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Iraq: A New Way Forward

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Washington, DC
January 11, 2007

(2:05 p.m. EST)

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you very much, Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen. I look forward to continuing our long consultations. The fact that we have worked very well together, Mr. Chairman, when you were Ranking and I look forward to your chairmanship of this committee.

Let me just say a few words about Iraq. I have a longer statement, Mr. Chairman, that I would like to have entered into the record, but in the interest of time for discussion I will not read that.

CHAIRMAN LANTOS: Without objection.

SECRETARY RICE: I just want to underscore a couple of things and then I will speak to the Middle East more broadly because I think it flows from the comments I'll make on Iraq. I think as I come before you today we all know that this is a crucial moment for the United States. We all understand the enormous stakes in Iraq, the enormous stakes for our country, for the region, a region in which we have extremely important interests and have had longstanding interests and indeed because of the centrality of that region the importance for the world of a favorable outcome in Iraq.

And just as we recognize that the stakes are enormous, we also, as the President said last night, recognize that the current situation in Iraq is unacceptable. And so if we put those two together, it means that we need a new strategy for dealing with Iraq, and last night the President laid out his views of how we might proceed. We understand that the current situation, the current strategy, is not really working.

I would just underscore a couple of things about the new strategy. The first is that it is extremely important to recognize

that the Iraqis face, after the Samara Golden Mosque bombing of February '06, an event that was carried out by al-Qaida precisely to stoke civilian -- to stoke sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni, it was planned by Iraq -- by the al-Qaida to do that, the Iraqis face a different set of circumstances where the important political process that they're engaged in is threatened to be overrun by the inability to control Baghdad, the inability to provide population security for the people of Baghdad.

And so what the President said last night and what we are talking about today is the urgent need to do something about the problem in Baghdad. But I want to be very clear. It's an Iraqi responsibility to do something about their sectarian violence. No one believes that America can determine what kind of Iraq there is going to be. Is it going to be an Iraq for all people or is it going to be sectarian and divisive? That's something the Iraqis have to decide.

But if you believe, as we do, that they are now demonstrating -- have now told us of their will to deal with that problem, the question is do they have the capability. And it is the assessment of our political and military people in the field that they don't actually have the capability to deal with the urgent problem in Baghdad. They will bring their best forces from all around the country, but that we need to augment that effort. And that is the surge of American forces to which the President spoke last night. But very clearly, it can only work if the Iraqis are prepared to make the tough choices, if they're prepared to behave in an even-handed fashion toward their population.

Secondly, we recognize that no military force can resolve these difficulties, and indeed this needs to be a comprehensive strategy, and so the President has ordered, and we and State are responding to the need for a civilian surge that is to deal with the political and economic side as well. We have had very good effect with our Provincial Reconstruction Teams which get us down to the local and provincial level. These are civil affairs, civil-military teams that go into a province, work with the local people, work with the local leadership, help to get projects and job growth in a specific area. We all in America are federalist and we know that we could not possibly have developed as a country if everything was dependent on success in Washington. And so this is an effort to support bottom-up the Iraqis and to frankly have multiple points of success rather than just being dependent on success in Baghdad. And so we are increasing significantly the commitment to these Provincial Reconstruction Teams to carry out these important tasks.

I might just mention that we are having some effect. In a place like Anbar, which is the epicenter of al-Qaida, we're actually seeing local leaders begin to respond to this al-Qaida threat. The local sheikhs there got together. They brought 1,100 young men together. They sent them to Jordan for training, as they call them, sons of Anbar, to come back and get in the fight against al-Qaida. And the reason that the President talked about a surge of forces into Anbar last night was to support those positive developments.

Now, all of this has to be put in the context of the region, and here, Mr. Chairman, I'll talk about your request to talk a little bit about what I plan to do in the Middle East. Obviously, Iraq is now the epicenter of how the Middle East turns out and our diplomacy has to recognize the importance of Iraq to the region and the region to Iraq, but it also has to recognize that it's a different Middle East, a Middle East in which there is a new alignment and our diplomacy has to respond to that new alignment.

On the one side, you have extremist forces -- Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria and Iran -- in fact, Iran, the state that is most responsible for supporting those extremist forces; and on the other side of the ledger, you have young reformist governments like Lebanon, the Government of Iraq and of course the positive forces in the Palestinian territories like Mahmoud Abbas, but you also of course have states like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan and the Gulf states.

We have organized our diplomacy around the proposition that you begin with those who share your views of how the Middle East ought to develop, and therefore our diplomacy and my trip will focus heavily on rallying the support of those responsible Arab states to support the Government of Iraq, to support what needs to be done there, to support of course also Lebanon and the moderate Palestinians.

But as to Iraq, I do believe that the states of the Gulf and the Egyptians and the Jordanians understand increasingly that if they are to resist as much they want to, if they are to resist Iranian influence or increases in Iranian influence in the Middle East, something that they fear quite greatly, then it is going to require support for Iraq. Because Iraq can either be a barrier to further Iranian influence or it can become a bridge if it is not dealt with effectively.

And so one of the most important elements of my trip will be to talk to those countries. I will be in them individually, in Egypt, in Jordan, in Saudi Arabia. I will then meet with the Gulf states. The GCC+2 will now be in its fourth meeting since September and it really is rallying these states around support for these moderate governments and in opposition to the extremist forces that Iran in particular, and Syria as a kind of sidecar, are trying to unleash in the region.

I know there's been a lot of talk about talking to Iran and Syria. I talked to some of you about that. Let me say that it's not that we fear or I fear talking to anyone, but you have to ask on what basis do you carry out such a conversation. And we have to separate them. With Syria, we have tried. Colin Powell talked to Syria. Rich Armitage talked to Syria. Bill Burns talked to Syria. And that was as recently as February of 2005 and then the Hariri assassination I think froze everyone internationally in engagement with Syria.

But it's not that we haven't talked to Syria. The problem is Syria hasn't acted. In fact, it has acted in exactly the opposite direction, continues to support extremist forces in the region, continues to try to bring down the government of Fuad Siniora in Lebanon, continues to harbor and house the most radical Palestinian factions that are retarding progress toward a Palestinian state.

And so I can't imagine frankly what this conversation looks like. If you go to the Syrians and you say, "You need to stop destabilizing Iraq because it is in your interest to do so," well, certainly they know that. And if they believe it's in their interest to stop destabilizing Iraq, they will stop destabilizing Iraq. On the other hand, if the idea is that we go somehow as supplicant to ask them to help us in Iraq -- and they will have a price, I can assure you -- one can only imagine that that price is the reintroduction of Syrian influence into Lebanon or perhaps to shave the edges off the tribunal that the Syrians seem to fear will find some connection to the Hariri murder.

With Iran, we have 27 years of policy that we did not have diplomatic engagement with Iran, but this Administration said that we were prepared to do that if the Iranians would suspend their enrichment activities leading to the technologies that could lead to a nuclear weapon, because it doesn't make sense to talk while they keep improving their nuclear capabilities. I said that if they did so, I would meet them anyplace, anytime, and that offer still stands.

But if we are talking about, in the absence of that commitment from Iran, the following kind of engagement: We go to the Iranians and as supplicants say to the Iranians, help us to secure Iraq, do we really believe that the Iranians are going to treat Iraq over here and not demand that we do something to alleviate the pressure that we're now bringing on their nuclear program and their nuclear ambitions? I don't think it's going to happen.

So we believe that the appropriate place for diplomacy for the United States is to concentrate on this new alignment, Mr. Chairman and Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen. It is an alignment that could be quite favorable to all of our interests, to a stable Lebanon that is free of Syrian influence, to an Iraq that has the support of the region, to a Palestinian state that could live side by side with Israel in peace.

That is the alignment that is going to support those goals and that is where I will be focused in the diplomacy that I undertake. I should mention that we supported the Iraqis when, as any state might do, they've engaged their neighbors, even when they've engaged Iran or Syria, but it is fine for the Iraqis to carry that activity.

And finally, I would note that we have an international compact which is a bargain between the international community and the Iraqis. The Iraqis would agree to do certain things, an oil law, fight corruption, certain other activities, and the international community would promise support. It seems to me that this is something that could have a positive effect on support for Iraq, but also a positive effect on developments for reform in Iraq.

Let me close, Mr. Chairman, by saying I've been listening to many from this body, from -- many from the Senate. We've talked to lots of people. The President's listened to advisors, old ones like me who have been a part of this since the beginning and bear the responsibility for both good decisions and bad decisions, and he has talked to new advisors like Secretary Gates who comes with a fresh look. We understand the skepticism that we're hearing about whether or not this strategy can and will work. We understand that a lot rests on whether or not the Iraqi Government finally makes the difficult decisions that it needs to make.

We also understand the continuing heartache that America experiences with the deaths of our men and women, whether in uniform or the brave civilians also who are serving there. And we certainly understand the continuing concern about those who are still in harm's way. But after a lot of thought and after looking at a lot of different options, the President very much decided that this is the best option for us going forward.

I've heard many people say we cannot fail and therefore we need to give ourselves, and most importantly the Iraqis, a chance to succeed. That, Mr. Chairman, is what the President laid out last night and I hope that you'll find a way to support it, each and every one of you. Thank you very much.

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