



Press Availability With Secretary of Defense Robert Gates And Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al Faysal

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
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FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: (In Arabic) In the name of God the Almighty, I am glad to welcome Dr. Condoleezza Rice the U.S. Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense Mr. Robert Gates. The two Secretaries have met with the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques (King Abdullah) and we have had talks about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the peace process in the region, the situation in Iraq, the crisis in Lebanon, the issue of nuclear weapons in the area, and the general disturbances in the region in general.

We have listened to Dr. Rice's explanation about the international peace conference and we think the initiative includes several positive solutions for a sustainable Palestinian state, dismantling settlements, and solving the problems of Palestinian refugees. These elements are in the Arab initiative for peace.

The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (King Abdullah) has stressed the importance of solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which could solve several tensions in the region. The Arabs have expressed their desire to arrive at a solution to the conflict and discuss the final solution directly. There is an international push to solve the issue. Israel must prove its seriousness in dealing with these efforts by taking concrete steps away from political maneuvering and has to work effectively away from (*unintelligible*).

We also discussed Iraq and the recent events there, and we expressed our concern at the goings-on and the instability of its political situation, especially since the incidents in Iraq are not confined to its people, but to the stability of the region in general.

The Kingdom is keen on achieving peace in Iraq and maintaining its unity and stability. However, the success of these efforts are [sic] tied to achieving social stability, equality, and representation for all of Iraq's people and all of the ethnic and religious groups there. Iraq bears a responsibility to (*unintelligible*). This issue has been discussed at the conference held in Sharm el-Sheikh. There was an agreement to a plan, and we are looking forward to seeing the effects of these efforts and what has happened on the ground.

We have also discussed the Lebanese issue and the situation of tension, especially (*unintelligible*). We call upon our Lebanese brethren to respond to these efforts and listen to the sound of reason, and put their national interests first.

We also discussed the proliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction. We confirm that we will solve the existing struggle through diplomacy without escalating tension.

Also, during the talks we discussed the security cooperation between the two countries (U.S. and Saudi Arabia) that has continued for six decades. It is important to continue and enhance this cooperation.

In terms of countering terrorism, we are pleased with the positive results which have come about through our joint cooperation.

In general, the talks were effective, positive, and frank, as they always are.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much, Your Royal Highness. And thank you very much for welcoming us here. We have had a series of very good discussions and I would especially like to thank His Majesty for all of the time that he gave to us last night and the time that we've been able to spend with you.

You have covered very well the agenda that we have been dealing with here. It's obviously an agenda that we deal with from a common view of many of the challenges that face us here in the region. I will not elaborate because you have gone through the agenda, but let me just take this opportunity to say that we are delighted that there was a Security Council resolution yesterday passed on Darfur. It was passed unanimously for the deployment of a peacekeeping force that we hope will bring an end to the suffering of the people of Darfur. We are expecting the Sudanese Government to live up to the commitments that it has undertaken, and we look forward also to the efforts that the Secretary General is making for the peace between the factions in Darfur and in Sudan. And I just want to note that Saudi Arabia played a very important and positive role in helping to bring about that resolution, so thank you very much for that.

SECRETARY GATES: I would just comment briefly that we had excellent conversations on a range of security issues and challenges in the region, particularly in the Persian Gulf. We obviously also discussed Lebanon and other issues. We explored the possibility for further closer partnerships in security. We will have further conversations this morning in that regard.

We look forward to continuing these conversations with our friends here in Saudi Arabia, both this morning and in the future. Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: If you'll choose the American.

SECRETARY RICE: All right, that sounds fair. All right. Anne Gearan, please.

QUESTION: For the Foreign Minister. Can you respond to Ambassador Khalilzad's remarks the other day to the effect that Saudi Arabia has not done enough to assist the Maliki government in Iraq? Do you have confidence in that government?

And also, did you discuss the upcoming plans for a Mideast peace conference, and under what conditions would you attend that conference?

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: Two separate questions, and one of them is allowed. But for the support of the government, we just had a mission from Iraq in Saudi Arabia where we talked about security and where we decided that we will send a mission to Iraq to see how we can start our embassy in Iraq. And so that aspect of it is well on the way to being resolved to the satisfaction of both governments.

We expressed the hope that we can work as closely with the Iraqi Government on security measures, especially dealing with terrorist activity, as we have achieved with the United States and with other friendly governments. And they promised that they would cooperate and coordinate with us in this regard.

And as I said, as a sign of good gesture, we also let them beat our soccer team in the final round. (Laughter.)

And on the other issue, on the peace conference, I said before that we are interested in a peace conference to deal with the substantive matter of peace, the issues of real substance and not form or non-substantive issues. If that does so, it becomes of great interest for Saudi Arabia. And should we then get an invitation from the Secretary to attend that conference, we will look very closely and very hard at attending.

QUESTION: (In Arabic) This is a question from Reuters TV. Dr. Rice, you have said before that America gives military support to the nine countries, but not for war. What are you giving support for? Mr. Gates, what kind of support do these nine countries have to give to the U.S., and why do Democrats insist on a timeframe for pulling out of Iraq? Your Highness, what kind of cooperation have you been asked to give America and its presence in the region? Does this meeting about military indicate an international crisis?

SECRETARY RICE: I might note I think that the translation was not coming through to the American press corps, so let me just say that the question to me was about the support that we – the military support, security support to the nine nations of the Gulf, and if it is not for war, what is it for.

And I would say that it is to secure the peace. We have with our allies in this region for decades been committed to a peaceful Gulf. We have had security cooperation with Saudi Arabia that goes back for decades, with other Gulf states that goes back for decades. With Egypt, we have just come to an end of a ten-year program on security cooperation. So there is nothing new here. The challenges may be different. In some ways, the challenges may be more acute, more – it may be a more challenging environment. But this is a very long-time and long-term security relationship in which we've been engaged.

SECRETARY GATES: I think the question that – two-part question that came to me was what kind of assistance are we providing to the nine countries of the Gulf, and then there was a second question in terms of domestic opposition in the United States to our presence, continuing military presence in Iraq.

With respect to the first, we've had ongoing bilateral security relationships with most of the countries in the Gulf for decades. Those assistance programs are tailored to the needs of each of those countries and their perceptions of their own security requirements. One of the purposes of my coming on this trip was to explore with each of our friends whether there were further opportunities for cooperation and enhancing those security relationships as we look forward.

In terms of opposition in the United States to the war, the reality is that the United States has been at war in Iraq for over four years. We have suffered just over 3,000 American soldiers killed in battle, several tens of thousands wounded. This is very painful for the American people. I think that there is a concern, has been a concern, at the slow pace with which the Iraqi political leadership has approached reconciliation while these sacrifices were being made.

By the same token, I think that there is an appreciation that the United States must not take any action as we look forward that is significantly – that is destabilizing here in this region. And I am confident that the President will take into account in any decisions he makes with respect to Iraq the long-term stability of the region.

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: (In Arabic) When the Kingdom gets weapons, it gets them to defend itself. The Kingdom has never been known to be a belligerent or aggressive country. That is why we are arming. I don't think any one of us in this room doubts the threats in the region and the turmoil that it is in. Therefore, whatever protects the Saudi nation and Saudi interests, the government has to take measures about it. I hope the reporters ask one question, and not three at a time.

QUESTION: In English, please?

SECRETARY RICE: Would you mind just saying in English what you just said? They didn't – they couldn't get a translation.

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: I said that Saudi Arabia is a peaceful country. It is a peaceful country in an area of tremendous threat and upheaval, and so it is not strange that it is trying to acquire a posture of defense that will protect the interests of and safety of the people of Saudi Arabia. And I asked the reporters to ask one question at a time instead of three questions.

QUESTION: Another question for the Minister following up on the earlier question. I'll try to make it one question.

Sir, is the Maliki government sufficiently protective of all groups in Iraq, including Sunnis? And is there any – are there any steps the Saudi Arabian Government is – new steps the Saudi Arabian Government is planning to take, such as on border controls, improving border controls, in recent – in the next few months that will help stabilize the situation in Iraq?

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: All that we can do in order to protect the border between us and Iraq we have been doing. I think what is needed for action is on the other side, and we have been in touch with our friends from the United States also for increasing the protection on the other side.

The traffic of terrorists, I can assure you, is more on this side coming to us from Iraq than going from us to Iraq. And this is one of the ways that our government has embassies, why we ask for cooperation and coordination between us and the security forces of Iraq.

QUESTION: Could you address whether the Maliki government is sufficiently protective of Sunnis in Iraq?

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: Well, it is up to the Iraqi people to decide. I don't know. We, for our part, keep the same distance from all factions and whether they're Sunnis or Shia, we perceive them only as Iraqis and we cooperate with anybody who is working for the unity and territorial integrity of Iraq.

QUESTION: (In Arabic) This is a question for the Foreign Minister. You always talk about the good relations between the two countries. Every now and then we see some verbal attacks or criticism against the Kingdom, beginning with what Zalmay Khalilzaid has said and what the Congress has said. Does Saudi Arabia want to see how strong these relations are?

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: (In Arabic.) Actually "good relations" doesn't mean that there are not any differences over certain issues. But "good and healthy" relations must contain some differences of opinion over some issues. The proof of the health of the relations is that these issues are discussed sincerely and transparently. As for Khalilzaid's statements, I was astonished at them. He was in the region, and we have not heard from him any criticism against the Kingdom's actions before. So, my comment is this: he must have been influenced by the atmosphere at the UN.

QUESTION: In English, please?

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: I said about the statements made by Ambassador Khalilzaid that I was astounded by what he said, especially since we had never heard from him these criticism when he was here. And as ascribed that to perhaps his being in the United Nations and in New York and away from Iraq.

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know that the question was also to me.

I completely subscribe to what the Minister said. We are good friends. We are allies. We have been so for decades. It doesn't mean that there won't be disagreements about policy, tactics, from time to time. But the fact is that this is a relationship that allows us to discuss the most difficult and most sensitive issues in a way that is respectful and friendly. If there are problems that the United States has with Saudi policy, we talk about it. If there are problems that Saudi Arabia has with American

policy, we talk about it. And that is what is befitting a relationship of our breadth and depth.

And I have said too that Saudi Arabia is a member of a group of the neighbors that have agreed on a course of action in supporting the unified and stable and democratic Iraq, and we all have our obligations to carry out and we are in the process of carrying them out.

And I just want to very much thank the Minister for something that he said, which is that they are now exploring with Iraq how to put a diplomatic mission in Iraq. This is something that we have encouraged. We believe that it is an important step because normal relations between Iraq and its neighbors is extremely important in affirming its identity in this part of the world. And so thank you very much for that, and we will try and assist in any way that we can. Thank you.

Are we done? I think that was four.

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: We'll take one more.

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, we're going to take one more questions? Oh, all right.

QUESTION: (In Arabic) Your Highness, you have discussed a Saudi diplomatic mission to Iraq to explore the chances of reopening the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad. Would you talk to us about the nature of this commission and when they will arrive in Iraq? Is it connected to launching a peace initiative?

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: (In Arabic) No, it's only about bilateral relations between Iraq and the Kingdom. It will contain diplomats, of course, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I will keep the date of their arrival as a secret for now. It is not connected to the peace process.

QUESTION: In English, sir?

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: In English. He was asking about the mission that will go to Iraq to open the embassy, what kind of mission it is going to be and when it is going to leave and arrive in Baghdad. So I told him that it will be a diplomatic mission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but as to the date of departure and arrival we shall keep that a secret.

SECRETARY RICE: Last question? Should we take –

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: Last question.

SECRETARY RICE: Warren. Warren Strobel.

QUESTION: A question for the Foreign Minister. Several months ago, King Abdullah described the American military presence in Iraq as an illegal occupation. Is that still the Saudi position? And at this point, would you like to see the beginnings of a staged American withdrawal from Iraq, or do you fear that that would lead to greater instability and more terrorism coming across your borders? Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD: I have made a promise to myself never to comment on the statements of my monarch, so I am not going to do that.

As to the issue of withdrawal, that is completely up to the Iraqi people and the United States Government.

Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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