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**Special Briefing****Office of the Spokesman**

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## On-the-Record Briefing With U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker Via Digital Video Conference

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Thanks very much and good morning to all of you. I've been in Baghdad, or back in Baghdad, for about a month now. Iraq has figured a lot in my Foreign Service career. I first came to Iraq in 1978 and early on in my tenure with the State Department I was here for a two-year tour then at the time when Saddam formally assumed his presidency. I was away from Iraq, although serving in the region for quite a while after that. I reengaged about a decade later with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait when I directed the State Department's Iraq-Kuwait Task Force. I was back here briefly in 1998 as the U.S. representative on the UNSCOM presidential palace inspection mission and I was, in fact, part of the inspection of the palace where I'm now sitting. And then when I was Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Near East Bureau beginning in 2001, I had the occasion to visit northern Iraq on several occasions -- 2001, 2002. Then I was out here shortly after the liberation for the -- for about a three-month period in 2003. So I've got a somewhat episodic, but at least enough of a background to make some comparisons.

Coming back now in 2007, I'm simultaneously struck by both the positive and the negative. The positive are the things that Iraqis have managed to do: conduct elections, write and ratify a constitution, form a government, and increasingly take the reins of governance in their own hands. On the negative, of course, there's been the level of violence and particularly the level of sectarian violence. I was struck, moving around the city in my first couple of weeks, by the amount of damage that has been done both physically and psychologically by the violence, particularly over the last year or so. I would say that as I look at what lies in front of us, the immediate fundamental challenge is security which, of course, is what the Baghdad security plan is all about; the centerpiece of the President's strategy.

As General Petraeus has said, as the President has said, Secretary of State, myself, others: Security buys time. It's not an end in and of itself. It buys time for a political process to move forward with meaningful national reconciliation which is why we pay so much attention to issues like de-Baathification reform, constitutional reform, hydrocarbon legislation and so forth.

So as I set about my tenure here that's where much of my focus will be, trying to assist and support this process of national reconciliation so that Iraqis are able to create the conditions where they're able to move ahead with the fulfillment of what they and we have all worked so hard for, which is a democratic, stable, secure Iraq that is a source of positive development in the region and beyond.

And I'd just say one final thing about the regional and international dimension, that's critically important to Iraq's long-term success as well and that is why in a few days we'll be meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh for two important events, both the International Compact with Iraq for which something like 60 countries will be represented, and then the following day the Expanded Neighbors Conference. The neighbors in particular, I think have a very important role to play. They can play it for better or worse in bringing about stability to Iraq. So the challenges are large without question. They are challenges at a variety of levels: the Iraqi level, the regional level, the international level. And for Iraq and Iraqis to succeed all three elements of this are going to need to come together in a constructive way. So that's kind of where I start from at the beginning of what I hope will be a long tenure, and what I know will be an eventual tenure and be happy to discuss anything that's on your mind.

**QUESTION:** Sir, what can you tell us about the death of the al-Qaida leader in Iraq that's been reported? And what impact do you see this having on the situation?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** We've seen the reports. We've tried to check them out. What I can tell you is that the coalition was not involved in this action, whatever it was, in any way, which means I can't confirm to you that Abu Ayyub al-Masri has actually been killed. We're in touch with the Iraqis. We're trying to see what confirmation they might have and what we can get. What would the impact be? Clearly, taking a major terrorist off the battlefield is an important thing. And if we can confirm it, if this did happen, without question it would be a significant and positive development. That said, I would not expect it to, in any way, bring to an end al-Qaida's activities in Iraq. We saw the organization adjust to the death of Zarqawi. The sense I have of it is that it is a -- now a very decentralized terrorist effort, so while removing its current head would be a good and positive thing, I think we have to expect that we will need to continue dealing with further al-Qaida attacks.

**QUESTION:** This is Elaine Shannon, Time. Can you talk about what's going to -- what do you think is going to happen with the hydrocarbon law and other aspects of the political process? A lot has been written about this break, this vacation that the legislators are going on. Are they being persuaded not to do that?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, I tend to worry about the Iraqi end of things and allow my colleagues in Washington to worry about the Washington end of things. It's an interesting debate to who has the hardest job.

(Signal drops).

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Hi, are you back? (Laughter.) It must have been something I said. I think the Administration has been pretty clear why we do not think it is good to be locked in and circumscribed by a set of inflexible conditions. This is a very fluid environment out here. We know that the -- where we need to get or where the Iraqis need to get is national reconciliation, but in order to do that effectively, we've got to have flexibility to work with.

Now in terms of the hydrocarbon law or, really, the hydrocarbon package, some work -- indeed, a fair amount of work

has been done. I think the good news there is that the basic principles to guide this process have been agreed on by all parties, which is an equitable distribution of revenue that will flow from the center out to the various regions. Negotiating something of this size and complexity is -- as I can tell just from my experience with it -- is a fairly major challenge.

So like a lot of things, it just isn't a question of saying this, this, and this needs to be done and it somehow happens. The negotiators are working. There have been several recent rounds. There will be an interlude here because many of the participants are going to be in Sharm el-Sheikh, but I expect that effort would resume very, very soon thereafter. And as I look at, again, both the challenges and the possibilities, I'm fairly optimistic about the hydrocarbons package because of the agreements that already exist and the work that's already been done.

**QUESTION:** Michael Hirsh, *Newsweek*. The question about the summer holiday -- the Council of Representatives.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Right. Several of us have spoken on that publicly, that it would be pretty hard to understand internationally or, indeed, among Iraqis if the Council of Representatives takes a two-month break when critical issues for the nation's future may still be pending. I know the Prime Minister shares that view. I've had that discussion with him and I know he intends to convey that pretty clearly to the Council of Representatives, so I'd be very hopeful that they will do the responsible thing and forego a long summer break.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, Sue Fleming from Reuters. Do you have any information on the five Iranians being held by U.S. forces in Iraq and are there any plans to start the process of release or to charge them?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** My understanding is that these detainees will be dealt with according to standard procedures. That includes ICRC access, which they've already had. I believe it includes the possibility of family visitation. I don't know if that's taken place, but it's -- again, it is part of standard procedures and their cases will be reviewed as all cases are. I'm not sure exactly when that review is scheduled. I know it's not for a couple more months, so we're dealing with these detainee issues really as we deal with others; no more, no less.

**QUESTION:** So there are no plans to release these five to coincide with the Iraq conference in Sharm el-Sheikh?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** No, there are not.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ambassador. Libby Leist from NBC. Can you talk a little bit about the concerns you have about security within the Green Zone after the recent bombing? Have you guys tightened up much more after that and just -- can you talk in general about the situation there and what it says about the surge effort that a bomber was able to penetrate the Green Zone and get to the parliament building?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** There are really a couple of good questions in what you just said. In terms of the bombing at the Council of Representatives, obviously, the Iraqis and we have taken a very hard, close look at that. The Iraqis directed that some immediate changes be made in how they controlled access to the Council of Representatives. We're taking a thorough look at all of the measures in the international zone that we control and that has to be an ongoing process. There are some very active enemies out there and it is, I think, very evident that they are going to look for targets wherever they can find them and that means looking at the international zone, so we've got to be sure

we're constantly reviewing potential vulnerabilities and dealing with them.

But I think it would not be correct to assume that the Council bombing suggests that the Baghdad security plan is somehow flawed. The security plan is primarily intended to bring broad stability to the streets of Baghdad and to put an end to the kind of sectarian death squads that did so much tragic damage over the last year or so. As I look -- and as you know, I think there have been some significant signs of progress there. Those types of sectarian killings have really come down in the last few months. No one is claiming victory here, but it is important to remember how complex the situation is.

At the same time that is happening, I think in response to the plan, you have, as it were, another fight going on which is these deliberate acts of terrorist bombings which I believe are primarily orchestrated by al-Qaida. Indeed, one could say as one looks at the two attacks in Karbala, the Sadriyah market bombing, the Sarafiya bridge explosion, plus the Council of Representatives and the massive truck bomb attack on our combat outpost in Baqubah that there is something of an al-Qaida surge going on that is employing suicide car bombs as the principal weapon. They are clearly trying to reignite sectarian strife, cause damage to us and strike at the symbols of the Iraqi state and government. So, we clearly have to work pretty hard at not giving them easy targets to aim at and a lot of the security barriers go into that effort. And also doing everything we can to identify and then disrupt the network.

But I would not agree that this bombing campaign suggests that the Baghdad security plan is not working. We're just fighting at a number of levels here against a number of different enemies.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on that real quickly? Where is al-Sadr to your knowledge and has his army retreated during this surge?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** As far as I know, Muqtada al-Sadr remains in Iran where he's been for some time. We certainly have seen a decline in militia activity, death squad activity in Baghdad, but coalition forces have also been actively engaged against militias where they can be found and identified. And that's -- these are fighters of every description. This is a sectarian neutral campaign. It goes after militants of whatever identity. And there have also been engagements elsewhere. It's not all about Baghdad all of the time. There's been some significant coalition activity against Sadr militia elements, Jaish al-Mahdi in Diwaniyah, for example. So some indications that in some areas that these militias are stepping back from the fight. In other areas, coalition forces and Iraqi forces are encountering and dealing with them.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, Charlie Wolfson from CBS. Can you bring us up to date on the status of the wall or separation or the barriers that have started to be erected in Baghdad and where Prime Minister Maliki stands on that (inaudible)?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** I appreciate the menu of choices you gave me on how we describe that and I will choose whichever one is not "wall." These are, in fact, a series of security barriers intended to, again, bring down violence gently, in particular to ensure -- as I was saying earlier, that al-Qaida doesn't have easy avenues of attack. And we see the importance of this sometimes in tragic ways. The Sadriyah market had been blocked by barriers. Until a few days before that car bomb attack, barriers were removed so that life could be a little more normal and the terrorists took advantage of it. So the emplacement of barriers continues around the city. And I would emphasize that it continues with the full coordination between coalition and Iraqi forces and the Government of Iraq. We're not making

unilateral decisions on this. We have ideas; they have ideas. We put them together and then we proceed and that's exactly what's going on now.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, Mike Hirsh of *Newsweek*, again. Could you bring us up to date on the status of the proposal for amnesty for Baathists which, you know, reports back here indicate it's been utterly stymied by opposition from Sistani and other Shiites. And considering that this was -- it seemed to be one of the main projects of your predecessor, can you tell us what's happening with that?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** As you know, the Iraqi President and Prime Minister have agreed on a draft text for de-Baathification reform. I think the challenge now is figuring out how to deal with that text in the Council of Representatives, which is the body that ultimately must pass it for it to become fully effective. There have been any number of reports that I've seen asserting what the position of the marjariya in Najaf is. An initial set of reports asserting that the marjariya was against it and then others speaking for the marjariya saying, no, that is not the case. The clerical leadership has not taken that position.

I think we're just going to have to see what happens when this is debated by the Council of Representatives. It is important clearly in our view as part of the national reconciliation process, but ultimately what is of key importance is that process itself. The question is then not so much about getting specific elements of legislation passed, but of building up a momentum legislatively and otherwise that gives impetus to a broader process of national reconciliation and that's where de-Baathification reform fits in, in my view.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, this is Matt Lee with AP. Looking ahead to this weekend, I'm just wondering what it is that you think will constitute a success of these two meetings? Or has the bar really been set so low that just having these meetings is going to be a success in your view and in perhaps the view of the Iraqi Government?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** No, I think these are important meetings. Taking them in order, the International Compact, again, will bring something like 60 countries to Sharm el-Sheikh and the Compact document embodies a number of important undertakings that the Iraqi Government has committed itself to in the realm of economic reform. I think the economic agenda has been one of the more significant success stories out here. The Iraqis have managed their economic policies in a constructive enough way that this Compact signing is now before us after only nine or ten months since its inception as a project. A number of countries are coming to Sharm el-Sheikh with the intention of announcing debt relief, other supportive measures, and the Iraqis, of course, are coming with their agenda for furthering their economic reforms. So I think the Compact process represents significant concrete achievements.

The neighbors' conference, of course, is the second iteration. The sub-ministerial-level meeting here kind of launched this process. Now we take it to the ministerial level. The initial meeting also produced agreement to form working groups to get into more specific and concrete issues in several areas, including security. I think the regional aspect of the Iraqi situation is a very important one. It's what I was trying to say earlier. What Iraq's neighbors do or don't do is going to have a crucial bearing on what happens inside Iraq. And clearly what we want to do is see the neighbors, all of the neighbors, commit themselves to constructive roles and not destructive ones.

It's obviously something we can't predict at this point. But I'm encouraged by the fact that all of Iraq's neighbors have agreed that they will be at the table at a senior level in Sharm el-Sheikh so this discussion can proceed. I think the neighbors forum is an essential one for Iraq's long-term stability. So while I can't predict to you what specific outcomes

this meeting may have, I think it is an important part of a process that needs to continue well beyond Sharm el-Sheikh.

**QUESTION:** So then just having the meeting at this level is success even if there is no concrete action? Is that what you're saying?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** I think getting Iraq's neighbors in the same room at the ministerial level, yes, you can call it a success -- it's certainly an important development. To call it a success, though, I think, you know, that is going to be retrospective when we see what results come out of the entire process further down the line. So I guess what I would really come to is that -- I wouldn't expect the neighbors' meeting to produce a specific result where we can say: "Wow that really succeeded." It's a second step, a larger step than the first step in what will probably be an extended process of developing an understanding among neighbors that truly supports the Government of Iraq and its efforts.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, I'm Michel Ghandour with al Hurra television. How do you assess Mr. Ali Larijani's visit to Baghdad -- first the timing of this visit and do you have any plan to meet with him?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** There are a lot of visits back and forth between Iraq and other states in the region. The Prime Minister, of course, was in several Arab states. The Foreign Minister was in Iran, Turkey, other countries as well. Clearly, there is a lot of movement back and forth as Iraq deals with its neighbors in the run-up to the Sharm el-Sheikh meetings. As far as I would interpret it, that's the context in which I would see Mr. Larijani's visit.

With respect to who meets whom in Sharm el-Sheikh, as Secretary Rice has said and as President Bush said yesterday, we certainly don't rule out a meeting with the Iranians. But we'll just have to see what happens when we're there.

**QUESTION:** Do you have any plans to meet with him in Baghdad?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** No, I have -- well, with whom? With Mr. Larijani?

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** He's, I think, back in Iran now. But no, I have no plans to meet with any Iranian officials in Baghdad at this time.

**QUESTION:** So just as a follow-up, Ambassador, do you have the same authority from the President and the Secretary that your predecessor did in an ability to meet with Iranians to talk about Iraq?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, I think the next step in front of us is Sharm el-Sheikh. We will be there. The Iranians will be there. The Secretary, the President, have not ruled out that there would be an encounter between us, so I think we need to get to Sharm el-Sheikh, see what happens and then after that we see what happens next.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, could you answer the question though? Do you have the same authority that Khalilzad had to meet with the Iranians?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** I'm not exactly sure which authority you're talking about. And anything like that, it wouldn't be --

**QUESTION:** Secretary Rice -- she specifically referred to the authority that had been given him to meet with the Iranians on Iraq issues.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** I think as we saw in the March meeting here that it was kind of event-specific and I certainly would not be going out to meet with Iranians without having pretty express authority to do so. I think wherever we were previously, where we are now is going to Sharm el-Sheikh and, you know, see what happens there and then see what happens next.

**MR. GALLEGOS:** Ambassador, I think we'll go two more questions.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, could you -- you spoke about reconciliation, could you talk separately about the concerns that some Sunni members of the government from the Sunni alliance have expressed about the pace of reform and reconciliation and their anger over that? And, separately, about the impact as you see it as a withdrawal of Mr. Sadr's forces from the government?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** On the first, there of course is a great deal that needs to be accomplished in national reconciliation. Sunnis feel marginalized, many Shia continue to be afraid that somehow the past will reassert itself. Kurds, too, are scarred by their past experiences. In a sense, all of Iraq's communities have been damaged by the past and have fears of the future and that's why national reconciliation is so important to begin to build in the assurances in and among communities that their future is going to be better than their past and that it will be guaranteed by things like rule of law that they can count on.

Sunni frustrations are certainly part of it, but it's a broader problem and I think a whole range of concerns on the part of all communities are going to have to be addressed as this process moves forward.

**QUESTION:** But I wonder if you could specifically talk about the Sunni alliance this week and their indications that they are thinking of not participating any more?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, again, I've only been out here a month. But in that month I have seen a truly extraordinary, even breath-taking range of speculation about what is happening, what has happened and what is about to happen; that I've already learned to be pretty cautious in over-analyzing or over-interpreting. Clearly, this government is under a lot of strain, all elements of it. I think the fact that as it approaches its one-year anniversary that it has hung together given the enormous stress it has been under from a deteriorating security situation as well as other factors is to the credit of its members.

The Tawafuq, the Sunni alliance, continues to be a part of the government. We clearly hope they continue to be so. Obviously, these are decisions that must be taken by Iraqis, but, you know, the fact that there is speculation out there that this element or that element is about to withdraw, I do not race to over-interpret that. That does take us to the second part of your question which is the Sadr withdrawal. Again, this is an episode in Iraqi politics. I have no erudite analysis to offer you, beyond pointing out that the terms of the withdrawal gave the Prime Minister the freedom to appoint such ministers as he saw fit to those positions. And that would seem to me to be an opportunity to bring in

individuals of experience and competence in the field of the relevant ministry and thereby improve the overall performance of the government. That would be a good outcome. But as in terms of the political ramifications, I would not venture a guess.

**MR. GALLEGOS:** Okay, I think this will be the last question.

**QUESTION:** When you were asked about the hydrocarbon law, you said something I didn't quite understand about not wanting to be locked in and circumscribed. Can you explain further what you were talking about?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** What I was referring to was the question of legislating benchmarks. Clearly, we've got expectations. The Iraqis themselves have expectations. My comrade and colleague, General Petraeus, has spoken of our intention to provide an assessment of where we are by the end of summer. This will all be part of it. But I don't think it helps our larger endeavor in support of Iraq and the challenges Iraq faces to legislate ourselves into binding requirements. We've got to maintain tactical and even strategic flexibility to try and help the Iraqis get the larger job done, which is national reconciliation. And the weight and significance of component elements that may add up to that could and very likely will change over the coming months. We just need to have all the tools we can get and all the flexibility we can muster to try to take advantage of successes in the Baghdad security plan to move forward national reconciliation. That is the issue, to me. It's a larger and more important concept than you know specific or narrowly defined initiatives that may and indeed we hope will contribute to that. But it's the larger goal that's important -- national reconciliation.

**QUESTION:** Could you -- just on a personal note and tell us how it's been being there months? Are you able to get out of the Green Zone at all?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** I have been able to get out and about both in the city and in the country. I've been both up in the north and down in Basra, for example. And moving around in the city, you know, and remembering that I used to live here -- I spent two years living here two years ago -- it's pretty sobering to see the damage that's been done, both physically but also politically and psychologically. I was in Dora, for example, an area that I used to visit on Fridays. You could go out and picnic in the palm groves during the fall or the spring. Well, you know, no one is picnicking in Dora these days. But even that said, to see how bad it has been and to be able to look at some of the progress that's being made as life comes back to the Dora market. I had a chance to talk to merchants there. It's all relative to what it was when I was living here, but also relative to what it was, say, a year ago, where you do see some improvements.

**MR. GALLEGOS:** Just one more.

**QUESTION:** This is Libby. Can you take one more, Ambassador?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Yes, I can do one more.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I just wanted to ask you about U.S. domestic politics and how the Iraqis are using that with -- or reacting to the vote on the war supplemental. There appear to be two messages going in, one from the Administration that wants to stick by the Iraqi leadership and the other from Congress and from -- you know polls in the American public that are saying we need to get out and get out soon. So how are they reacting to those mixed messages?

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Well, part of that is my job to -- broadly speaking, I do two things out here. One is try and interpret -- and one of them is try to interpret America for Iraqis, because the messages coming from the Congress and the American public are important ones. Our patience is not unlimited. There is a sense of frustration. We have paid a lot in blood and treasure. That doesn't go on forever and it certainly doesn't in the absence of progress. So I think having that message understood here is important.

At the same time, I think it's important that Iraqis not get the wrong message, which is that the United States is getting set to leave. Because if that's the message they get, then I think increasingly, you will see Iraqis, both our friends and -- as well as our adversaries start to make their calculations against the day they presume we will be gone, rather than making their calculations in a manner to help us stay.

So it's a fine balance here that I think we've got to strike of indicating that for their sake ultimately, but also because it affects our ability to help them, they need to make progress on national reconciliation and they need to make it fairly quickly, balancing that against not creating the impression that we are going to leave, period, because if we leave, they're going to be here. They know that. Then they start -- will start making whatever calculations they feel they have to make to deal with a post-withdrawal era.

And I don't think those calculations would be in the interest of national reconciliation within Iraq, nor do I think they would be something that supports our long-term interests in a variety of critical areas, both in Iraq and in the region.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**AMBASSADOR CROCKER:** Okay, I'm being given the hook here (laughter), but I just want to thank you all for coming in and for what I know for people in your profession is an insanely early hour. (Laughter.) I do appreciate it and I hope you will all come visit.

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