



THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials

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MR. SNOW: We will start on the record with a brief comment on the President's NATO experience on the trip.

This has been a very good trip with productive meetings with the leaders of Estonia and Latvia. In addition, the President came back encouraged last night from his working dinner with fellow NATO heads of state. They talked about the normal retinue of issues, most importantly, Afghanistan and on coming up with a coordinated way forward. Again, rather than trying to give you a full readout, I'll simply give you a characterization of how the meetings have gone so far.

Any other details?

MR. BARTLETT: I would say, having done these NATO dinners, NATO sessions for some time now, he was particularly pleased about the interaction, substance and dialogue from last night. As was said, last night was primarily a discussion about Afghanistan; a lot of today's talks will be more of the political nature of NATO, new members, things like that, how open NATO is going to be in the coming years. Those are the kind of thrusts of the conversations today. But last night, Afghanistan. There will be a communiqué that will report out about the way forward with NATO's commitment to Afghanistan. What we heard around the table was a clear understanding of the stakes in Afghanistan and the continued commitment of NATO being very consequential for the future of that country.

If you want a few comments for tomorrow, we can do that.

MR. SNOW: We'll do a little of that, and then we'll go on background.

Q Can we get a on-the-record comment on the Hadley memo, or do you think that the memo shows --

MR. SNOW: No, because, again, you're asking us to do a direct conversation on a classified memo.

Q But just on the reported assessment.

MR. SNOW: What we'll say on the record is, the President has confidence in Prime Minister Maliki. And also, the administration is working with the Prime Minister to improve his capabilities in terms of dealing with the fundamental challenges in Iraq, which are security concerns, economic growth, political reconciliation, and regional diplomacy, so that you are going to have an Iraqi government that has the ability to operate independently, that can sustain, govern and defend itself, and can serve as an ally in the war on terror.

MR. BARTLETT: And I would just add, as we set up this meeting -- I think Steve had touched on this in some of the other briefings he's done -- is to recall the last time the President and Prime Minister Maliki somewhat saw each other in person through the video conference session they had. The thrust of that conversation, again, was how can we grow the capability of Prime Minister Maliki, particularly when it comes to Iraqi security forces and him taking a more direct hand in dealing with the sectarian violence, whether it be the Sunni-based insurgent aspect of it, or the illegal militia aspect.

And both leaders tasked key members of their cabinet and their military to work on a game plan to see how that could happen. And a key aspect of tonight and tomorrow morning's meeting will be for the two leaders to get updated on where those are -- where areas that we can accelerate and expand Prime Minister Maliki's capacity to deal with these issues. So that will be a dominate subject of today and tomorrow's meetings.

MR. SNOW: Let me add a couple more notes. We'll obviously be giving you enough on the record here that we could -- Prime Minister Maliki also has been very aggressive in recent weeks in taking on some of the key challenges. You have seen him making changes at the Ministry of the Interior. He has been taking a good, hard look at police forces and trying to comb out those who have been involved in acts of violence, rather than peacekeeping.

You also have the Prime Minister's avowed goal of developing great security capability, because he understands that ultimately it is going to be the Iraqi people who have to govern, sustain, and defend themselves.

The Iraqi people also have been working on a series of steps that are very important. There was a conversation about de-Baathification; there are conversations ongoing about the hydrocarbon law that would permit the sharing of oil and natural gas revenues throughout the country, providing a very powerful economic incentive for people in all regions and of all backgrounds to work to sustain the Iraqi state.

You also have the fact that the Iraqi government, through a tough time, has maintained its unity. And there's another important point, which is that the Prime Minister and his entire government came into office really in midstream when it came to the sectarian violence that was inaugurated by the Samara mosque bombing in February. They have an enormously complex task in front of them in terms of dealing with building a political apparatus in a nation that has not had one previously, that is a free political apparatus. They also have the difficulty of dealing with long pent-up angers with different factions within the country. But at the same time, they have demonstrated unity and determination.

And the Prime Minister, along with the Deputy Prime Minister and the President, have all been out

publicly stating their commitment to the goals that we've outlined all along, which is building the kind of strength within Iraq that will enable it, again, to sustain, govern, and defend itself.

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: With that, we'll go to questions. And we'll play around with this. If we can keep stuff on the record to the best of the ability, we will, but there are going to be some areas where we can't.

Q How does the President make al Maliki feel as though he's highly regarded by the U.S., say, in the light of this memo?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, he makes -- the way he makes him feel highly regarded by the United States is that Prime Minister Maliki is in regular consultation with our Ambassador, with the President, with General Casey. Furthermore, the two governments have already been involved in ongoing cooperation, as my colleague mentioned. And if you take a look at key parts of the memo, including -- key parts of the memo, you have a constant reiteration of the importance of strengthening the Maliki government -- "need to work with him to augment his capabilities." This, in fact, has become the focal point of U.S.-Iraqi cooperation -- helping develop the capabilities necessary in unusually and incredibly challenging time for the government of Iraq.

The President's conversations on a regular basis with Prime Minister Maliki I think have not only provided the personal relationship that is very important in this case, but also the ability of both men to talk candidly about the challenges that the Maliki government faces. And the approach of this government is, how can we help Prime Minister Maliki? And that continues to be the way in which the President reaches out to him.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just add that I think a little bit of getting beyond just the headline of the story and taking it in complete context and tenor of the memo demonstrates that important questions and obvious points of assessment are being made by the administration. But the broad conclusion, as identified in that very memo is that the big deficiency is capability. That's something that Prime Minister Maliki has discussed publicly, as well as privately, with us; it's something that we have acknowledged. One of the central tenets of this meeting is, how do we increase his capability to turn his good intentions, as described in this memo, into concrete action.

And everybody recognizes it, and those who understand the command and control issues, when it comes to Iraqi security forces, they come under MNFI authority and command. What he is looking for and what he is hoping to demonstrate is more direct effect on the security situation, particularly the sectarian violence. He believes he needs greater autonomy and control over certain aspects of his security forces in order to accomplish that. A lot of the work that has been done in the last month is to determine how best to do that, and that's what the two leaders are going to be spending a lot of time tonight and tomorrow morning on.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me just say that while we're discussing the memo I want this to be ON BACKGROUND. We can try to sort out things beyond this.

Q Were those last comments on the record?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, those are background comments. We said any comments about this was on background.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: If you ask about the memo, it's going to be on background.

Q What about the troop levels? The memo talks about the possibility of sending additional troops to Baghdad. Is the President leaning toward doing that? Will he discuss that with Maliki?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No doubt it's going to come up, but also, the President has made it clear that he will continue to base troop assessments on what he hears from generals. The President has said, as you know, recently that there's a possibility, for instance, as we continue to embed U.S. forces helping to train Iraqis, that you might see some of the troop levels go up. But this is -- as Steve Hadley noted yesterday, we're not going to prejudge either up or down in terms of troop levels. Those are very practical considerations that are made on the basis of conditions on the ground.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And take -- the definition of troops doesn't necessarily mean U.S. troops. It could be increased Iraqi troops. You've seen some of the issues of the Baghdad Security Plan from over the summer, is that some of the Iraqi security forces that had hoped to materialize and be deployed in Baghdad have been slower than expected. So some of the deficiencies may be filled with Iraqi security forces. So don't rule that out when you say troops.

Q Can I get back to something the senior official on the left said?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Your left, or our left?

Q It makes clear that the deficiency is capability -- my left -- the deficiency is capability, how to turn good intentions into concrete actions. Doesn't the memo itself say that there is a question about the Prime Minister's intentions

-- one of three -- whether his intentions are at fault; whether he's being undermined; whether he simply doesn't have the capability -- isn't that a question? And two, is this meeting between the President and the Prime Minister, in fact, a response to the memo? Is Bush going to talk to the Prime Minister to try and answer this question about whether, in fact, he does have good intentions and they're simply being undermined?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll help you -- even though I'm on your right and our left, I will take on the latter question, which is, no, this is not -- the President is convinced of Prime Minister Maliki's determination and good intentions. Again, you have a series of questions, which, within the context of the memo, represents a very hard look, a probing look at the situation in Iraq, and the one thing that has come up is that we believe that it is a capability problem, and that the Prime Minister understands a lot of the complexity of the situation that he faces and is eager to address it.

Many of the joint collaborations that I and my fellow senior administration official have referred to have taken place subsequent to the writing of this memo.

Q I'm sorry?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The joint committees that were formed in the video conference -- that the two agreed to form, those activities have been ongoing. The bulk of those have occurred since the writing of the memo.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd also add that in many respects, the administration and the embassy, as well as commanders on the ground, wouldn't be doing their job if we didn't raise these types of probing questions and assessments. Anytime you're doing a fundamental assessment, as we are, you're going to, of course, ask these questions. But if you read carefully in the memo, based upon some of the recommendations that the memo suggests, as well as some other -- where it says that reporting shows that he is actually willing to address his party politics and his issues within his political constraints

-- I think demonstrates that the assessment we have made is that it is a capability issue. And that's why that's a bulk of the memo, in the back discusses about increasing his capability.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And speaking of which, I know we're kind of doing a Mutt and Jeff act here, but we'll try to get you as much as we can. If you take a look at the memo, some of the actions that are already mentioned and contemplated within the context of the memo have taken place. For instance, Iraq has supported renewal of the U.N. MNF mandate, which was renewed yesterday. I've already mentioned the discussion about de-Baathification. It is clear that Prime Minister Maliki has begun taking a very hard look at the Ministry of the Interior, particularly with regard to police forces.

So a number of the action items mentioned in the memo already, for public consumption, have begun to take place. So keep in mind that when you have a situation -- when you're in wartime, you're going to ask tough questions. You're also going to start outlining actions that you take in response to challenges that are ongoing, and they continue to do that.

Q How is it anything other than a slap at al-Maliki to say that there are three possibilities and one of them is that he is ignorant of what's happening on the streets of his own country?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Because the bulk of the memo demonstrates that the judgment is that it's a capability issue. Just because you raise the range of possibilities doesn't mean you're casting judgment in declaring that one aspect of that range. And the evidence is contrary to that, when you look at the bulk of the memo and the assessments we have made very clear, publicly, as well as, as we said, the itinerary or the key agenda item for this meeting -- is not to say it's a slap in the face, but it's, how do we grow his capability.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Furthermore, you have to address questions that have been raised in the public square, and simply because one says you have to ask the question does not mean

that you have reached the conclusion that it is one of those.

Q He wasn't raising his own questions, he was just echoing those he --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, no, these are questions that sometimes are going to be circulated and other people are going to raise, and that you do need to acknowledge that those are questions that are -- that people have raised to the President or within the broader foreign policy community. And then if you go ahead and take a look -- and please do go look through the rest of the memo -- you see that the emphasis is on capability building.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's just what it says -- a range of possibilities. But if you read the whole memo, it clearly gives the context of the judgment that has been passed, and what we are telling you it's a capability issue.

Q There's the list of the nine items that -- nine action items that he should take in there. Do you know, were those shared with him before today? And do you -- other than the two you mentioned, what else of that list have there been action on?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, many of the conversations have centered around the action items. As we've noted, there are some that he's taking action on. It will be a question about how more aggressively he can be, how more comprehensive he can be. That will be a lot of the discussion in which the President will talk about.

As we say in here, he has the proper vision and intent and understands the issues that have to be dealt with, whether it be issues of oil, political reconciliation, hydrocarbon law is mentioned in there, the issue of illegal militias. What will happen in these meetings is an opportunity for the two leaders to flesh that out in greater detail, determine the road map to dealing with some of those issues in greater detail.

So, I'm not going to be -- we're not going to be in a position to sit here and check off all nine and where -- and give you a grade of where they are in each one of those. But that is the bulk of the conversation, to be talking about these areas, because everybody recognizes the areas that need to be addressed.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Keep in mind, also, that Prime Minister Maliki comes -- this all seems to be -- I want to caution against this being one-sided. This is not the President dictating terms. Prime Minister Maliki is the sovereign head of state. The President respects that. And there are going to be things that Prime Minister Maliki thinks are going to be helpful to him, and he is going to be sharing his thoughts.

Keep in mind that the Iraqis also have clear and practical thoughts about how to deal with problems that are going on in their own cities and on their own soil. And this is a very good opportunity for the two leaders to talk in detail and very candidly about precisely what challenges they face and how we can be of assistance.

But again, the point to underscore is that the United States position is in support of Prime Minister

Maliki, building capabilities, and enabling him to put together the proper series of components that are going to enable him to govern effectively within Iraq and his governing coalition to govern effectively.

Q Among the steps that the memo says the U.S. should take is Secretary Rice holding an Iraq-plus-neighbors meeting in the region in early December. Does Steve anticipate that that would include Iran and Syria?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, I'm not going to go into any detail about these things. Obviously, if something like that should take place, we'll let you know.

Q Has Maliki been briefed on the contents of this memo in advance of the face-to-face meeting?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Don't know.

Q This memo was written on November 8th, the visit occurred on October 30th. Nearly a month has passed since the visit. Can you tell us what -- has the administration taken any concrete steps so far as a result of this Hadley visit and this memo to improve things? We've seen a deteriorating situation there in the interim.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, no, what you've seen are attempts to destabilize through acts of violence. But the notion --

Q But what has --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The answer is, we're not going to tell you specifically simply because you have daily interaction. You have a situation on the ground where it can be as practical as trying to figure out how to secure and hold particular neighborhoods within Baghdad, to security challenges in al Anbar. And quite often -- and those are tasks that have been assigned by each head of state to their designees. Again, this goes back to the conversation in the SVTC.

And so in terms of concrete action, you see them taking place each and every day. It is not as if you simply allow things to sort of go rolling on by themselves. Each and every day, there are conversations where the generals on the ground make the adjustments they need, and obviously there are conversations between the governments.

Q What about the President, though? Has he taken any particular steps since --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, I think the key aspect of this was the two leaders, in their video conference, tasked key members of both U.S., as well as the Iraqi government, to work on a way forward to grow capability, accelerate the handing over of capabilities to Prime Minister Maliki. The whole purpose -- one of the key purposes of this meeting with him is to receive an update -- a key update. Hopefully from that, they will be able to -- there will be some greater consensus on how to do that.

Q And did those two meetings, the video conference and the upcoming meeting in Jordan, flow out of this Hadley visit and memo?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't think the memo says anything about a visit.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No. And furthermore, the video conference, again, took place before the memo was put together.

Look, again, this is -- what you have to realize is that there are constant efforts to assess what is going on in Iraq and how best to address the problems that the government of Iraq is facing, and how to assist the government in doing that. So this is sort of a natural piece of consultation that would take place.

Q Could you discuss the political element of the memo in this respect -- regarding the Sadr faction, the memo raises the possibility of trying to -- I'm looking for the right word -- change the political base for the Prime Minister away from this heavy reliance on Sadr's faction and to try to bring more moderate Sunnis and others, and basically peel them away from that faction. That seems to be the basic theory behind one possibility where this could go. I was wondering if you can talk to that specific idea in your talking with the Prime Minister today?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, it's a possibility. And the purpose -- one of the purposes of this meeting is to gain greater insight into how Prime Minister Maliki is going to deal with a very thorny political climate in Baghdad, which is not only one in which deals with illegal militias from the Shia, but also Sunni inclusion to marginalize the insurgency. And how you go about doing that, who has what voice, what leverage, and who sits at the table to make those decisions, is something that is of great interest to the administration, obviously. And Prime Minister Maliki put a lot of thought to this, and that obviously will be a part of their conversations.

Q Do you think that the President would ask Maliki to repudiate Sadr and basically try to --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, again, I'm not going to describe with the President may or may not ask of the Prime Minister. But I will say that we recognize that the Prime Minister has a strategy to marginalize illegal militias by -- through inclusion, and to isolate those who are acting outside of the purview of the government and of the law of the land, and by doing so, believes that it will be the most effective way to deal with that scenario you just described.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And let me just add, he has made public the fact that he's had conversations with al Sadr about this. Obviously, there are cabinet ministers who are part of al Sadr's party. But the strategy has been to say, you need to make a choice. The government itself should have the exclusive authority for bearing arms and having armed organizations trying to enforce the peace. And they've made it clear that they do not condone militias. And he's had the conversations publicly; he's read out conversations with al Sadr about this.

So a part of this is you're assuming that there's an either/or, that al Sadr is necessarily in charge of all the militias that may claim to be part of Mahdi Army. That is one of the things that has to be

determined. But it is also clear that the existence of militias is unacceptable.

Q If I could have one more follow-up. In terms of the meeting today, are you guys going to be carrying specific new ideas? You kind of characterize this as a listening session to kind of glean more insight into what the Prime Minister thinks about things. But are you guys going to be carrying your own ideas about what you could do to augment his capabilities, what you guys could do, specific ideas?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There's going to be a natural give-and-take in a conversation. That's how it's been every time they've met. It's always going to be a sharing of ideas. It's not one way. But as the senior administration official pointed out, he is the sovereign leader of a government that controls, in many respects, the destiny -- future destiny of that country. And it's going to be very important for us to listen to the specific ideas he has for the way forward. Obviously, we're going to have our own ideas, and it always has been a give-and-take process.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And that gets back to the point we were saying before about consultation. To get back to Sheryl's question, in dealing with the situation -- security and otherwise -- in Iraq, you have to understand that there have to be constant adjustments. We've made this point over and over.

You also -- it's also important to realize that there's a lot been going on other than the violence. There have been attempts to build up economic infrastructure. We've talked about the increased pumping of oil. There are attempts to deal with reconciliation. The hydrocarbon statute and de-Baathification are important parts of that. You have seen public declarations in terms of trying to reduce the levels of violence, and also to be supportive of the government by people from all factions within Iraq.

All of those things are taking place, as well. It's important to realize that Prime Minister Maliki has -- and this is worth emphasizing -- an enormously complex challenge in a nation that had been living under the domination and oppression of a brutal and bloodthirsty dictator, and now you have people who are coming to grips not only with the history within the country, but also trying to deal with the challenge of being a new democracy.

And so what we have seen is that Prime Minister Maliki, rather than shrinking from making decisions, has been embracing the responsibility of the head of state for taking on responsibility. And we find that not only encouraging, but necessary, and we're going to do everything we can to assist.

Q I'm assuming the President is aware that the memo was leaked. What was his reaction?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry?

Q I'm assuming that the President is aware the memo was leaked. What was his reaction? Was there any concern that it will color the perception of the talks with Maliki?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Obviously, the substance of the memo was an obvious part of the agenda, so in that respect, no. But is the President ever pleased when classified information is

handed over to the public? Obviously not, from that standpoint.

Q Was there any intention to share this with Maliki before their discussions?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There's no question there will be conversations, probably through the embassy, with Prime Minister Maliki, but they're meeting tonight, a perfect opportunity to talk about the contents of the strategy. Again, there's nothing --

Q Not the contents of the strategy, but the fact that this memo was leaked to the press?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, look -- I'm sorry, go ahead.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The two leaders are not going to spend their time worried about the process of this being leaked to the press. He will be -- I'm sure the Prime Minister understands the memo has been leaked. I mean, it's in The New York Times. I'm sure he's been made aware of that. But the substance of the memo is already a key part of the agenda.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And again, if the Prime Minister is looking through it, you see the constant focus on building capability, which is precisely what he has been talking about and emphasizing in his conversations with the President.

Q I'm sorry, can you just clarify, you said that you're sure that he is aware of the contents --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Who?

Q Maliki, because it's in The New York Times?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sure -- I'm just assuming he is. But I --

Q But you don't know for sure.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't verify that.

Q Okay. There's nobody in the administration that's alerted Maliki that this is out in the press?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't verify that.

Q Okay.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: A lot of people on airplanes, the Prime Minister is traveling, so I can't confirm that.

Q Just for the on-background record, you can confirm that the text of this memo as published is

accurate?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It is what it is. And I'm going to leave it at that.

Q Is the text an accurate rendition of the memo?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to confirm classified information that's been leaked.

Q So we assume it is.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You've got my answer.

Q Did I mishear you when you say that Maliki is trying to gain further control of the security forces?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, absolutely -- I mean, that's been a stated objective for a long time. It's been -- I mean, he's --

Q I mean, it's a sovereign nation.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But as part of the charter, the U.N. Charter, and the part of the arrangement we have right now, the multinational force, MNFI, has complete control, command and control over both all forces on the ground, which include Iraq security forces.

Q There have been indications that he's not feeling very secure. How can this make him feel more secure in office -- Maliki?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think the very substance of the conversations tonight and the commitment the President has made, and the President publicly made as early as yesterday, demonstrating his confidence not only in the government, but the fact that the United States of America understands the stakes in Iraq and is committed to success.

Q You know, on one hand, you guys are always saying that the President has confidence in Maliki. But on the other hand, you know, Maliki is not doing enough, Maliki doesn't have control, as much control over the situation as possibly he should, is he capable of turning things around --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me jump in there. I mean, Toby, the way you frame this is a summary judgment that seems to imply negligence on the part of the Prime Minister. And again, look, this is an enormously complicated situation for which there is no cookbook answer. We have said of ourselves that we're not doing well enough fast enough. And the fact is -- so I don't want -- it's very important to make it clear, again, that there is not summary judgment of Prime Minister Maliki, but instead there is a great deal of respect for the enormity and complexity of the challenge he faces. And it is worth it, as you do your work, to think through it, too, because you start putting together the layout of the country, you take a look at the different factions, you take a look at the history of the country, you

take a look at the novelty of democracy within it, you talk about the importance of dealing with neighbors -- you talk about all of those things in a time where there has been a concerted effort on the part of various insurgencies to blow up the democracy -- not to vie for authority, not to come up with a competing ideology, but simply to create a failed state, and it is obvious that the Prime Minister has an enormous challenge.

We understand it. We also understand the absolute importance of succeeding in Iraq by creating -- by helping Prime Minister Maliki create a government that can defend, sustain and govern itself, that can be an ally in the war on terror, in many ways simply through the sheer fact of its existence and stability. So you put all those together. We understand that more needs to be done. We also understand that it is going to require the resourcefulness and commitment of both sides, and both sides are, in fact, fully committed to it.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: One more question on this topic.

Q Can we please go back to something --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Patiently waiting.

Q Yes, the memo, it says at a certain that despite the reassuring words of Maliki, on the grounds there are reports of non-delivery of services to Sunni areas, an intervention by the Prime Minister obvious to stop military action against Shia targets. So how can you trust him, looking forward, if your own military command show distrust in him?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I'll take -- and my colleague can add to this -- but subsequent to this, you have, in fact, seen military operations in Shia areas going after militias, and you have also seen very aggressive activity, again on the part of the Ministry of Interior, and that would involve police units that apparently have been involved in collaborative efforts with militias. So if you want to find out -- if you want to do it, you take a look at your own news clippings from the last three weeks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And I think one important point on that, when it comes to targeting Shias, there has been high coordination on going after death squad leaders. There are times when there has been -- there could have been better communication about certain operations in which the Prime Minister complained about, but he publicly made clear later that the people we were going after were very -- it was justified, because there were pre-cleared discussions about the specific people. But how and when the operation took place, there could have been better coordination on, and we've recognized that.

That's part of the conversations we'll be having, we talk about operational control of security forces, how these issues are dealt with, because you can't look at a military operation in a vacuum. They have political consequences. And it's to make sure that the political strategy and the military strategy are constantly integrated and linked up. And that's one of the key issues which they'll address, because as you give greater control and autonomy to Iraqi security forces you have a lot of complicated issues with regards to that -- embedded U.S. troops, how they will conduct operations vis-a-vis coalition

operations. There are a lot of details that have to be worked out, and there will be a lot of time that the two men spend talking about today and tomorrow.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But even though the focus of that particular language is Shia militias, let's not lose sight of the fact that there have been other organizations, including al Qaeda, within the country that are trying to destabilize, and the Prime Minister also is committed to going after them, as are we.

Q Does this memo, in any way, diminish the ability of the President to work with al-Maliki?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q And does Hadley's statement from a week ago that no big, bold announcement is forthcoming from these meetings, does that still hold?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, we'll find out.

Q At what point precisely did you go on background?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Everything -- every question with regards to the memo is on background.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. I mean, that goes back to quite awhile ago.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The opening -- the opening remarks we made before we went to questions, because the questions started on this topic, we made very clear that answers to these questions about -- specifically about the memo are on background.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You can either consult the recording, or transcript.

Q Let's go back to something you said earlier. You talked about the bulk of the memo being -- addressing how to shore up Maliki's capabilities. But if you read this, the memo says, "There does seem to be an aggressive push to consolidate Shia power, influence. It is less clear whether Maliki is a willing participant." It goes on to say, "His intentions seem good when he talks with Americans -- the reporting suggests he's trying to stand up to the Shia hierarchy, but the reality on the streets suggest Maliki is either ignorant of what's going on, misrepresenting his intentions, or that his capabilities are not yet sufficient."

Are you saying that the President is, in effect, rejecting those first two possibilities in favor of the third, that his capabilities are not yet sufficient?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that's evidenced by the rest of the memo that the judgment being made by us, whether it be Steve Hadley or other members of the administration, is that the issue is predominately one of capability. And that's exactly what's going to be the bulk of the

conversations tonight and tomorrow.

Q It seems to fly in the face of what Hadley has written here.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's a range -- it's like what we said to Mark -- it's a range of possibilities. It is not a, as you said, summary judgment.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And, Sheryl, if you take a look through the rest -- what you've done is you've read off the beginning, and then you go back through the steps both sides can take, and those are all about capability building.

Q It's all in the conditional. If Maliki is willing to move decisively, this is how we can help him.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, but as we --

Q It suggests a disbelief or a feeling that you're really not sure who Maliki is and how committed he is.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I think -- again, if you take a look at what we've discussed in terms of measures that have been taken in recent weeks, and furthermore, what you're seeing with Prime Minister Maliki is somebody who has made it clear that he is eager to assume greater responsibility in these things. The President has made that clear in recent conversations, and Steve talked about it as recently as yesterday.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But as I previously said, you would expect us to probe these very issues during an assessment period that's going on right now. These are important questions that have to be raised, possibilities have to be entertained. But the judgments that are being rendered and are being demonstrated and what we're actually doing we believe concludes that we think this is an issue of capability, not intent or vision.

Thanks everyone.

END 12:20 P.M. (Local)

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