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Background Press Briefing by a Senior Administration Official on the President's Meetings with Prime Minister Maliki

Sheraton Amman
Amman, Jordan

12:05 P.M. (Local)

MR. JOHNDROE: Good afternoon, everyone. We're going to start a background briefing by a senior administration official on the President's bilateral meetings with the Prime Minister of Iraq.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good afternoon. I am very pleased to have been left behind to talk with you today, try to give you a little bit more color and feel for the bilateral meeting that the President and the Prime Minister of Iraq had this morning. I know I'm a real step down from asking questions of the President and the Prime Minister, but I think I'll try to be of some value added to you.

First, I'd just like to begin by saying a little bit about the atmospherics. And as many of you are aware, Prime Minister Maliki has been in office for about six months, and during that time, he and the President have met four times -- once in Washington, once in Baghdad, today in Amman, and then they had a video-conference, I think it was the very end of September or the beginning of October, where they were each in their respective capitals. That's a pretty regular interaction for two leaders. And through that course of interaction, as well as phone calls and other communications, they really developed quite an easy relationship. And as a result, there was not a lot of warmup to these meetings. And that's one of the things that the President really appreciates. Maliki is someone who really wants to get down to business and that's what they did today.

I would say if there's one theme coming out of this morning's meetings, that is that Prime Minister Maliki and the President said this very well today -- he's a leader who is aware of the enormous responsibility that he has to the people who elected him and to his country that's under a lot of strain right now. And he also feels that he doesn't have all the tools and authorities that he would like to tackle those responsibilities. So there was a common sense of it is in Maliki's interest and in the President's interest and our two countries' interest to try to empower Prime Minister Maliki and his unity government as quickly as possible so that he can take on these challenges as he sees fit.

If I could just quickly mention that there was a breakfast this morning -- that was the first meeting. The two delegations met in full. That was probably -- Gordon might be able to help me out here, but I'm thinking it was probably a little bit more than an hour. And then there was a one-on-one with the President, which was probably about 45 minutes, and then into the press conference that you were at.

Just going into a little bit about the actual substance of the meeting: The two leaders began by talking about the region. There was a little bit of a discussion about some of the difficulties that are occurring, some of the regional interference in Iraq, but most of the discussion about the region had to do with the consequences for the region of Iraq succeeding or failing.

And they talked -- both leaders talked a lot about how they could talk to other regional leaders about Iraq, and how they could make the case that, really, if Iraq is stable, the region will be stable, and if Iraq is unstable, the region is going to be unstable, and also talking about how democracy is a natural way for Iraq to be a stable country, given the demographics and all of that.

The Prime Minister then spent quite a bit of time talking about the politics in his country, and he really laid out his vision in a couple of areas, the first one, I would say, his vision for the politics of the country, talking a lot about the importance of democracy and why no Iraqi should be afraid of democracy, and laying out, really, quite a sophisticated vision of polity that would move from where politics were organized around sectarian or ethnic identities to one where people mobilized on political issues. And he was making, again, that case, that this was something that should assure people of all kinds in Iraq that they will be able to have their say in Iraqi politics.

Secondly, on this laying out his vision for the future, there's quite a bit of talk about the rule of law and the importance that Maliki attributes to that. And in that context, as the President and the Prime Minister discussed in their press conference, there was a discussion, and Prime Minister Maliki was very, very clear about the need to hold accountable any entity that is operating outside the rule of law, and the need to use force, in some cases, for people and organizations that are not supporting the government and that are using violence, and that that treatment should be the same across the board -- it should not be discriminated upon -- people should, people and organizations should be treated the same way, regardless of any sort of identity.

There's also a little bit of talk of the economic situation in the country, with Prime Minister Maliki laying out some of the achievements that have recently occurred -- the foreign investment law that the parliament recently passed, and a little bit of talk about the hydrocarbon law that is in process.

The President talked very briefly just about the reviews that are occurring in the United States, and assured Prime Minister Maliki that he would consult with him as we moved ahead on those reviews.

And then there was quite a good conversation about the situation in Baghdad, about what the challenges are in Baghdad, the centrality of Baghdad to Iraqi success, and the Iraqi government and their constant effort to look at what's going on in Baghdad and how they can change or adjust their efforts to bring about a calmer situation there.

Finally -- and this was one of the centerpieces of the meeting -- there was a presentation by the Joint Committee for Accelerating the Transition of Security to Iraqis, and that was done -- it was somewhat of a formal presentation given by Mowaffak Al Rubbaie, who is Prime Minister Maliki's National Security Advisor. This committee has five members -- Dr. Rubbaie on the Iraqi side; the MOD -- Minister of Interior; the Minister of Defense on the Iraqi side; as well as Ambassador Khalilzad and

General Casey on our side.

So Dr. Rubbaie went through the status of the committee's work, talking a little bit about the MOI, the MOD, and this concept that I'm happy to talk a little bit more about, about transferring authority to Iraqis of provinces -- it's called the PIC, Provincial Iraqi Control -- and talked a little bit about how in various areas there's the possibility for accelerating the development of Iraqi capabilities in each of those three areas.

And then from there, the meeting broke, and the President and the Prime Minister went to their one-on-one. And I apologize for not being able to give you a readout of that meeting, in part because I don't yet have one.

So if I could leave it there, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

Q Can you explain what this accelerating authority is? If the President said that he's dealing with a sovereign government, what authority do they need?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's accelerating the transition of security responsibilities. So, in part, it has to do with authority, in the sense of the command and control relationships. Right now you have a situation where the Iraqi government has full command and control of the Ministry of Interior forces, and the Ministry of Defense forces are kind of under a joint command and control arrangement with General Casey and Prime Minister Maliki.

What we've already begun is a process of turning over full command and control authority of divisions, Iraqi divisions, to the Iraqi government, and this has been happening, as I said, on a division-by-division approach. There are already I think, it's two divisions that have fallen under Prime Minister Maliki's control. And so one of the things his authority is looking at speeding up that transfer of command and control of the 10 Iraqi divisions.

The other element really has to do with capabilities. And of course, it's a sovereign Iraqi government, but, as the President talked about today, building an army is much more than putting people in uniform. It's training and equipping people, but then also all that -- our military calls it the tail -- all of the logistics, the intelligence support, the things that make a force deployable, that make a force mobile.

The Iraqi army is still heavily reliant on coalition forces for those things. So if the Iraqi army wants to move, it often needs to move with the assistance of coalition forces. So part of this accelerating the transition is looking, how do you speed up the development, ministerial capacity, et cetera, of those parts of the MOD and the MOI so that the Iraqis are in a position to operate without this quite significant coalition support.

Q And there was a lot of attention on this meeting. We've been accelerating for quite some time. What's different today? Is there a deadline? Are there bullet points, are there goals that were set in this meeting that makes this somehow different than where we were a week ago?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think the right way to look at this is this committee was coming together to give a report to the Prime Minister and the President. They established this committee I think about six or seven weeks ago, and it's still a work in progress. So there was nothing that was signed, sealed and that marks a change from yesterday to today. But what was done was keeping the Prime Minister and the President up to speed about the numerous ways in which we and the Iraqis are looking to accelerate this transition. And that has to do with budgeting authority, it has to do with -- I mean, all of this is not sexy stuff, this is the real nuts and bolts of developing these armies -- identifying areas that the parliament needs to act, what laws need to be passed. And so it's saying we are going to do this over a certain time period and now we're looking for ways that these things can be achieved sooner.

Q And the other question, just to follow up on the concern about Maliki's connection to Sadr and the infiltration of the militias. In the press conference, the Prime Minister didn't seem to say that that was going to be a problem, disbanding the militias. Yet, after the memo from Steve Hadley, it seems like that's a major concern for the administration. How much talk was about that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, as I mentioned, there was quite a bit of talk about the importance of the rule of law, and that was done explicitly in the context of talking about militia, although, of course, it doesn't refer only to militia; it also refers to al Qaeda and insurgent groups. It refers to every group or person operating outside the law.

Now, Prime Minister Maliki was talking about that that is a fundamental tenet of his government. Now, what we see is that he has been taking an approach that is not just a security approach to the militia. And I think everybody, as I assume everybody in this room has looked at these problems, realizes that these things are not just security problems; they're problems that require a political element, sometimes an economic component, but also a security component. And what the Prime Minister has been doing is trying to work these three angles so that your security part, what you have to do in terms of using force, is not as large as it would be if you weren't working a political angle or other angles, as well.

Q There is a press report that says a senior al-Maliki aide is quoted that Maliki told the President controlling Moqtada al-Sadr would be "no big deal." Can you confirm that? Did he say that to him?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Those words were not used in the meeting that I was in. Whether this happened in a sidebar or in the one-on-one, it's possible, but I did not hear those words.

Q Is that the general sense of what Maliki's confidence level is, as far as controlling the Mahdi Army?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I hate to be repetitive, but I think really, when he was talking about the rule of law and using force to address where necessary elements operating outside the rule of law, he was very confident. And it was very clear that he recognizes this is a big challenge for his government and one that his government must take on and succeed in if he is to be successful. So -- and that was in the context that certainly would include elements like the Mahdi Army, although, as I said, I cannot verify that quote.

Q But there were reports from inside the Iraqi side of the meeting that they basically blew off the questions about Moqtada al-Sadr, side-stepped, wouldn't answer, went on, despite the President's entreaties.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That is not at all how I saw it. I cannot comment on Iraqi reports of the meeting. There was a discussion about militia and it was responded to in what seemed to me certainly a very appropriate response from the Prime Minister about taking the importance of using force or other means to deal with these kinds of problems, and that no one, regardless of their political or sectarian identity, should be immune from that. So I did not find that to be a side-stepping of the question.

Q Was there a sense -- I mean, I'm listening to you talk about this meeting where they're talking about foreign investment and the hydrocarbon law -- at a time in which 50,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed, by many measures Iraq is in a civil war, the past week was the bloodiest since the invasion, et cetera -- I don't get a sense of urgency from what you're saying or what the President said today, or what Maliki said. The press conference today was largely a sense of -- stay the course. He said there would not be withdrawal, there would not be a major shift. You're talking about bureaucratic tinkering, it seems to me, at a time when Baghdad literally is burning. Why is there no urgency of trying to figure out a way of finally bringing a civil war there under control?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would disagree with your characterization that there is no urgency. I think what you're not seeing is panic. And I think that is appropriate, that there is a sense of urgency and a sense of seriousness and a real sense of purposeness. And I think that permeated every interaction that I witnessed today. The fact that there's not panic is a good thing, because these problems are real and they need to be addressed in a systematic way.

And I also wouldn't agree with your characterization of tinkering. These are the, as I said, sort of the nuts and bolts of getting the tools in place to deal with the security situation. There was, as I mentioned, quite a fulsome conversation about the situation in Baghdad -- the fact that they did talk about some of the positive things that were happening in the country, like the foreign investment law, like progress in developing a hydrocarbons law. I also think that that is completely appropriate. Those are real developments in this country. The fact that there are positive things happening would naturally take up at least part of this meeting. It was not only focused on the challenges, but it was focused a little bit on some of the other elements of the strategy.

Q You're saying that much of the meeting was designed to talk about a task force that is doing logistics in the Ministry of Defense, logistics in the Ministry of Interior. With respect, that is tinkering. I mean, it's important and it's substantive, but not as important as figuring out a way to deal with a cleric like Sadr who is an enemy -- sees himself as an enemy to the U.S., nor is that as important as figuring out a way of trying to finally disarm militias after three years where they have not been disarmed.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, let me -- if I wasn't clear, let me put it in context for you again. What I was trying to do is give you a little bit more details about what actually it means to accelerate the transition of security responsibility.

All of that was in the context -- and that's why it came at the end of the meeting, as I described -- all of that was in the context of talking about dealing with al Qaeda, dealing with the insurgency, dealing with sectarian violence. These are the objectives that we share with the Iraqi government.

And so you have that conversation. And that was, I would say, the broad scope of the conversation. But then, these are two leaders who have a lot to get done in Iraq, and at the end of the day, they need to hear from their people who are operating on, okay, what tools do we have to actually get at these problems? How do you go after al Qaeda, the militias, the insurgencies, if you don't have a good and strong Iraqi security apparatus? And so talking about how to strengthen and accelerate the capabilities of the security forces, which are directly related to the capabilities of the government overall, is part and parcel of a serious look at how to deal with some of the larger problems that you mentioned.

Q When you talk about an acceleration of the transfer, and you speak of those 10 divisions, had there previously been a timetable which said, look, we'll have these 10 divisions of the MOD in their hands completely a year from now, nine months from now, and we're going to advance that to three months or six months? Was there anything firm like that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Nothing quite that firm. There was a sense that they were going to move these things along -- again, it's according to capabilities. There are certain -- I'll take the provincial control as an example -- there are certain criteria that a province has to meet before it is transferred to Iraqi provincial control, and that has to do with the structure and the capabilities of the civilian government, as well as the structure and capabilities of the security forces. So they have a notional kind of sequence of events in mind, and what today was looking at or seeing how this committee had determined that these conditions would be met on a quicker basis.

Q And in a broader sense, the President, coming in here, said that he was looking for a strategy from Maliki about confronting sectarian violence. Did he get a detailed strategy about that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The Prime Minister was very, very clear about, one, the need to combat sectarian violence, and, two, as I mentioned, the need for this to be done in an integrated fashion, combining his political strategy with an economic strategy with a military strategy.

Q I have two questions. You mentioned that there were some areas that you thought that handover had already happened. Which areas are those?

And secondly, I've been reporting from Iraq since the day after the regime fell, and I've seen a lot of handovers from the U.S. to the Iraqi security forces. And every time, within weeks, if not months, there is some sort of sectarian violence that erupts -- How do you accelerate the handover without having that happen again?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This is one of the tensions that has to be managed, and this is why the acceleration process demands this kind of scrutiny at this level, because, on the one hand, you want Iraqis to be in control as quickly as possible; on the other hand, you don't want them to find themselves unprepared or incapable of handling the situations as they arise.

I also think there's a sense of moving forward and handing over transition, but that doesn't mean that the coalition disappears. I think people originally had a sense that handover to the Iraqis, and then the coalition sort of recedes from the landscape. I think the coalition just takes a more backseat role, a less visible role, but is there to come in and in many cases, provide backup.

I don't know that I would agree that in every instance we've had setbacks. I think in some instances we have had setbacks as Iraqis sort out how to handle the problems that they face when and after transition occurs. But I traveled with Steve Hadley to Iraq not long ago, a few weeks ago, and we went down to the south, two provinces where there have been transfer provincial controls, and met with the Iraqi civilian and military leaders there, and they were quite satisfied with the arrangements in the provinces of Dhi Qar and Muthanna.

Q In those areas in the south, that's also an area where the militias have a lot of control and the Iranian influence in those areas. I was wondering if you could just tell me which areas would be the sort of next in line to get a handover.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't feel like it's my place to give you the window on which are the next provinces that they are discussing. Just simply I'll leave that to the Iraqi government and to General Casey.

Q -- talking about --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We were talking about transfer of provincial control.

Q Two quick factual questions -- how many troops are you talking about in terms of the issue in terms of transferring control to the Iraqis? B, was the name of Moqtada al-Sadr actually discussed today between Mr. Maliki and the President? Was it specifically discussed, or was it a general discussion of militias? And three, did the Prime Minister have any specific request for the President beyond the transfer of -- more transfer authority of Iraqi forces?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay, let's see if I can remember these all. On the first one, the number of troops, there wasn't a discussion of the exact number, but it would be 10 divisions, so it would end up being close to around 140,000. You may want to get the more exact number, but that's roughly the right number. That's the overall Iraqi army number.

The second question was Moqtada al-Sadr. I can tell you that, yes, the words Moqtada al-Sadr were used in the conversation.

And thirdly, about Maliki making requests, there's one area I can point out for you, but I think the general tenor of the conversation was we really want a partnership, and so it's not really that the Prime Minister is coming in and asking the President, I need X, Y and Z from you. It's a little bit more of a conversation about what needs to happen to set Iraq on a stable upward trajectory.

In that context, there was a lot of talk about the region, and so there was the sense that the Iraqi

government is looking to us for additional help with the region.

Q Did either leader make any reference to the cancelled trilateral?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q Never came up?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It did not come up.

Q There's been a lot of talk about the Iraqi army, but I haven't heard a lot of detail about the Iraqi police. Was there any detailed discussion about whether it was possible or even desirable to turn that around?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There was talk about the Iraqi police. And as I mentioned, part of this security transition committee, they talked about the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, and then this transfer to Iraqi provincial control. And so there was a discussion of the MOI, and general agreement that the MOI was much further behind than the army, and therefore, that accelerating the development there is a very high priority, but will take a little bit longer in that there are certain ministerial capabilities that may be can be done more quickly, but then, there are other elements of MOI reform that will take longer.

Q -- the same range of issues with the police as it is with the army, it just has to be accelerated?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, two things. It's not the same range of issues because you have a different command and control structure like I talked about. I just want to make sure I leave the right impression that it's not -- just has to be accelerated, because, again, this is not about just doing the passing the baton. This is about making sure that the Iraqis have the capabilities so that when they find themselves responsible without coalition or with minimal coalition support, that they're able to do the job. So I just want to clarify that.

Q Hi, I'm Sheryl Stolberg from The New York Times.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you for introducing yourself. I recognize most of you.

Q Two questions. First, did the Hadley memo come up? Was it raised by either the Prime Minister, the President, or Mr. Hadley himself? And then as a follow-up to Mike's question, can you give us the context in which the words Moqtada al-Sadr came up? Who brought them up? Did the President make any specific requests of Mr. Maliki with respect to Mr. al-Sadr?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: On the memo, there was no explicit reference to it or discussion of it. There were a few jokes about leaking things to the press, which I can only assume were lighthearted references to the memo.

Q Who made those?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't recall at this point. But as I said, no discussion. I think that's really a reflection of what I started out, at the beginning, saying, is that these two leaders have a lot of confidence in one another, and that has been the product of working together over these very intense six months. And so there was -- it didn't -- there's no cloud over the meeting in any fashion whatsoever.

On Moqtada al-Sadr, I think I've said, really, as much as I'm in a position to say about the context of the discussion, which was about the rule of law, was about the importance of getting a handle on sectarian violence, and the role that militias are playing in undermining the government.

Q But the Hadley memo laid out a series of steps that the administration -- or that Mr. Maliki could take, and that the administration believes he should take. Did the President raise that series of steps and say, you know, we think you need to do this, this, and this?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The conversation, again, was not so much like two leaders coming together with their lists of demands. But it was much more a conversation of, okay, here's the problem we have, and here are the tools and the actions that need to happen on both sides to get after them. So the President certainly didn't have a list of things that he was asking Maliki to do, but the conversation, I think, was a lot more sophisticated than that, a lot more of a kind of joint strategizing.

Q Can you tell us what kind of political and economic incentives would work in order to -- the militia, for example?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll keep this answer short, because it's outside the range of the meeting. There wasn't a discussion about any specific economic plans. But I think the DDR process is one that many countries have used and needed -- Afghanistan is a good example -- to get groups operating outside the rule of law to turn over their weapons and join the political process.

Q The President said Maliki expressed frustration that some things -- some of the transfer of authority wasn't happening more quickly. And I'm just wondering why, if it was a simple matter of handing over more authority, why wasn't it happening more quickly, and what did the President say in response to those frustrations?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This goes back to the question I just answered about, it's not a simple matter of passing the baton. It is a matter of developing capabilities that allow the Iraqis to take on very complicated and high-stakes problems on their own. And so, again, transitioning is sort of the thing you do once you've developed a lot of those capabilities. And the President did talk about Maliki's frustration -- I'll have to check the transcript -- and I think he was saying he's frustrated about not having all the tools that he wants to have at his disposal. And part of that, how I would interpret that, is that he's still building his security forces. And so he's in the process of doing that, and he needs reliable, well-trained security forces to take on some of these problems, and those things are in progress. And so that is the context of his frustration.

Q Was there any frustration with the U.S. being unwilling to hand over more authority, or was the frustration merely internal frustration?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right, no, I'm glad you mentioned that, because this is an important point, and a good place to end. The President was very, very clear, and General Casey was very clear, as well -- he was a participant in the meeting -- that this is something that the United States sees as being in our interests, that this is not, I think, one person said that this is not the United States and Iraq struggling for control of the steering wheel. This is the United States wanting Iraq to be firmly with the steering wheel in its hand, and the issue is just, how do we get it there as fast as possible, although recognizing that there are some elements that have to be in place to make sure that this transition is done at an acceptable level of risk.

Thank you. I will see you all on the plane.

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