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Embassy News

Ambassador Crocker Call with Journalists

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AMBASSADOR CROCKER: On the record.

MS. STEVENS: On the record.

QUESTION: Ambassador, do you have anything you wanted to start with or we can --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I do not. Fire away.

QUESTION: First question, well, there were – this is Mort. There were some questions about the details of the various laws that have been passed, for example, I mean, going back on the de-Baathification law whether more – more ex-Baathists were going to get kicked out of jobs than – than were going to be enabled to get jobs. That was an issue that was raised. A question about, in the case of the provincial law, whether the election commission would be on the up and up and so on. Do you have any answers to those sort of details? And there were some others too.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, first, broadly, like – like anything else, the proof is in the implementation, so – and in cases like the accountability and justice law, de-Baathification reform implementation, regulations have to be drawn up in order to have the thing go forward. So there's still some – some work to be done. Our expectation is that in the process of developing the implementation regulations, these concerns can be addressed and I think they will be.

The – the atmosphere out here now is – is just remarkably different than it was back when the early de-Baathification statutes went into effect. The whole motivating factor in this exercise was, you know, one of reconciliation, not retribution, and that's a complete reversal from 2003 and I know and I – because I was here. So while obviously, you know, I can't give guarantees on behalf of a government that's going to have to do this up on its own, I expect that these – the implementation will be worked out by the executive council, the prime minister and the three members of the presidency council. And I know they're approaching that from a spirit of – as I said, of reconciliation, not – not retribution.

On the new legislation, we're still ourselves, as are others, sorting out all the details of that with respect to provincial powers and elections. As you know, the UN, through UNAMI, is going to be playing a major role in election preparations and Stefan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the Secretary General, did a press conference, actually, yesterday and any of you who are interested in where we go from here on elections might want to get on the UNAMI website and pick that up. He said, for example, that, you know, it is vital that all steps be taken to ensure that the independent high electoral commission is in a state of readiness for future elections and that UNAMI is prepared now to assist in the appointment of eight additional provincial commissioners. And he urges the commission to review the qualifications, independence and performance of the commissioners already appointed. So you know, again, it's all about implementation, but in this particular case, the UN is also going to have a major role and they've actually done a pretty good job on the election issue out here previously.

QUESTION: When will there be an election?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: The law says by October 1st, this year.

QUESTION: Ryan, this is Tom Friedman. What difference do you think these provincial elections will make in terms of (inaudible) the overall politics of Iraq? What's sort of your best-case scenario?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I think they're going to resolve a lot of gaps in issues that go back to the first round of provincial elections in which there were some significant boycotts, as you know. Though I think in – you know, in a province like Anbar where it's predominantly Sunni, it won't get at sectarian balances, but it will enfranchise, quite literally, those elements, particularly the tribal elements that sat out the last one, and who, therefore, are not represented in the council. It gives them post-awakening, a literal stake in the system and that's obviously key in other areas like, say, Ninewah, a predominantly Sunni-populated province, but because of the boycott, the overwhelming majority of the council members are non-Sunnis. It's an opportunity for the Sunnis to redress that, similarly in Baghdad.

Then there is, I think, a third – a third category, which would be the south, where (inaudible) tensions have come to the fore in recent months. You know, basically, in societies, there are a couple of ways to resolve differences. The – by far, the preferable one is through elections and tensions between and among Dawa, supreme council Sadrists, and different tribal elements need to be sorted out in the south through an election process and sooner rather than later. I'm very pleased that October 1 was set as a date. So overall, in kind of a – in communal terms, Sunni and Shia and in cross-communal terms, these elections should – should correct a significant number of imbalances that either came out of the last elections or have developed over time.

QUESTION: And Ambassador Crocker – it's (inaudible). Absent a census, is a census necessary, a census? I mean, there's been a lot of movement, there's been, you know, ethnic cleansing in some areas can you have elections without any census?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: The UN believes that you can and that you do it on the basis of the roles for the public distribution system. These have been reasonably well-maintained by all accounts because they provide the entitlement for Iraqis to – a basic rations package. And what would now be necessary in the context of developing the election law in the next 90 days will be to use the PDF lists as the basis for a new electoral roll. The UN is quite confident that this is a manageable proposition.

QUESTION: Is it your view, Ambassador Crocker – this is Fred Barnes – that a new and perhaps better class of political leaders will emerge from these provincial elections.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: You know, that tends to be the way things -- you know, the way things work in any democratic process. What will be different about -- one of the things that will be different about these elections is you now have the incumbency effect for the first time. The first time around everybody could run on promises. Now those who have been in power are going to have to run on their records and their opponents, of course, will be running on the proposition that they can do a heck of a lot better. Now I -- all I can say is that it's through that kind of process in most societies, and I think in this one, that you do get more responsive and more responsible government over time.

I will say that, you know, as the prospect of elections comes into closer view, probably by no great coincidence, political figures are everywhere, are now riveted on services. (Laughter.) Just amazing how commitment to better services is now overtaking the political discourse.

QUESTION: Speaking of services -- the corruption issue -- can you talk at all about how this provincial -- the distribution of revenue law is going to work and how -- are there any mechanisms to stem the corruption that's been part of that process in the law?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: You're talking about the budget, you mean or the --

QUESTION: I'm talking about -- yeah, the distribution of revenues.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Right, right. Well, there is no question that, you know, one of the many, many

challenges that Iraq faces going forward is that of corruption. They're taking some steps as you know. The Deputy Prime Minister has convened one conference on corruption. There will be another one next month that the UN has, at Iraqi Government invitation, now engaged. They have named a new individual to take over the Commission on Public Integrity, who actually gets good reviews from just about all the leadership here and has spoken out very forcefully on the problem of corruption, so you know, at least there is, I think, a more sober awareness of the problem and the beginnings of some steps to address it.

In terms of, you know, now that there is a record \$50 billion budget, how do you ensure that the revenues are wisely and responsibly used. You know, frankly it is going to be a challenge and it's actually a double challenge. One is clearly to ensure that corruption doesn't overtake the use of these funds. But the other is, what has also been a problem, not to allow steps -- so many steps to be put in place to control and spending that you actually retard it. Because we saw some of that in last year's execution, that it just got incredibly difficult to execute and expend in a timely fashion because there were so many controls. So again, that twin challenge.

I do expect, though, that this year is going to be better than last, both in competence of execution because they've got a little -- they've got more experience at all, and they certainly feel the electorate breathing down their necks. But also second, I expect to see some -- some real traction in the course of this year on anticorruption, again, because it has received a higher profile. But also because it's already becoming a theme in public discourse, that (inaudible) average Baghdadi citizens aren't getting the things you should have is due in part to corruption on the part of officials, not a good place to be in an election year. So I think, again, like a lot of things, you're going to see some incremental progress here, but -- like in a lot of those other things, this too is going to be a long, hard slog. It will not be easy.

QUESTION: Ryan, bring us up to date on the refugee flow. Is it increasing? Is it steady? Is it decreasing? Why or why not?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: It's -- it's a little bit difficult to track. We are hearing that out of Syria in particular, there have been some quite significant numbers coming back. We think many of these are going back into -- into Anbar which, as you know, has stabilized considerably. Flows are coming into Baghdad as well, but in smaller numbers. And in addition to refugees, those outside the country, we're seeing internally displaced persons starting to come back to homes around the country.

I really hesitate to use numbers. I'd say at this point, we're still talking in the -- probably in the tens of thousands versus the hundreds of thousands, although figures close to 100,000 or more are used in shifts out of Syria. There clearly is enough going on, though, that there is a major need for more -- more support, not financial so much as capacity support, from the international community.

The High Commissioner for Refugees is going to be here in the next day or so and I can tell you that is my number-one talking point with him, that UNHCR has got to get permanent staff in on the ground to -- both to quantify what's going on and to help the Iraqis develop coherent plans to manage this. Because, you know, while the numbers can be questioned, it's pretty clear to me that the trend is moving toward return and at increasing rates. That is a good thing, but it's got to be properly managed and we kind of need the international community to step up to this in a somewhat greater way.

QUESTION: Ryan, this is David Ignatius. Could you talk a little bit about how Iran is playing its hand in Iraq these days? Tell us why you think the meeting that you were supposed to hold with Kazemi-Qomi, the Iranian Ambassador, was cancelled and what you think about Ahmadi-Nejad's plan to come visit Iraq and the Iraqi Government?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, as you know, David, we've been ready to go to the table with the Iranians since the Iraqis proposed another round back in December. We've agreed to a number of dates and something seems to have come up on the Iranian side in each case, most recently this time around, when we were supposed to be sitting down, in fact, today. We had the Iranian Foreign Minister announce that the talks would take place and then two days ago, a reverse course and now they're not.

I can't -- I can't tell you what's -- what's motivating him on this, being kind of simple myself, I look for simple explanations. We're ready to do this because we're ready to do anything that can assist with improvements in

security in Iraq, because that's the agenda; nothing else. The Iranians, presumably, have another set of calculations in mind that I couldn't even guess at. But what it – the net result is pretty clear. They don't seem willing to sit down and talk about how security can get better in Iraq.

Now, with respect to the Ahmadi-Nejad visit, you know, Iran and Iraq are neighbors; they're going to have a relationship, they're going to have visits. The fact that he will be visiting doesn't particularly trouble me. In fact, I would hope this would be an opportunity for the Iranians to rethink what their long-term interests here are, and for the Iraqis to press them on it. Because I've mentioned this to some of you before. I've been around this part of the world for a long time and it's seemed to me that what is really in Iran's long-term interest is a stable, secure, democratic Iraq that does not threaten any of its neighbors and does not permit the formation or actions of groups on its soil that could threaten its neighbors, among other things.

Now, given what Iran has suffered with the Saddam's Iraq, that should be their interest and that is what obviously is achievable. Unfortunately, they seem to work against it by breeding conditions of instability and insecurity that over the long run do not in any way benefit them. And I often think that they are so absorbed in practical considerations, like trying to give us trouble in Iraq or elsewhere that they're losing sight of their own longer-term strategic interest vis-à-vis Iraq.

QUESTION: This is Bill McKenzie with the Dallas Morning News. Obviously, what is happening there is playing out in a political context back here. So what would you say to people back here who are curious about how long it may take the political surge to really start making a difference?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I'd make a couple of points. First, there -- we are indeed seeing the signs of that political surge. The legislation that passed two days ago, a very intricate package: amnesty, provincial powers and decentralization, and an extremely complex budget. Putting all of that together would have been just unthinkable six months ago. The political climate engendered by the bad security situation just would not have permitted the tradeoffs, the compromises, you know, the hard political work that led to these achievements. So you can fairly say that, you know, we're starting to see some results.

The second point would be, you know, we've got to be realistic about this. You know, I'm fond of—kind of say these days that neither an optimist or a pessimist, I try to be a realist. And the reality is that Iraq is hard. Everything about it is hard. It takes time. It takes application. And progress can be achieved but you've got to stay with it. What I don't think we want to do is, particularly at a time when the security gains are now showing a payoff in political and economic terms, is decide that we're tired of it, and don't want to do it anymore. I think we're on a sustainable trajectory in two ways, both the progress that we're seeing but also in terms of our force presence which is on a downward trajectory. And I think we can continue that as long as we stay focused on conditions. You know, not to give up any of these hard-won gains because we decide we need an arbitrary timeline. This is moving in the right direction, albeit slowly. We just need to stay with it because if we decide we don't want to, we then have to consider the consequences both in Iraqi context and in a regional context.

QUESTION: How much are the Iraqis aware of what the democratic candidates are saying about what they would do if elected -- begin withdrawals within certain periods and be out within a four-year period and not have any permanent presence and so on and so forth? I mean, are they -- do they regard this as some sort of deadline or threat or are they looking forward to it? What's their reaction?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, a multiplicity reaction. A pretty diverse political society here obviously. But I think overall most Iraqis look to the U.S., under any administration, to do what's in the interest of both countries. And certainly Iraqis I talk to take it as a given that it's in U.S. interest to see a stable, secure, democratic Iraq emerge and take deep root. To some extent, the debate, I think there's a useful purpose in reminding Iraqis that there is a lot of impatience and unhappiness in the U.S. over the cost of our engagement in Iraq. That can help motivate them to move down the road of further progress in all of these sectors. What you just have to be careful of is not to create an impression, and I don't think there is that impression, but not to create one that gives Iraqis in large numbers the impression that we're done here, that we've just decided, no more and we don't care about outcomes, we don't care about conditions, we're going home. Because if that mindset were to take hold, then the kinds of compromises we saw two days ago on legislation become almost impossible to get. Everybody will then be thinking about, okay, how do I survive once the Americans are gone, time to stockpile the ammunition, dig the trenches and get ready for what comes next. And

obviously that is not the mindset we want to see take hold.

QUESTION: Ambassador, Kevin Fearson of the Philadelphia Inquirer. I wonder -- can you talk any about possible Sunni-Shia realignments in the provincial elections that might be coming up.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yeah, that's a -- it's a great question and it will be extremely interesting to watch as one measure, I think, of progress here over time is the degree to which issues, specific issues, become more important in some circumstances than the sectarian, communal or ethnic identities. So that the -- we're seeing some of this going on right now in the parliamentary give-and-take and, indeed, some of the dissension within political blocs, which, by and large, as you know, are communally and ethnically imposed, is an example of that.

On provincial powers, for example, the strongest differences were within the Shia coalition itself, and you actually had some Sunni floating alliances in the parliament with one element of the Shia coalition against another. And that, in my view, is extremely healthy. And as, again, security conditions continue to improve and stabilize, I think you're going to see increasingly more of that, possibly including in the provincial elections. But it's something very much worth looking at.

QUESTION: Ambassador, it's Sonni Efron. Could I go back to the corruption question, just one more question? I've been hearing a lot about this Article 23 that prohibits corruption prosecutions unless the superior in the ministry approves them and how impossible it is to curb corruption. Was there anything in the legislation or do you have any thoughts about, is that going to change?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I think what is going to need to happen here, and I think it's where these anticorruption symposia are going to go is get out in the open, on the table, as it were, the structural impediments to progress in anticorruption as well as those regulatory or other elements that inadvertently or, by whatever means, create a base or climate in which corruption can develop. That would be one of them. There are a couple of other articles I know of that were put into place in an effort to protect individuals from arbitrary, politically motivated punishment, but in practice, have turned out to protect individuals who should not be protected.

But I think, you know, really, all of this has got to be put out there in a public debate so that there will be pressure brought to bear to acknowledge a different climate and an experience that is going to require changes, because there's this article, there is at least one other I can think of that instead of protecting individuals from politically motivated harassment are kind of doing the opposite, protecting individuals who should be brought before the law.

QUESTION: Ryan, what's Muqtada al-Sadr up to these days?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, as far as I know, he remains in Iran, where he has been virtually my entire time in Iraq. I don't invite you to draw any connection between the two. You know, the Sadr trend, we continue to feel, is an important element in Iraq, both historically -- in the 90s, when it was formed and today. I think Sayyid Muqtada just has some choices in front of him as to, you know, what direction he wants to go in. The fact that he announced the ceasefire and has kept with it since August, I think, is encouraging. We certainly hope that he renews it and I think it's in everybody's political interest, including his own, that he do so.

One of the ways Iraq has changed in the last six to nine months or so has been this kind of popular rejection of violence. Gun slinging just does not win hearts and minds, not with the Sunnis and increasingly, not with the Shia either. So you know, they call it the Sadr trend because it's more amorphous than a political party. I think he does need to decide which trend he wants it to take, and I very much hope that it is going to be an affirmation of political action over violence.

QUESTION: Ryan, I wanted to ask you about the debate over a pause in troop reductions following Secretary Gates' visit. You said earlier in this conversation that we can -- I think I'm quoting you right, "We can continue our downward trajectory if we stay focused on conditions." And I wasn't sure what that meant in the context of this debate. So let me just ask, were you involved in discussions with Secretary Gates, the President, General Petraeus about whether there should be a pause in further withdrawals after July, and

what's your view about that?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, thanks for coming back on it because I would not have wanted to leave anybody there with the impression that I was injecting yet another and different point of view into the discussion. I'm not. And when there has been discussion of a pause, you know, it does not in any way suggest reversing the course we're on, which is to draw down forces.

The question we have in front of us is, since we're committed to a conditions-based process, is, okay, what are the conditions as we go through this first cycle of redeployments, what are we now dealing with and what we should do about it. All I can say from my perspective is that it is extremely complex because you've got only – not only got to look at, kind of, what conditions are in an area where we're deployed in terms of overall stability, crime, sectarian tension, lack thereof, capability of Iraqi security forces; you have to look at all of that, but you also have to ask yourself a question, okay, how will our redeployment, if we make one, change those dynamics, because it will. When we remove ourselves from a particular area, the other pieces reposition or are affected to some extent or another, and we've got to try to think that through. So it becomes political-military calculus and it's hard to do.

So you know, again, as I look at this, I just think we've got to be – we've got to be, you know, very careful. We've got to work in extremely close coordination and consultation with the Iraqi Government on these things and proceed when we've got a high enough level of confidence to be able to say that we're certain that in the aftermath of these redeployments, we're not going to see a new spin-up of instability. And again, you know, pause or not to pause or how long to pause, you know, for me sitting out here, I keep my own focus on -- you know, not are we, you know, moving a brigade every X weeks or months, but what are the conditions and do they permit – and when do they permit us to take – to take another step back. And I realize that's not, you know, hugely crystalline as you try and map this on a chart, but that's actually by intention.

At this stage, sitting here in the middle of February, I don't have a position on what should come after the summer. I do know that we need to be very, very careful in making those calculations.

MR. REEKER: Yes, we've got time, I think, just for one more, then we've got to make sure we get the Ambassador on his schedule.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, Charles Krauthammer. Sorry I came in late, so if you've answered this, please let me know. In our previous talks, you've emphasized how important the provincial powers and elections law would be. There had been some indication in the early reports that there might be a fine print or poison in the pills in the legislation that would divisiate its effect. Are you happy with the legislation and do you expect that we will see effective and good elections by October the 1st?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: We talked a little bit about it, Charles.

QUESTION: Oh, I'm sorry about that.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, I haven't been through all of the details of – particularly provincial powers, which is pretty complicated. But certainly, an initial read suggests to me that it addresses some fundamental issues between Baghdad and the provinces that needed to be addressed, authorities of governors and so forth. And it certainly does what it needs to do in terms of setting a stage for elections. It sets a deadline for an electoral law, 90 days, and October 1 for the elections themselves.

I've actually had two meetings in the last two days with the UN's Special Representative of the Secretary General, Staffan de Mistura, talking mainly about elections because the UN will be taking on a significant role, as they have in the past, of working with the Iraqis on preparations for those elections. And I certainly have come out of these conversations, first, impressed with the commitment and the preparation he's bringing to the job, but also with the steps he's outlined with the Iraqis going forward that should ensure that these are free and fair.

It's going to be a challenge. Absolutely everything here is a challenge. But I think with a transparent process, a UN role based on the experience they've already developed and our own close involvement, that

this is achievable, and it's important.

QUESTION: Will it be a party list system?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: That's another great question. That – this is something they're going to have to work out in the context of developing the elections law. My conversations, both before and after the passage of the provincial powers act, suggests to me that there's a broad awareness that the closed-list system did not really produce the results that people might have wanted. So this'll be for them to work out, but I sense an inclination toward doing this. There will probably still be a list system, but the inclination now is toward open list, and while it's their decision to make, arguably, that produces a more accountable elected government.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

MR. REEKER: Okay.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thank you.

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