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Press Conference by Ryan C. Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq

Press Briefing at The Combined Press Information Center
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AMB. CROCKER: Well, "salaam aleikum" and good morning. I've been in Iraq now just under four weeks, so I appreciate your coming in today to give me a chance to share with you some of my initial impressions, and then, of course, to take your questions.

(In Arabic) -- (through interpreter) -- my family because I met my wife here when I was here in the '70s.

(In English) I was last here in 2003, as many of you know. I began my association with Iraq actually going back to the late 1970s, and then in the 2001, 2002 period, I made several visits up into northern Iraq coordinating with leaders up there. So over the years, I've been in and out of this country that is so critical for security, stability in the Middle East, and indeed, in the international community.

Coming back now in 2007, meeting the Iraqi leadership, many of whom I've worked with at various times in the past, I've been struck by what has been done here. When I left in 2003, you know, there was no constitution, there was no Council of Representatives, there was no sovereign government. All of these things are now in place. And I've been impressed by the extent to which Iraqis have stood up to the challenges of building a new state -- the courage, the resolve, the dedication they've demonstrated. I've been encouraged by the beginnings of the Baghdad security plan. This is still just at its first stages, but I think it has registered some improvements in Baghdad and also in Anbar. I've been struck, as all of you I know are, who live here day to day, though, by the impact that violence has had on Iraq, Iraqi society, Iraqi individuals. And just traveling around a bit in Baghdad, I have seen the scars of that violence over the last four years in a very literal sense.

So clearly, security is crucial, and that's what the Baghdad security plan aims at. The violence comes, as you know, from a number of vectors. And I think at a time when we've seen a decrease, a decline in the sectarian violence, we've seen an increase in terror attacks, primarily car bombs, primarily coming from al Qaeda. So security challenges clearly confront Iraq on a number of levels, and it's going to be critical to try and deal with those in the period ahead.

I think the Baghdad security plan, led by Iraq, supported by the coalition, can buy time, but what it does is buy time for what ultimately has to be a set of political understandings among Iraqis. So I think these months ahead are going to be critical as this plan continues forward to increase security and gain the time, but most especially, as the Iraqis then try and use that time to grapple with some of the difficult issues of, fundamentally, how do you achieve among these deep divisions a level of national reconciliation that ensures that all of the disputes that occur in open societies are resolved by peaceful means.

So as I said about my mission here, we will be engaged in support of the Iraqi government and people on the security level as we are now, through the Baghdad security plan and our other security operations. We'll also be doing everything we can to support the government of Prime Minister Maliki and the Iraqi people as they strive to achieve progress on these critical political issues that will truly guarantee the future of Iraq if they can be achieved.

So that'll be my focus in this period ahead, and it's important, I think, for all of us to bear in mind that what happens in Iraq doesn't occur in a vacuum. There is a region, there are neighbors, there is an international community, and over the next couple of weeks I think we're all going to be very busy looking at both the regional and the international aspects of Iraq's situation with the conferences that will convene in Sharm el-Sheikh at the beginning of May. First, the ministerial meeting to sign and launch the international compact with Iraq, and then, the following day, the conference of Iraq's neighbors also at the ministerial level involving both the G-8 and the P-5 states, including the U.S.

So enormous challenges ahead, clearly. The road is going to be a tough one. I don't begin my tour here with any illusions. It's going to be very, very difficult, but I certainly believe that success is possible otherwise I wouldn't be standing here.

So again, I thank you for coming. I look forward to your questions and look forward to working with you in this critical time ahead.

QUESTION: (Off mike.)

AMB. CROCKER: My agenda here in Iraq is to support the road map that the president laid out in January, and to which he has just spoken in his speech two days ago. So and it's what I described briefly to you before. As Iraq moves ahead, decisions, responsibilities and authorities are increasingly in the hands of the Iraqis. Our role, the U.S. role, the coalition role, the international role is to support those efforts.

Right now of course we're engaged primarily in two main areas. One is the security effort, the Iraqi-led, coalition-supported attempt to re-establish security primarily in Baghdad and in Anbar, and then the associated, critical political effort, how the United States and other friends of Iraq can support a political process of national reconciliation in various respects: constitutional reform, de-Ba'athification reform, eventually elections, hydrocarbon legislation, devolution of authorities to the provinces and so forth. So I intend to be active in supporting that agenda, but it's supporting an Iraqi agenda led by an Iraqi government. We do not dictate it; we do not drive it. We can support it.

With respect to your second question, it's a very important one. I am keenly aware of the sacrifices that representatives of the media, both Iraqi and non-Iraqi, have made to tell the story of an evolving state and nation in Iraq. You have literally paid with your lives to get that story out, and no group has paid more than Iraqi journalists themselves. So I start out

here with enormous respect for your courage and your commitment.

What we are driving at, what the Iraqi government is driving at, is creating circumstances where journalists and all Iraqis can go about their jobs, can carry out their responsibilities, without fear of paying with their lives for doing their job. But in the time we face now, I would just again like to register my enormous respect for all of you who are doing your jobs under extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Thank you. Let's try again. Andrew North from BBC.

Ambassador, firstly, now that Prime Minister Maliki has come out against this wall in Adhamiya, is construction of it going to be stopped? And was there consultation beforehand with the Iraqis on building that?

And secondly, just in relation to the continuous car bombings, I wonder if you could talk a bit more about where -- about the networks that are involved in doing this, because when you're talking about over a hundred attacks last month and still that same kind of rate carrying on -- probably even more -- this month, it takes an incredible amount of organization to keep this level of violence going with such huge bombs. I'm just wondering whether you can talk about more about -- al Qaeda is responsible, you're saying, but kind of where's the funding, where's the organization coming from? I'm wondering if you can just give us more detail on that.

AMB. CROCKER: Actually, the two questions, of course, are related. Efforts such as the construction of barriers is designed in large part to prevent the kinds of awful bombings that we've seen over the past couple of weeks.

Again, clearly these are complex issues. The challenge is to prevent these kinds of bombings and other forms of violence while obviously allowing people to live their lives.

Certainly there is consultation, and I think some of you may have seen the statement yesterday by General Abboud, the Baghdad security commander, with respect to the wall.

Obviously we will respect the wishes of the government and the prime minister. I'm not sure just where we are right now concerning our discussions on how to move forward on this particular issue, but in general, we have, I think, a full understanding between the coalition and the Iraqi government. The steps we're taking are coordinated, and they are coordinated toward the goal of ensuring that we stop attacks such as those that have devastated this city so greatly in the past week.

Now, in terms of the source of this, I can't give you a full and complete picture, but I would say the following. We do believe that the party responsible for most if not all of the car and other suicide bombings that we've seen over the past 10 days or so -- that this is al Qaeda.

My sense, having dealt with al Qaeda for a number of years -- I've just come from Pakistan, where al Qaeda is also a major threat -- is that over here we're dealing with a highly decentralized operation, that local figures probably have a great deal of initiative and latitude in setting up operations. This increases the challenge of trying to get at them and to

stop them.

It's been a subject of discussion between myself, other coalition representatives, and the Iraqi government over the past couple of weeks, just how we can be more effective in, first, simply creating the security environment out there, barriers, other measures to make it much harder for them to get successful bomb attacks through; and then how we go about taking apart what is numerically a very, very small operation, but which over the years has learned some organizational tactics that make them extremely dangerous.

But again, I think it is important to remember that what we've been looking at over the last couple of weeks are acts of terrorism, very horrific. But this not the kind of wave of broad-gauged sectarian violence that we were looking at before. In my judgment, what we're seeing now is, in fact, an effort to ignite that kind of sectarian violence. And I am impressed that thus far, that has not been successful; that Iraqis have withstood the provocation to take revenge on other innocent Iraqis for the crimes inflicted on them, because again, we've seen these attacks move across the entire range of the Iraqi community against Shi'a, against Sunnis, against other minorities. The Sadriyah market bombing was really against a very mixed neighborhood. So I guess the fact that Iraqis are not letting the terrorists succeed in their agenda, which is to reignite sectarian violence, is something we should note and appreciate.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm Lauren Frayer with the Associated Press. It's looking increasingly like regional support for the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is going to be contingent upon Sunnis taking a greater role in the government and in civil society. Considering that the U.S. was largely behind the policy of de-Ba'athification in the first place, as well as disbanding the Iraqi army, what can the U.S. and what is the U.S. doing now to encourage that reconciliation process in Iraqi politics?

And if I can ask one more question. You said you weren't clear exactly on the status of the wall in Azamiyah. But would you like to see that wall not built? What's your personal view on the idea of separating these kinds of neighborhoods with barriers, 12-foot high barriers?

AMB. CROCKER: Well, with respect to the region, I think the fact that Iraq's neighbors are convening on the 4th of May in Sharm el-Sheikh at the ministerial level is very encouraging in and of itself. I think that reflects a general awareness that what happens in Iraq has implications beyond Iraq, and this is, I think, an excellent mechanism to bring about a regional approach that supports stability in Iraq instead of the opposite.

In terms of the broader issue of national reconciliation in Iraq, as I tried to say in my opening remarks, I think that is absolutely crucial that specific initiatives such as de-Ba'athification reform derive their value to the extent that they further a spirit of national reconciliation. So it's going to be up to Iraqis, through their democratic processes in the Council of Representatives, to decide what measures to take.

We are trying to be very clear in our dealings with the government and with all of the principal political players that this is a process that has to gain traction, that has to be advanced if the time and space that is bought by the security plan is to have a lasting effect.

What I think is of note here is that Iraqis and all of us need to move away from zero-sum thinking, and that's going to be extremely difficult given what this country went through under Saddam Hussein and what it's been through

since liberation. But reconciliation -- that very definition of reconciliation means that you've got to move away from an "I win, you lose" mentality to some form of broader accommodation. And I think de-Ba'athification reform can be a very effective example of that.

I think that also touches on your second question, in a way. The real imperative here now, with the construction of barriers, the other steps in the Baghdad security plan, is to bring down the level of violence. You know, that is absolutely crucial. Clearly, nobody wants to see more and more of these car bombs going off in various parts of the city. So I think it's important that as one looks at the measures available, that one not lose sight of the threat that is motivating some of the decisions that are made.

The intention in Adhamiya, as it is elsewhere, is clearly not to segregate communities or to engage in a form of political or social engineering. It's not it at all. It's to try and identify where the fault lines are, where avenues of attack lie, and set up the barriers literally to prevent those attacks. It is in no one's intention or thinking that this is going to be a permanent state of affairs. It's all part of that effort to buy the time, in security terms, to allow a political process to move forward.

QUESTION: (Through interpreter.) (Name and affiliation inaudible.)

The visit of the U.S. minister of Defense was to confirm the partnership between the Iraqi government and the U. S. government, in regard to the reconciliation initiative. The Iraqi government raised some projects to the Council of Representatives, but it is facing legislative mechanisms that do not help, especially the law of accountability and justice for de-Ba'athification. This law is not accepted by the Council of Representatives.

My swali (ph) is in two parts. First, what are the procedures that would be taken by the Iraqi government and the U. S. government if the council refuses this de-Ba'ath law? Secondly, your excellency, have you started contacting the heads of the Iraqi political blocs to encourage them to agree on this project? Thank you.

AMB. CROCKER: Well, thanks very much. It's an important question.

As I noted earlier, in all of my previous visits to Iraq, going back to 1978, the country did not have a democratically elected Council of Representatives or a democratically elected anything. Now it does, and that council, as your question implies, possesses significant power, as elected legislatures do everywhere, including in the United States. What we have tried to make clear, both to the Iraqi government, to members of the Council of Representatives, to other political figures in Iraq, is the importance we attach to serious, measured progress toward national reconciliation. And elements such as de-Ba'athification reform we view as an important part of that.

We can stress the importance we attach to it; we can and do stress that the American people need to see meaningful progress toward reconciliation among Iraqis, in order to assure that the support is there in the U.S. at a critical time. But ultimately we can't dictate it. The Council of Representatives is going to have to decide on this and other key issues. What we can do is make clear how important this is, what the stakes are, both in Iraq and with respect to outside support, and hope they take the correct and the responsible measures. But these will be Iraqi choices in the long run, and the consequences for better or for worse are going to result from these choices for all Iraqis.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm Tina Susman from Los Angeles Times.

Back to the security plan, you're saying that what we're seeing with these major bombings is enough to ignite sectarian violence. Wasn't this considered earlier? And if not, why not? Was there a serious miscalculation in that this kind of response that we're seeing wasn't considered before the plan kicked in?

And you know, it just seems to me that there has been an awful lot of -- going into the plan, it seems that there was an awful lot of assumption that it was going to be one side that was providing -- that was creating the most problems. Well, that hasn't happened. It's been the other side. So what does that say about the planning that went into the plan?

AMB. CROCKER: The conflict in Iraq of course is multi-dimensional, as most of you know better than I. I mean, there has been the insurgency, if you will, against coalition forces. There has been sectarian conflict; there has been a terror campaign. And often these interlink in various ways.

That reality is by no means new, nor do I think anyone failed to take account of it. In my view, having, again, been around this region for a long time and watched Iraq for a number of years, the most corrosive and the most critical aspect of conflict in Iraq over recent months has been the sectarian dimension. That has done the most damage and, in my view, poses the greatest danger to Iraq's future. The security plan, therefore, I think rightly has had as its major element how efforts on the ground can calm sectarian violence, bring the violence down, stop the movement of peoples, the displacements, and then create that stage for national reconciliation.

The terrorists, like al Qaeda, would make their own surge. You know, again, it's been pretty awful, but I don't think a total shock or surprise. And as I said earlier, again, if you're dealing with a decentralized -- a small but decentralized enemy, it gets very hard to stop every avenue of attack that he might be able to come up with. But that's -- again, when we look at things like Adhamiya, it's got to be against that test of will the measures we take bring down violence really of all types, because obviously, if you're blocking street access to markets, as has been done at Shorja and had been done at Sadriyah -- I understand some barriers were later removed there -- you've got to be sure you're not opening up space for, again, the terrorist element of this.

And I'm not trying to characterize this as some kind of victory, but again, I would underscore the point that I think one of the reasons we're seeing this wave of attacks is precisely because the level of sectarian violence has come down. Therefore, a committed enemy, committed against the coalition, committed against all of Iraq's people -- Sunnis, Shi'as, Kurds alike -- has stepped up its efforts at terror attacks to try to get the sectarian conflict reignited.

So -- and a final point I'd make -- again, well-known to all of you -- the Baghdad security plan is still in its opening phases. We've got several more brigades that have not yet closed on this. The Iraqis are adding more forces. And clearly, we learn as we go. You know, we will be taking the steps to do everything we can both to get at the structure of al Qaeda and its associates, but also on the ground to, as much as we conceivably can, to deny them avenues of attack. But, you know, all of that is hard, and a lot of it takes time.

QUESTION: (Through interpreter.) There is also focus for the Americans and the Iraqis on the role played by the neighboring countries. What are the chances of reaching an agreement with Syria and Iran with regard to Iraq? What are the chances of reaching an agreement with Syria and Iran with regard to Iraq?

The second question, if you'll allow me, you said that you were surprised about the -- (inaudible) -- the Council

of Representatives. Yesterday, General Petraeus was -- expressed his shock for the security situation, deteriorating security situation. Both of you are very high senior officials in the Iraqi government. How do you see the differences between your view and his view with regard to Iraq?

AMB. CROCKER: Well, with respect to the neighbors, we'll have to see who shows up at Sharm el-Sheikh. Clearly, we see this as an opportunity for all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria, to come together and work to chart a constructive engagement in support of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people and not the opposite. We hope that both Iran and Syria will be there. We think their presence will provide some real opportunities, but obviously, they're going to have to make their own decisions.

For our part, we are going to be ready to engage in Sharm el-Sheikh, both at the international compact conference and the neighbors' conference, to do everything we can to see that the resources of the international community and of the region are directed toward supporting Iraq, stabilizing Iraq and, again, not the opposite.

With respect to your second question, General Petraeus and I work very, very closely together; we have since the day I -- literally, the morning I arrived, and we've done that every day since. In fact, the last thing General Petraeus did yesterday morning before he flew back to the U.S. was to take a six-mile run with me at 6:00 in the morning around Camp Victory, so we could have a final consultation as he goes back for his discussions in Washington.

And so I think we see the issues as in, really, exactly the same way. He is leading an effort to support Iraqis in bringing down violence and establishing security, while I am doing everything I can to see that time bought through that will allow a process of political reconciliation to move forward. And both of us are firmly of the view that at the end of the day it is going to be political decisions and political actions that will bring about lasting calm and peace here in Iraq, not military ones.

QUESTION: Paul Tait from Reuters. Ambassador, just to clarify one of your earlier answers, is the building of walled communities like Adhamiya now part of the Baghdad security plan? And in your early dealings so far with the al-Maliki government, do you get the sense you're dealing with a government that will be able to make the sorts of decisions by the end of summer that Defense Secretary Gates said would need to be made?

AMB. CROCKER: Again, I'm coming at the issue from a slightly different perspective. It's not about walled communities. It's about what sets of steps can we take in coordination with the Iraqis that are going to bring security to the people, bring down the level of violence, from whatever source, and make it different on the ground for the Iraqi people in that most fundamental area, which is security.

So I think the answer is going to vary area by area, neighborhood by neighborhood. What might work well in one area may not work well in others. So I wouldn't suggest to you that there is a -- you know, we've figured out the template, and we're just going to wall off each neighborhood. That's not it at all. In some areas where there are clear fault lines, it seems to us that a line of barriers makes good security sense.

But again, all of this has to be a step-by-step process. It has to take into account local realities. And obviously it has to take into account how the Iraqi government and the people of the area want to proceed.

So you may see changes. You may see different courses of action in one area as opposed to another. You may see a lot

of evolution in the process. But the fundamental principle doesn't change, which is what can we do to see that this plan achieves its aim, which is reducing violence.

QUESTION: And the second part of the question, about your dealings with the al-Maliki government --

AMB. CROCKER: Oh, sorry. Well, in -- again, in three and a half weeks, I have had very extensive dealings with the government of Prime Minister Maliki. And what I have found with him and with his colleagues in government is, I think, an admirable sense of determination and responsibility to bring Iraq to a better place.

The challenges, of course, are immense, and they would be immense for any government. But for a government that still has had less than a year in office and which faces enormous capacity challenges in terms of organization, personnel and so forth, it is all the more formidable. But I certainly see a firm intent to move Iraq to a better place.

There is also, I think -- of course the reality, and we talked about this before, that in a democratic society, the executive, the government does not control all the decisions. The role of the Council of Representatives, as we discussed, is going to be pretty important. And the leadership there, I think, is going to have to step up to the challenges of moving with speed and determination to pass legislative initiatives when they reach them. And of course Secretary Gates addressed that at expressing the hope that the Council of Representatives would forego a two-month vacation this summer if, as we expect, there are going to be some very important legislative issues before them.

STAFF: Okay. We can take two more questions.

QUESTION: Ambassador Crocker, Mike Shuster from National Public Radio. Last week -- it's kind of a follow-up to your last answer -- Muqtada al-Sadr pulled his cabinet ministers out of the government. How do you think that step will affect Prime Minister Maliki's government, particularly in light of the emphasis you're putting on political reconciliation and his efforts to achieve that?

AMB. CROCKER: Clearly this is part of a pretty lively Iraqi domestic political environment. I think what's important from our perspective is that whoever assumes these portfolios, that they be individuals of capability and determination, because there is a great deal of work to be done by these ministries as well as by the government itself.

So while I would not comment on the internal political workings here, I am very much of the hope that the -- that whoever assumes these ministries is going to be of an ability and a determination to get the work of these ministries done.

QUESTION: Hi. Shushang Fengali (ph) from McClatchy Newspapers. Ambassador, General Petraeus was quoted over the weekend in saying that there may be a certain number of car bombs -- that Iraq may have to learn to live with, sort of like Northern Ireland, that we may not be able to stomp out all of these car bomb attacks. Do you agree with that? Is there any hope of bringing car bombs under control as a security problem?

AMB. CROCKER: Well, again, I spent a lot of time in a lot of places over the years that have bombs going off in them, car and otherwise, so I've got a sense of how hard that is to control. And it's particularly hard to control here with -- at a time when security forces -- the Iraqi security forces are still under development, when there has been such a range of problems to deal with.

So I would think that certainly over the near term, to expect that there is going to be suddenly perfect security -- you know, no more bombs going off anywhere -- that is just unrealistic. Obviously that is the goal over the longer term. But to -- in -- dealing with a terrorist organization such as that responsible for these bomb attacks requires two things that I've described.

You know, one is the effort to dismantle the structure, which is hard when you're dealing with a decentralized enemy; and the other is on the ground, to try and identify vulnerabilities they will exploit. That's also very hard, particularly when you're talking about a huge urban area like Baghdad.

So you're not going to get any time soon too perfect security. The way al Qaeda will be defeated in the short- to medium-term, in my view, will be by the continued resolve of the Iraqi people not to be provoked into revenge or a renewal of sectarian violence. That's what al Qaeda is seeking, and it is within the power of the Iraqi people, I think, to deny them that, even as some bombs continue to go off.

QUESTION: (Through interpreter.) Irani (sp) Television. Your Excellency, do you believe that the presence of other states in the Sharm el-Sheikh conference without the neighboring countries will weaken the regional states' role in resolving the problem?

AMB. CROCKER: I think the presence of the P-5 and the G-8 at the neighbors conference is something constructive, something good for the overall effort in support of Iraq. I think we saw that at the initial sub-ministerial conference that took place here last month. I think there was good interaction.

And the fact is that while the neighbors have a critical role, clearly so do other states, and the United States is one of them. Given our role now in support of Iraq, militarily, economically, politically, to have a neighbors initiative that did not include us would, I think, weaken the whole endeavor. So I think we all have a place around the table, rightly, at Sharm el-Sheikh, and we very much hope that it is going to lead to something positive for Iraq.

Thank you all. You'll be seeing lots more of me in the future.

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