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Background Briefing by a Senior Administration Official on Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's Visit

Via Teleconference

 [In Focus: Renewal in Iraq](#)

5:09 P.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hi, everyone. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting a couple of minutes on this call. And again, as my colleague mentioned, I'm sorry this is not at the most convenient time during the week, 5:00 p.m. on a Friday. But I do appreciate you taking the time to do this. I know that people's eyes have been on other parts of the Middle East for the best part of this week. But I did welcome the opportunity to tell you a little bit about Prime Minister Maliki's trip that will be happening next week, and also to give you a little broader context about just what has happened in Iraq since the President visited just about five weeks ago.

What I thought I might first do is talk a little bit about just the schedule, kind of the nuts and bolts, and the who he'll be seeing, and where he'll be visiting, and then, like I said, I'll go into the more contextual points.

I think the overall big point at this -- this is really a quintessential working visit. It's not a pomp and circumstance visit, it's very much an opportunity to get some work done, to have an opportunity for the President and the Prime Minister, who have really already started to build a personal relationship, as I think any of the people on the call who were with the President when he went to Baghdad got a feeling for that.

Basically the President -- the Prime Minister will arrive -- I'm not going to give out times, of course, but he'll arrive in Washington on Monday evening, after he visits London for a brief period earlier that day, and he'll be coming from Iraq. The bulk of his schedule in Washington is on Tuesday and Wednesday. He'll leave Thursday morning to go to New York, and then he'll head back to the Middle East.

On Tuesday, he'll spend a real big chunk of the day with the President, beginning first by having breakfast with the National Security Advisor, Steve Hadley, and then meeting with the President in an Oval Office meeting where the Prime Minister will have a number of his ministers with him. He's bringing several of his important ministers -- it's interesting, he's bringing his oil minister and his electricity minister, as well as a few others in the Oval Office. He'll then do a joint press availability after that, and then there will be a working lunch. The rest of the afternoon for the Prime Minister will be

primarily meeting other Cabinet secretaries in the U.S. government.

On Wednesday, he'll be going up and spending quite a bit of time in Congress, really the first half of the day he'll be up on the Hill. Then he'll spend some time with our troops, and then he'll meet with, again, more Cabinet officials -- DNI Negroponte and others -- and then he'll spend some time meeting with prominent non-governmental people in the Iraqi -- or in the Washington area. And then there's a couple of things still up in the open in terms of what he's going to do for dinner that night. And there's also talk about whether there will be more opportunity for him to talk to the press. And as I mentioned, he will be going to New York on Thursday, and that will be Thursday morning. And his schedule is still being firmed up there, but he's looking at the possibility of making some public remarks up in New York, as well.

So that is the schedule, and if you just bare with me a little bit longer, what I'd actually really like to do is spend just a few minutes talking about the context of this visit. And some people have asked, is this a great time for him to be visiting Washington, and I would say, certainly it's an appropriate time for them to be visiting together. They are, again, building on the relationship that they began to solidify on a personal, face-to-face level in Baghdad in June, and that's been about five weeks, and it's actually -- it's a good amount of time, and a lot of things have transpired in that time for the two leaders to come together and talk about the situation.

Since they met in Baghdad, there's been some progress on a number of the key priorities that Prime Minister Maliki laid out for the President, or sort of identified for the President. I think many of you will remember that the President came back from Iraq, and one of the things that he was most impressed with was that Maliki was able to identify a number of political priorities, and that these struck the President as the right ones, and that also he didn't have a list of 101 things that he was going to do in the first 60 days -- that this, much more, these are the things that are most critical to Iraq's success.

So he's made some progress on those key priorities, and there's been some disappointments, as well. So the idea is for the two of them to get together. And I'm sure the President will begin by reaffirming U.S. support for Iraq and for Maliki's government, and then I expect that they'll get into a pretty hands-on kinds of discussions about some of the key issues.

And just to flag some of the categories, as I mentioned, since the President was in Baghdad, Prime Minister Maliki announced a reconciliation plan, and the Baghdad security plan started around that time, as well. He's also announced an economic plan, and he's embarked on some personal diplomacy to help with Iraq's relationship with some of the Arab states.

And I'll just take a couple of minutes to highlight a few things in each of these areas, really beginning with political reconciliation. The expectation is that on this coming Saturday there will be the first meeting of the National Reconciliation Council, or what they're calling the National Council for Reconciliation and Dialogue. This will be probably the most prominent thing that has happened since Maliki has rolled out his initiative and made reconciliation a priority.

So while we understand that he's gotten a number of groups expressing interest and talking to him about reconciliation and there's been a mixed reaction, but generally a positive reaction from many

Sunni groups about the reconciliation plan, this will be the most tangible thing that has happened thus far. And during the last five weeks there has been a rise in violence in Baghdad, and a rise in the sectarian violence. And that's obviously something that they'll be talking quite a bit about.

But at the same time, there's also been a number of things that may be below people's radars that demonstrate that there's still -- in fact, I'd like to put it that this country is trying to pull itself together, it's not trying to pull itself apart. You've seen a lot of solidarity between Sunni and Shia organizations. And Ayatollah Sistani just yesterday issued another statement talking about Iraqi solidarity and the need to overcome pressures on the Shia and Sunni communities.

There's also a committee in the Parliament that has begun its work on looking at the de-Baathification issue, which is one of the things that Maliki announced would be part of his reconciliation initiative. They're looking at the current de-Baathification program and how it could be modified to be potentially more of a judicial program than it is currently a political program.

On the economic side, I think there, there's been more positive developments than I think most people realize, just because I think it's been drowned out a little bit. But some of you will be well aware that Iraq in this period, in the last two months, has realized its highest oil production and export levels since before the war. Over the course of 2006, in the first six or seven months, exports were averaging about 1.47 million barrels a day. And in June, they were at 1.67. So that's a significant increase.

And there's also been an increase in hours of power and electricity. Still -- can't fool anyone here -- still the numbers are very, very low. But in Baghdad, they were around three to five hours in April and May, and now they're up to about eight hours.

And that is, in part, a reflection of the new electricity minister and the electricity plan that he's put in place that has resulted in a number of initiatives on the security front, but also on things like rapid repair, getting up cables faster when they come down, those kinds of things.

Also, Prime Minister Maliki made a speech to the Iraqi assembly laying out his economic program. And it was really the first time I think you had an Arab leader in decades put on the record that there would be change in key areas -- in new investment laws, anti-corruption initiatives, restored financial relationships with Gulf states, and initiatives to improve essential services. And he's started to follow up by instituting changes. And it's particularly notable on the corruption front. He is talking to his Cabinet members, directed them to establish comptrollers in their agencies and submit financial disclosure forms. He's submitted the investment law to parliament, and there's some other liberalization laws which are pending. So there's been a number of small steps, but, again, indications that he is moving from his announcement plan to his implementation plan.

I think on the international front, there has been an initiative called International Compact which many of you have probably heard the U.N. or the Iraqi government or our own President talk about in the last month or so. It's basically an initiative that the U.N. and the Iraqi government will co-chair much along the lines of the Afghan Compact, where Iraq will agree to certain reforms and commitments, primarily on the economic side, but maybe a bit in the security and political sides, as well. And in return for making those sorts of reforms that will put Iraq on a better path to self-sufficiency; the international

community will find additional ways to support Iraq in that transition.

And then finally, just on the security side, as I mentioned a little bit earlier that as we're all aware, the last month has been a very difficult month for Iraq on the security front, that there has been an increase in violence, particularly in Baghdad, really. And that violence in Baghdad is not exclusively but largely of a sectarian nature. There has been a Baghdad security plan in place for about five weeks now, and I would say it's fair to say that the results -- or the initial results of that plan have been disappointing.

The Prime Minister has talked about that. I think our own commanders are probably on record talking about that the plan has not had the results anticipated. So what General Casey and General Dempsey and our other commanders in the field are doing, they are in the process of working with Maliki and his security ministers to make adjustments to the plan because Baghdad is such a critical part of stabilizing Iraq that there needs to be -- they assessed that a month was generally the right amount of time to see if what they were doing was having the right effect.

So overall, I think that security will figure very large in their bilateral conversations; they'll probably get down to some very specific conversations about what's going on in Baghdad, what can be done to improve the situation there, what we can be doing to adjust our strategies. When I say, "we," I mean both the Iraqis and the United States.

I'm happy to take questions. I think I will stop there because I'm beginning to feel like I'm talking to myself.

Q Do you think that the President and the Prime Minister will come out of this meeting with a specific plan on improving security?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that they -- it is possible that they will come out with agreement on certain kinds of steps that need to be taken. But I think that it's important for me to stress that the more tactical decisions -- i.e., about the possible deployments of troops from one part of the country, whether it's ISF or coalition troops -- will be made in Baghdad, and possibly discussed here in Washington when they come, but that General Casey is engaging Maliki on those kinds of decisions.

But I think that it's very possible there could be some concrete agreements that could be made during the trip about shifts in emphasis, shifts in resources, those kinds of things.

Q Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure.

Q Yes, I was wondering, will Prime Minister Maliki be traveling with an interpreter?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I believe that he will have -- first of all, the Prime Minister

speaks Arabic and is not an English speaker. So he will have his own interpreter. The President generally uses his interpreters in the meetings that the two of them do, although it's possible Maliki could bring his along, as well.

Q Okay, thank you.

Q Hi, it's Olivier. A quick question on -- we've been asking about Prime Minister Maliki's comments about Israel's "criminal" strikes in the Middle East, and every time we ask we get told that the President is going to raise this issue during their meeting. What is the President going to say?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think there will be a discussion. I would say that it's an opportunity for both leaders to talk about how they see the situation. It will be an opportunity for our President to lay out a little bit more about how he sees the situation in the Middle East and what the overall trends are, and that here the situation is one where things are interlinked, and the role of Iran and the role of Syria and the role of Hezbollah. So I think that will be the nature of the discussion.

I think really the Prime Minister's comments -- our reaction is this is -- may be the one kind of demonstration of the fact that we're dealing with a sovereign government here, and in fact, it's not a government that takes an American position on everything.

Q Hi, I'd like to ask you about the Prime Minister's address to Congress, and just wondering whether or not the U.S. is advising him at all in his speech, if he's asked for any advice. What would you like to hear him talk about, what kind of messages would you like to hear him raise during his address?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can say I certainly -- I have not seen his speech, I have not heard the discussion of what's in the speech. Our ambassador, Zal Khalilzad is talking to Maliki often about the trip, about the logistics of the trip and the different parts of the trip and the possible meetings. So I don't doubt that they've had a discussion about it, but Maliki is preparing his comments by himself, of course. And I don't expect to see them before the rest of the country sees them.

I think in terms of what we would anticipate that he would address in Congress, he has in other forums demonstrated or expressed his thankfulness to the American people and particularly to the American troops that are in Iraq or have been Iraq for the sacrifices that they have made for Iraq. So I imagine that that would be one of the themes that we'll hear.

But I also think that he'll probably spend quite a bit of time explaining -- he's the leader of this country, and that this is his plan for improving the situation there, and for stabilizing the situation and bringing Iraq to a better security environment and political situation that contributes to a more stable security environment. So I imagine that he'll lay out a lot of his own agenda and a lot of the steps that he's taken, and basically his vision for his country, which I think certainly will be of interest. And it's important for the United States to hear from him directly.

Q If I could just follow up very quickly, when you said that you expect that he'll write it himself, do you literally mean that he will write it himself, or that his foreign -- his advisors will write it for him? Do you know?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's a good distinction. I don't know exactly if he has the pen the whole time or not, so I wasn't trying to say that. I was just basically trying to say we're not involved in writing his comments or giving him text or anything of that nature.

Q Okay, thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He's somebody with actually a lot of press experience, and it sort of distinguishes him from some of the earlier Iraqi leaders who didn't have an experience for the press. He used to be a spokesman, so I know that he does like to do a lot of this stuff personally.

Q Thanks very much.

Q I guess I'd like to ask a two-part question. One is, is there an obvious change that can be made to the security strategy, particularly in Baghdad right now? And the second part of the question is, do you all now think that there is, indeed, a civil war going on as more and more people seem to be saying?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry, the second part of the question -- I didn't hear the first part then.

Q Do you now --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Do we -- okay --

Q Do you now agree that there is a civil war going on?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay, the first part about is there a change in the security strategy in Baghdad from the previous time -- and I think that we will hear, after the two leaders get together, we'll hear more of the details about the change, if anything -- I know, in fact, there are changes under consideration, but I think by that point, they'll be in a position to talk about them more publicly, because right now I think they are still consulting about it.

I would put it in terms of a shift of emphasis, a shift in the way of using forces. There's an open question about whether there will be forces, there will be -- whether more forces will come from other parts of the country.

I also think one of the things that we have seen over the last -- really put it over the last 10 days or so, which is notable, is more of an effort to go after individuals who are leaders or instigators of sectarian violence. And you've probably seen press reports of more leaders being picked up in Baghdad and around Baghdad, and actually in Basra, as well. One of the leaders of the Jaish al-Mahdi leaders in Basra was picked up over the course of the last week, as well. And that is a new development, and one that I think there's broad agreement has to be part of a successful strategy, there has to be this going after the people who are provoking the violence on that side. So that's what I would say to that.

In terms of the civil war question, I would simply say that there has been a rise in sectarian violence, but that in itself does not constitute a civil war, that what you really can see when you look at the individual developments in Iraq over the last few months, again, this country is trying to pull itself together. You see its leadership is trying to come together and find tangible ways, rhetorical ways, symbolic ways of underscoring the importance of maintaining Iraq at the expense of empowering different sectarian groups.

There's a poll, which I don't have in front of me right now, but that I would recommend to you from the International Republican Institute that just came out a couple of days ago. And it's from June, so it's just -- it's within the last month or so. And they asked the question about, do you support breaking up Iraq into different parts along sectarian lines? And I'm sorry I don't have it in front of me to give you the exact amount, but it was over 70 percent of Iraqis really rejected that idea.

So again, I think there is a lot to point to the fact that -- not trying to diminish the reality that there is a real problem with sectarianism, that sectarian violence in Baghdad is on the rise, and that it is one of the most serious problems that this government has to deal with, but at the same time, that this government is still acting as a national government, it still has members at the most senior levels working to create an agenda that is not a sectarian agenda, and one that will advance the interests of the country as a whole.

Q Thanks.

Q Hi, you may have answered this question as far as you can in the previous answer, but if I could just press you a little bit more on the security situation.

You said that the tactical decisions are largely going to be made by General Casey and the security ministers in Baghdad. I guess I'd sort of raise the question of what's left. If they're going to make decisions on troops and where they're going and how many, other than this initiative about going after leaders, what is left for the two of them to talk about with a new strategy?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think they can talk about -- I guess there's not a lot more I can say on this -- but they can talk about the developments of the Iraqi security forces, how that's going, if the emphasis or the emphases are in the right place. They can talk about the Ministry of Interior, which in fact the Prime Minister has acknowledged is in need of reform. They can talk about -- there's a range of security issues that don't require tactical shifts, putting troops here or there. They can talk about operational concepts -- what's the operational concept behind what they're doing in Baghdad versus what they're doing in Ramadi versus what's happening in Basra.

And let me just underscore what we all take to be a given, is that any time there's a situation like the one in Baghdad, doesn't just have a security solution. It's both a security and a political and to some extent an economic solution, but heavy on the security and the political.

So I think the President will be also looking to Maliki very much, what is being done by Iraq's leaders to really rally people to push back against sectarianism, and to do -- what kind of leadership is being exerted to get that message out.

And I think we see parts of it -- as I said, we expect that this National Council for Reconciliation and Dialogue will meet on Saturday. That will be a new institution, there will be new faces, and they will be delivering a message of national unity.

So I think there's a lot to discuss, even if they're not discussing about what battalion goes where.

Q Okay. And just to get to the first two points you made, which is the development of the Iraqi security forces and sort of making sure resources are in the right place, is there maybe some discussion or hopefully some agreement on the mix of Iraqi versus coalition troops in Baghdad? There has been a lot of talk of the Iraqis actually have taken over quite a bit of battle space in Baghdad.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right.

Q Is there any thought about moving, changing that mix, maybe having the Americans move back in some of those areas? Is that perhaps on the table?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I've got to be careful how I say this, not to leave you with the wrong impression, that certainly would be an appropriate thing for them to discuss. I can't tell you that there is going to be necessarily any sort of announcement to that effect.

Q Okay, thank you very much.

Q Thanks for doing this. Trying to get the larger picture of trying to reverse this dynamic. On the sectarian side, we've been looking at this obviously getting worse and worse, not better and better -- even with the unity government. How at some point can you sort of change this? The forced migration issue seems to be on the rise, more and more people being forced from their homes and neighborhoods. Each of these kind of developments builds on the other, and I'm not sure there's any dramatic -- I'm not sure what dramatic gestures are left to try to change that momentum. Can you talk about -- is there anything? Or is this a very long process to try to change that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: If your question amounts to is there sort of a quick fix or a silver bullet, I would agree with that, no, there's not -- there's a multitude of trends, and that reversing them will take a lot of effort across a range of areas on the security and political side, and that the time frame for this will be gradual.

But all that said, I do think that the situation in Baghdad is one that if there starts to be improvement in that city that that will have positive -- I guess, the word is reverberations throughout the country. So that is one of the reasons why Baghdad is so heavily on the minds both of the Prime Minister and the President.

Q So the answer then essentially is that there are no grand gestures at this point?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No. Grand gestures -- there's no one single thing that can be

done in a short time frame to produce immediate results, that's true. But whether or not there are any tools left in the arsenal to tackle sectarianism, my answer is, yes, there are. And I would put those in the category some of them are political, and that is forging ahead with the reconciliation plan in all of its dimensions, whether it's the de-Baathification commission I mentioned, whether it's the detainee release program that the Prime Minister has already released large numbers of detainees, whether it's dialogue between the Iraqi government and other parts of society, or whether it's sort of a national dialogue through the committees that I mentioned.

And there's also steps that can be taken in a security situation -- again, the Baghdad situation being so critical -- steps to hopefully improve that situation. Again, it won't be dramatic; it won't be overnight, but that that will have a very real impact on the overall situation in the country.

Q Thank you.

Q I have a question about politics. Can you tell us what the message that the President is trying to send this week to the Iraqi people and to the American people out of this meeting? What's the kind of political message you're trying to send with this meeting?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What's the message that we're trying to send, or -- I'm sorry, I lost you for a bit there -- or that the Prime Minister is trying to send?

Q No, I was going to try to say, from the American point of view, there's a political message that I assume you want to send both to the Iraqi people and also to the Americans, and I'm wondering if you could describe what that message would be?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think at the most basic level, the message would be one of a continued commitment to Iraq, one of -- kind of a sense of pragmatism, that we are cognizant of the challenges in Iraq -- we, meaning both the Prime Minister and the President -- and that we are working very diligently to constantly assess the tools and the approaches we're using to tackle those challenges, and adjusting them where we're necessary.

So our commitment is still there, that our interest in -- or our major national security interest in a successful Iraq is as essential as ever, and that we are engaged from the President on down at constantly adjusting our strategy so that we have the greatest chances of success.

Q One other question, just on the sectarian violence. Does the President feel that the Prime Minister is doing all that he can to address sectarianism within the security forces and the military in Iraq? And is he going to use this as an opportunity to ask him to do more, or to do anything specifically?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't say at this point, because the meeting hasn't happened, whether or not he'll make specific requests of him. I think that the tone of the overall meeting, I expect it to be one -- a definite one of partnership, but also that the President will be pushing on Prime Minister Maliki to take the steps that he can take to address this situation, to underscore that he can be sure of American support for taking those hard steps.

And we've seen that he's been willing to take some of those steps, particularly in the arrests that I mentioned just a short while ago. That's an indication that he is making some tough decisions that have possible security and political implications for him, but that he recognizes that the situation won't improve unless he moves forward on those fronts.

Q Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure.

Q There was an emphasis when Bush was in Baghdad that the future of Iraq was in the hands of the Iraqis. Do you all worry that Maliki's visit here will again fuel the perception that the United States is holding the reins on this whole thing?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not concerned about that because I think that there's plenty of room for that to be true, while it also to be true that we are heavily invested in the success of Iraq. And so we have enormous interests in how it's progressing and in supporting its government and supporting the Prime Minister in his efforts to be successful.

So I think that the two messages of partnership and commitment on the part of the United States for leaders who are doing the right things, who are making the right choices is compatible with -- ultimately it's up to Iraqis to make the situation in Iraq work. And I think that's more true than ever given the increasing sectarian challenges.

Q I got back in line. You said at the outset of your comments that this is going to be quintessential working visit, not pomp and circumstance, and the opportunity to get some work done. I'm just wondering what is at the top of the President's list of deliverables that he would like to get from Maliki during this working visit?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would put it, just if I might phrase the question a little bit differently, what is on the top of the President's list in terms of things that he wants to talk to Maliki frankly about and to strategize with him jointly about, and I would put the situation in Baghdad very high on the list. And I would put the efforts at reconciliation right alongside because the two are really intertwined.

Thank you all, thanks for your time, and have a good weekend.

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