Press Briefing by Ambassador Crocker

Ryan Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq
Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt
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MR. MCCORMACK: (Inaudible) if there are any other Iraq-related questions that you might have, but this is on the record. Ryan, do you have anything you want to say or just go to questions?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Let's just go straight to questions.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay. Why don't we just go right to the questions?

QUESTION: Ryan -- I'm sorry, the U.S. military in Baghdad today said that they had no new progress on the border in terms of U.S. (inaudible) Syria. Could you talk a little bit about that?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I saw that. I think they said over the last month. Obviously, a good thing if that's the case. I'm not sure a single month gives you a demonstrable trend. There have been problems there for quite a long time, as you know, which is why we've been concerned and why we pressed that particular point. So I think we'll have to continue to watch that and if it really is going down, then that's what we'll see.

QUESTION: But you say if that's the case, but you were just there a couple days ago and this has been going on over a month. Is there a particular moment?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: What I -- those of you who have spent more time in Iraq than I know there is a pretty significant (inaudible). I think they look at these things on a monthly basis and what I saw in the statement was that over the last month, they saw -- for the month of April, they saw a decline.

QUESTION: And do you think this is because the Syrians are just -- you know, trying to show some good behavior for a brief period or trying to get back in the U.S.'s good graces to prepare for this meeting with Rice?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: All my time in this part of the world has kind of taught me not to spend too much of my time developing broad theories and a little more than just kind of focusing on what's happening; see if this goes on, see if it continues down, and then make some judgments. But right now, I couldn't tell you. I wouldn't have a clue.

QUESTION: How are the Iranians behaving? Have you seen any change in their behavior?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I really can't say I've seen anything to point to. Certainly, groups like Jaish al-Mahdi, which they support, continue to be quite active. I can just say if there is a change in what the Iranians are doing, I haven't seen it.

QUESTION: Ambassador, on Syria again, can you speak a little bit about what's the logic of meeting Syria now at this high level? Why now as opposed to somewhere else or some other time? And what happened at the meeting with Secretary Rice and Mualem?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, why now is because we've got a set of conferences going on Iraq that involve the neighbors as well as us. So it seemed like a pretty good time to do it. We have been -- when we had the first sub-ministerial meeting in March, I gather we talked to the Syrians then. Now we're at the ministerial level. We're talking to them at a higher level. So it's what the whole process is about, particularly the neighbors process, to see if the neighbors and the P5, G8 can work together for the benefit of Iraq instead of, in some cases, the opposite.

QUESTION: How will that process continue?

QUESTION: What about the Iranians --

QUESTION: Will you -- when you leave, how will that process continue? Do you plan your own contact with the Syrians or will there be other -- will there be some other forum in which some more sessions (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, we'll see what happens tomorrow. I would expect that there will be -- I'd look to a couple of things for tomorrow. First, I would expect that there will be agreement on convening again at some point in the future. And I would also expect to hear something tomorrow on the status of working groups which were agreed in the March conference; haven't yet engaged, but I think that will be a focus of discussion tomorrow, so probably the -- probably have a ministerial somewhere in the future and we'll probably get working groups going in the interim.

QUESTION: But I mean, are the Syrians -- on the whole idea of talking with the Syrians, I mean, do you anticipate this will pave the way for future direct talks on the issue of Iraq, you know, outside of this -- outside of this, possibly? You don't have to be at a conference to talk.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, we'll just --

QUESTION: More regular contact --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: It's going to be an evolving situation. We'll see. There was a meeting today. We've got the neighbors-plus conference tomorrow. As I said, it'll do some things within this structure and then it'll just have to kind

of see where we think we should go next in light of all of this.

Yeah, Scott, you were trying to follow up on something?

QUESTION: Yeah, I still don't understand the logic of it. If I take what you said about Syria, why can't you apply that to Iran as well and have a bilateral talk here as well?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, in the case of Iran, neither we nor the Iranians are actively seeking a bilateral here. There was a brief encounter between Motaki and the Secretary earlier today. That may happen again. And again, we would, I think, look at this and keeping our options open.

QUESTION: Was that encounter at lunch?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: That's what I understand, yes.

QUESTION: Can you tell us a little bit more about the meeting with al-Moualem today, what exactly did happen or didn't happen there?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I wasn't there, but my understanding is that the Secretary made it clear that the focus -- the reason she was there, the focus was Iraq. That was the topic to be discussed, not other topics. And she registered again our concern, in particular, over foreign fighters moving across the Syrian-Iraqi border because they are involved in so many of the suicide bomb attacks.

QUESTION: Have you made any --

QUESTION: The subject -- there's been a lot of layer (inaudible) afterwards in a brief comment, to get back to that, U. S.-Syrian bilateral relations and how to improve them were also discussed in addition to Iraq. Is it your understanding that the Syrians asked that the ambassador -- the U.S. Ambassador be returning to Damascus and did that come up at all?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: They may have raised it, but I can tell you that from our side, the only thing the Secretary was there to talk about was Iraq.

QUESTION: Have you requested a meeting with the Iranians through an intermediary, for example, the Egyptians or the Iraqis or (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: No.

QUESTION: I know the Iraqis have been trying to arrange such a meeting now. Are you discouraging them?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, we're just going to take it as it goes. We'll see where we are after tomorrow, see what options present themselves, see what makes sense, again bearing in mind that the point is -- for our side is not to have meetings with the Iranians. It's what can we do -- what can we do in Iraq or in the region to create better

circumstances and a better future for the Iraqis.

QUESTION: Well --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: That's the calculation.

I know you have something else.

QUESTION: Many of the neighbors here in Baghdad, not all of them, seem skeptical about the ability (inaudible) carry on national reconciliation (inaudible). What would you say to them (inaudible) Baghdad, what do you see in terms of (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I've had a number of meetings with the Prime Minister now even though I've only been there -- God, is it only five weeks?

(Laughter.)

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I think it's hard -- you know, most of my life I've been in Baghdad. I think he's committed to being the Prime Minister of all of Iraq and that means making reconciliation work. But it's also clear that this is very, very hard to do and I've been in and out of Iraq for years and years and I was just telling Sean I was in Iraq '78 to '80 when it was a real republic of fear when -- in the way that security system worked, it just made everybody afraid of talking to anybody else, afraid to talk to your neighbors, afraid to talk even in your family.

Any kind of groupings were banned and that meant if you had a different kind of political view, you operated in a real secrecy in or out of the country. That was also true for the exile groups to a marked extent. That gives you an atmosphere, when it's over, that doesn't lend itself easily to kinds of open, democratic interactions that we're used to. I think an awful lot of Iraqis from all communities, all political persuasions still have the legacy of that climate of fear. And that's also a climate, therefore, in which it's pretty hard to move toward reconciliation. If you're still looking for that -- some level of your subconscious, that knock on the door in the night and then you add to it, you know, the violence and its enormously corrosive impact, it makes all this real hard. But I don't sense that you have in the Prime Minister or his government the desire to create a narrow divided sectarian state. Just getting somewhere else is not easy.

Yeah.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) in the background? Was that the wall building, the (inaudible) is that (inaudible) discuss with the Government of Iraq before or not? And if not, it was then why Mr. Maliki after two weeks start you know, just announcing that he's opposing that they were closing (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Everything we do in the Baghdad security plan is coordinated with the Iraqis. And it's their plan, they're in the lead. They've got the bulk of the forces. We're not doing anything out there on our own. And that includes decisions on replacing security barriers, which are intended to prevent some of those awful car bomb attacks. And you may have seen some statements from the Iraqi military saying, yes, this was all coordinated. Now, in open societies, in democratic societies, the political truth can sometimes change. So when an issue that wasn't

contentious becomes contentious, people in public office might take another look. But the reality is this is coordinated and continue with the Iraqis to replace barriers where we jointly agreed barriers need to be.

QUESTION: So did (inaudible?)

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yeah. If there's a word I wish I could tear down it would be the wall. It's not the first set of barriers that have been in place; it won't be the last. There are lots and lots of them in Baghdad, if you've been there since the time you got going. So you know, I encourage you to think of it not as a wall. It's a series of barriers. In some places, they link up, in some places they don't, based on the best assessment of where stuff might come.

QUESTION: And I thought this was about 3 meters. It's not the barrier (inaudible) you know, the one that you are preventing cars from hitting the (inaudible?)

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, again, it's part of the sad reality that -- you know, you got Jersey barriers we all know about. Jersey barriers don't do much to mitigate a major blast from a car bomb. They might stop the car, but they do not mitigate the blast. Texas barriers do.

QUESTION: Ambassador, one of the things that we keep hearing today from a lot of the Arab diplomats here is that, you know, they're all fine and dandy with this international compact, but they don't really see how you could implement that until you have the national compact in Iraq -- until Iraq actually gets its security stuff figured out. What do you -- I mean, do you agree with that -- because a lot of that is dependent on Iraq actually getting its own house in order first.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: In terms of the international compact, if you look back to its inception in July of last year, a lot already has been implemented and Iraqis have -- an economic agenda is a fairly encouraging one. They have done a great deal there to move toward a privatized, well regulated economy that's plugged into to the global system, so it's already happening. You know, I think it's important and in something as complicated as Iraq that we not let linkages develop. But this can't happen -- this will be frozen until that move. It's a great way for total gridlock. Things are moving on the economy.

The point, though, is still valid. I mean, that's whether you call it a national pact, a national unity, national reconciliation, that's important. You know, that's what the President -- our President's been talking about, it's what the Secretary has been talking about or all of us have been talking about. As hard as it is, and I addressed some of the reasons why I think it is very hard to do in the Iraqi context it needs to get done, because if you're not moving forward on these issues, the centrifugal forces are probably going to take hold and move you back. So I think it's -- I guess the way I'd put it would be the international compact is a good thing. It deserves support. It's got support. We certainly saw it today. It's also very important to move forward on the national level, national PAC, national reconciliation.

Yeah.

QUESTION: A couple of things. If a person has already been asked (inaudible) there were remarks out of Baghdad today by the military spokesman?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: Okay. The other thing is we had a sort of informal (inaudible) with the Egyptian Foreign Minister earlier today. And I asked him how he thought Maliki is performing in meeting his responsibilities to protect all of the Iraqi people and so forth. And what Foreign Minister Gheit said was he needs to be enabled, he needs the tools. And those of us who were present at the Dead Sea when the restructuring was first sort of announced, remember that Maliki came right out and said -- and listed a number of weapons systems that he needed, things like helicopters. He spoke of all kinds of equipment and hardware. Do you feel that -- and does Maliki seem to feel at this point that he has what he needs, that he is enabled at this point or is he asking for more? What's the status quo?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: There's a constant discussion between the Iraqis and us on how you move the development and modernization of Iraqi security forces forward. And again, they really have done a lot. What's being done now in the judgment of my military colleagues and of myself and with Baghdad, you know, simply could not have been done a year or even nine months ago. There might have been enough Iraqi forces well enough trained to carry this fight forward and they've done it in a sustained and coherent manner. You know, I think in these things, you want to move as fast as possible. I think you also have to be careful not to over accelerate.

You know, what the Iraqis clearly need and what they looking to develop are capable, reliable forces that can get the job done on the ground and have the trust and respect of the population. That does not take F-16s. It takes, you know, well trained, disciplined committed forces, whether it's military or police. And that's where I think the focus needs to be and where it is. High tech weapons systems require an enormous commitment, you know, maintaining, operating, training personnel. That all needs to be done. We have programs with the Air Force, with the Navy. But I think you got to be careful not to get too far too fast into the high-tech military realm. Just --

QUESTION: Can I follow up on that? Can I follow up?

QUESTION: Just a follow-up. Thanks. You said in your television interview recently and you said just a few days ago when you did your news conference, you repeatedly used this phrase that the idea of the surge in the security of Baghdad security initiative is (inaudible) the national (inaudible). Do you know how much time you need?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: It's the way Americans or westerners think about time and the way time is thought about in Iraq as (inaudible). I guess I'd put it this way. Over the next several months, we need to see meaningful progress toward national reconciliation. We -- Iraqis have laid out benchmarks. We've supported those. You all know what they are. Those continue to be I think measures that the Iraqis need to concentrate on and try and get implemented. But it's kind of a logical parallel to what we were talking about earlier with Syria and Iran. The issue is not talking to Syria or Iran. The issue is can those kinds of conversations help toward a better situation in Iraq. On these, it isn't to get them done just to say "box checked." It's, you know, getting something done that will contribute to a level of reconciliation you don't have now.

QUESTION: But just two quick follow-ups. First of all, you said that they need to show progress in the next few months or what? I mean, clearly the Bush Administration, President Bush, does not want to, you know, put consequences in terms of a withdrawal but what is the kind of consequence or accountability for it if they don't meet this progress in the next couple of months? I mean, are you just saying that the country -- well, then Iraq will continue to stagnate or are you, you know, is there some kind of condition to your financial support and things like that?

And then also, you said that Maliki, you know, doesn't -- you don't see that he wants to have a sectarian state and that, you know, the training needs -- these people that have the trust of the forces but that also means forces that are free from sectarian agendas. And there were reports recently about Maliki dismissing senior security forces that were doing too much to crackdown on the militias. So while you say that there's progress towards reconciliation -- I mean, are these the kind of signs that he's not really committed to cracking down on the militias?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I think we've got about three levels of --

QUESTION: I know it's a --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I think you're going to run into some tough political realities both in the U.S. and in Iraq if there isn't progress toward reconciliation. We've been pretty clear: American patience is not unlimited. Now that's not a moral judgment, it's a simple fact. You know, if there isn't progress, I think that the American people believe is meaningful within a few months down the line, our ability to sustain the support we want to bring to this challenge is going to be threatened. It's a fact.

I think it's also a fact, as we were discussing earlier, that if in the coming months Iraqis don't feel that they're moving towards reconciliation, then those centrifugal forces are likely to start spinning up again. Those are the kinds of deadlines I worry about because those are deadlines within political context. And the other five parts of your intricately constructed question --

QUESTION: Sorry. Just on the Maliki and the forces.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Oh, yeah, right. You know what we're seeing in the security plan so far is they -- Iraqi forces really have gone after militia members and others who are working against the plan in a remarkable and even-handed fashion and an awful lot of Shia militants have been wrapped up in this. And I think it's that kind of effort that's maybe the only kind of effort that really counts, that people feel that the guy in the uniform is going to go after the guy with the gun, whoever that guy is, whatever neighborhood he is, whatever affiliation he might have, that's what really counts. So that takes some encouragement out of those signs and the plan that that's what happening on the ground.

QUESTION: There's been a -- just following up on that subject of progress (inaudible) kind of little uproar in Congress today of people complaining about the reports that the Iraqi parliament is going on vacation (inaudible). Mr. Satterfield said on Friday that he would expect some of these reforms that they're supposed to approve in the next couple of weeks and that we were speaking strongly to the Iraqis to say that perhaps this wasn't a very good idea. Has anything changed on that?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Certainly, I have raised this with officials at various levels, including the Prime Minister. And the Prime Minister's attitude when we talked about it was it shouldn't be two months, it shouldn't be one month, it shouldn't be a week -- maybe a weekend. You know, the same sense that a lot of us, a lot of Americans have that, you know, how can you go away for the summer when you've got both Iraqi and American soldiers out there fighting and dying to buy you -- the Council of Representatives -- space to do the political work of the nation and then you take off for two months. I think that's felt pretty strongly in the Maliki administration, too.

Now, what's eventually going to happen? Well, in the new Iraq, the Maliki administration cannot order the Council

of Representatives, the legislative branch, to stay in session if it doesn't want to. Clearly, we all hope and expect they'll do the responsible thing.

QUESTION: Can I ask you to just comment briefly on the attack today in the Green Zone, killing four contractors. Are you concerned that the insurgents or whoever is firing rockets are getting better or luckier? And what does it say about the safety of U.S. operations inside the Green Zone?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, indirect fire into the Green Zone is not new and it's hard to say whether -- and I think you framed the two possibilities, are they better or did they just get lucky. I don't know. It's obviously a concern right away because we've got four dead folks who work for us, Filipinos. Again, on the long list of things that are hard to do -- it's pinning down and eliminating those kinds of attacks because those of you or all of you who have been out there, you know that's the kind of system you can run out of the back of a pickup. So yeah, clearly, it's a concern. We're going to do everything we can to get at the sources and get rid of that.

QUESTION: Following up on that exact point, are they getting better or are they getting lucky? Everyone talks about the intelligence failures prior to the war. Is it fair to characterize our inability to -- did you predict that the flow of foreign fighters and explosives and materiel that continues to cause these problems in and out of the Green Zone? Is it fair to characterize that also as an intelligence failure? I mean, after almost five years what have we learned about how to interdict these kinds of shipments of supplies and materiel and (inaudible)? Because as a practical physical matter, those lines of supply are what our problem is, correct?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: And I'd take you back to the problem we've got with a couple of Iraq's neighbors, for example and (inaudible) the same with respect to Syria. If foreign fighters are crossing, what else is crossing? The same thing with Iran where we see very clearly evidence of some very bad things coming across the border -- the whole problem of the projectiles coming out of Iran, so I wouldn't at all characterize it as an intelligence failure. We know stuff is coming across. We know that other stuff is being fabricated inside Iraq, that money is moving that finances these things. But understanding sources or stuff is coming from doesn't give you the magic automatic ability to interdict it, particularly in the conditions of the prevailing -- these days in Iraq.

MR. MCCORMACK: One more and then we need to take a break because we promised Jonathan Beale we'd do an interview.

QUESTION: You said several times that it's not about talking to the Iranians and Syria, it's about Iraq and what happens there. We are told that Maliki last night actually told the Secretary that in order for something to happen in Iraq then the relations with Iran and Syria have to be better, so which one comes first?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I was there and that wasn't exactly how I heard it. What comes first is Iraq. If Iraq's neighbors care, as they should for their own interest, if they care about getting Iraq to a position of stability and security, then they need to demonstrate that. And we think that the neighbors' forum gives them the opportunity to do so. Whatever has gone on in the past, this is now the opportunity for everybody to come together and say we all have interests in this. We need stability in Iraq and we're going to work toward it and then you see where you go from there.

From an American perspective, it is just out of the question that we would take a position that we say, okay, you know,

you're sending people and stuff across that are tearing the country apart and killing our troops at the same time. But, you know, we're going to go ahead and start a cozy little dialogue. It's just not going to happen.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay, we'll take a break in the programming there.

QUESTION: John Roberts -- John Roberts --

MR. MCCORMACK: (Inaudible) and then we can come back if there are a couple other questions.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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