other members of the Shia coalition, so he obviously has broad support. And while I know that there are going to be questions about what has transpired in

the past, clearly the Iraqis are now looking to the future. He did play a role in the constitutional process. I believe we think that he was a useful interlocutor, a constructive interlocutor, and we'll look forward to working with him. But the most important point to make is that the Iraqis themselves, across the broad coalition here -- Kurds, Sunnis and Shia -- have overwhelmingly supported his nomination.

MODERATOR: The next question comes from Anne Gearan.

QUESTION: Hi, Madame Secretary. Could you tell us, just expanding on that, whether you have met with him or, you know, had any -- or if not, what Zal may have told you about him and, you know, whether you think at this point he's going to be able to bring the Sunnis fully into the coalition?

SECRETARY RICE: Sure. First of all, I have not met with him, but Zal Khalilzad knows him as well as a number of other people in our embassy and the British as well. He's thought to be a strong figure, someone who is capable of getting things done. He's also thought to be someone who is very much an Iraqi patriot -- very, very concerned about Iraq and Iraq's sovereignty. I think that's a really important point and I think he will defend that sovereignty.

Let me be very clear. We probably won't always agree. We didn't always agree with Prime Minister Jafari. We didn't always agree with Interim Prime Minister Allawi. But this is somebody with whom we can work and we're looking forward to working with him because we think he has the best interests of the Iraqis at heart. He's a hard-working person who wants to see Iraq stable and democratic and he clearly worked hard to convince people in the broad coalition that he is going to take seriously the concept of a government of national unity and not a government that would be sectarian but one that will be a government of national unity.

So I think all of those attributes really do serve him well and he's obviously somebody who is very courageous and brave because he also, like many of these people, he stood up to Saddam Hussein at considerable cost to himself.

MODERATOR: The next question comes from Sue Fleming.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, Maliki said he would like to merge the militias with the Iraqi army. What's your view on this? Do you think that this is the right way to go or do you think that this might lead to even more sectarian problems?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I read just the brief statement that is in the press and so I don't want to comment until I know more properly what he said, except to say, Sue, that he also said that there can be only one -- essentially one authority and one gun. I mean, he said that, you know, that armed force has to belong to the state. And with that we would certainly agree and so I think the question of how militias are going to be handled, how they will be demobilized, what aspects or what elements of armed groups might be incorporated into the national army, I think those are all issues to be discussed in a more detailed way than we can do based on initial comments. But I would just note that he did make a very strong statement that armed force has to be the providence

of the state.

MODERATOR: The next question comes from Steven Weisman.

QUESTION: Good morning, Madame Secretary and everyone. The United States was widely seen in Iraq as dealing with the situation essentially in what some thought was a heavy-handed way, making it quite clear that they wanted Jafari out, that he had lost the confidence of President Bush. This word was disseminated to -- or discussed widely by the Shiites especially and created some resentment. What can be done now to ease that lingering resentment? How much of a problem do you assess it to be?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let me start by saying something about Prime Minister Jafari, with whom we have had good relations during his prime ministership and worked closely with, and I think he made a patriotic decision in essentially putting this back in the hands the Shia caucus, the UIA caucus, in order to pave the way for a resolution of what had become a quite difficult situation. And so he is to be really appreciated. His efforts and his act of personal courage there is to be appreciated and we do appreciate it.

We said -- and I said, Steve, when I was there -- that it was not up to the United States to choose a leader for Iraq; it was not up to the United States to choose a prime minister. The only point was they had to have a prime minister and it was becoming clear that they weren't going to be able to form a government of national unity under the circumstances that existed, with the prime ministership being unresolved.

And so our whole concern was to get this to the place or to encourage the Iraqi's to get to a place where they could resolve the issue of the prime minister and create a government of national unity. And I think people understand that. Zal has talked to these leaders. I believe that they understand that the United States had only one interest, and that was to see them move to a government of national unity, because there is so much work to be done.

And by the way, it wasn't just the United States that wanted to see this government of national unity, but the Iraqi people were very vocal in their press and in their cartoons and in their comments that they expected this government of national unity to be formed as well. The United States has had good relations and is going to keep good relations with all of the groups, but now they're going to start to work as an Iraqi government of national unity, and that means overcoming the sectarian divisions that have made it difficult for this country.

MODERATOR: The next question comes from Elise Labott.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thank you. I'd like to follow up a little bit about what you were saying that there's so much work to be done. And when you were in Iraq, you said that, you know, you expected that you would return soon and that there was a lot of work you wanted to do with the Iraqis. If you can talk a little bit about what you see as your priorities now that you have an interlocutor -- it looks like there will be a prime minister -- and a government, you can deal with some of the things that you will be pressing in the coming weeks and the most important things to

you and the United States?

SECRETARY RICE: Sure. The first point to be made is that the priorities are going to be the priorities of the Iraqi Government and there have been lots of conversations with people who are in the political leadership about how the Iraqis see those priorities. And when I was out there, I had discussions with them about how they see those priorities and they're very consistent with how we see it.

Obviously, the security situation is of great concern, the situation in particular in Baghdad is of great concern, as well as getting a ministry of interior that can oversee the creation of a police force that the people of Iraq will have confidence in that is not sectarian and that represents the interests of all Iraqis. And I think that's an extremely high priority.

It's also a high priority to help the Iraqis create the infrastructure for governing. There's finally now going to be a permanent Iraqi Government. As you might imagine, having several governing structures over the last three years has made it difficult to get a kind of steady and sustained attention to these issues because there's been a change every time, you know, that attention has begun. And so now with a government there, we want to make sure that they have the infrastructure that they need to govern.

So I'll be talking a lot with our embassy and with Iraqi leaders about assisting their ministries to become really strong and capable of delivering services for the Iraqi people. We'll be talking about helping them create more capable provincial and local leaders because the constitution gives quite a bit of authority to the localities and to the provinces, but the capacity really isn't there for the delivery of those services. And clearly it's better to be able to deliver services at the local and provincial level, and so we'll be working with them on that, on training, on creating that entire infrastructure of governing. We'll obviously be continuing to work with them on improving the delivery of essential services like electricity and making certain that oil production stays up so that they can meet their budgetary targets.

And finally, I know that the Iraqis have talked about wanting to put people back to work in large numbers, and so I think we'll want to talk with them about how they see plans for job creation and in their cities where the unemployment rate is still too high.

And so it's a long list. Obviously, the security situation is key. But this is now going to be a government that needs our help in creating the infrastructure so they can -- the governing infrastructure so they can deliver these services, and we'll be right there for them.

MR. MCCORMACK: I think we have time for two more questions.

MODERATOR: The next question comes from Jonathan Karl.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, one of the concerns about Jafari was, obviously, he was a candidate of Muqtada al-Sadr, with a devoted, you know, position to Sadr. Do you have a sense for Maliki's relationship with Sadr and also what his views would be about the continued U.S. military

presence in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, along with, remembering that all Iraqi leaders have thus far talked about the importance of security for their people and have recognized that Iraq cannot yet deliver that security on their own, I would expect that we have a very basis from which to continue the support that we are giving to Iraqi security training and the support that we're giving the Iraqi people as they're fighting the terrorists.

I'd just remind, Jonathan, that the multinational force is there under a UN Security Council resolution so this is not an American force; this is a multinational force that's there under a UN mandate. And I don't expect that that would change for the near term, but I know that all Iraqi leaders with whom I've spoken and with whom Zal has talked look very much forward to the day when Iraqis can do this on their own, as do we, but recognize that we're not quite there yet.

As to the relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr, I really don't know. I can't comment because, obviously, whatever the internal deliberations were in the UIA we're not party to. But I would just note again that this candidate had broad enough support to bring not just the, as I understand, six of the seven Shia leaders within the alliance, within the coalition, but also the Kurdish leaders and the Sunni leaders to support his candidacy. And so I think that shows that he's been able to reach out to a broad range of people. This was a tough -- you know, tough internal fight, internal deliberation to get to this point. The politics, I think, was really quite active here and that he was able to bring this broad a coalition speaks very well to his political skills and I think argues well for his ability to continue to do that in the future.

I might just note, too, that some of the work that was done before these positions were filled is also going to help. They did agree on certain rules for how the government would work. They did agree on certain programmatic issues. They did agree on a national policy council, security council, to bring all the political actors together to deal with some of the more complicated issues for the country. So there's also a kind of political infrastructure, set of political mechanisms, that will be at his disposal to keep this national unity government on track.

But I want to emphasize he still has to form a government. There's still work to do in filling the ministries. And we are especially concerned that the ministries of interior and defense, which really have to carry all the responsibility on the security side, be filled with people who are nonsectarian and people who are very capable.

MODERATOR: The final question comes from Nicholas Kralev.

QUESTION: Thank you. Good morning. I wanted to ask you, Madame Secretary, about the role of the embassy from this day on in terms of working with the ministries. With the interim government, with the transitional government, you had advisors who worked with the ministries very closely on a daily basis. Is that going to change with this government? And how do you see the role of the embassy in the coming months?

SECRETARY RICE: Thanks, Nick. We would hope to actually intensify our effort in ministry

advising, in some programs. The Iraqis have been attracted to the idea of our helping them with some of the training centers that they have. They really need to build a good, strong civil service in these ministries as well as develop really just processes, everything from the ability to have budgeting and personnel systems. And there have been a lot of conversations already with any number of people who are going to be a part of the government, but that's something that Iraqis are very interested in doing.

And I would hope, by the way, that that isn't just going to be the United States. We've had expressions of interest from other countries in helping to develop the capabilities, the technical capability of the ministries. And so I think the Iraqis will find that the international community, not just our embassy but the international community, will want to help them do that because Saddam Hussein's ministries were basically places for his cronies and, you know, issues of delivery of services weren't those that they will be in a democracy. And so they need help in building those ministries. And as I said, they also need help in building the provincial and local leadership and delivery mechanisms, so we'll be working with them on that, too.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay, thanks, everybody.

SECRETARY RICE: All right. Thanks, everybody. I'll see some of you on Monday, I think.

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