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Press Gaggle by Dana Perino and Dr. Ali Al-Dabbagh, Spokesman for the Government of Iraq

9:35 A.M. EDT

 [Press Briefings](#)

MS. PERINO: I wanted to -- I will take your questions first, before I turn it over to our special guest, who actually joined us last April when he was in town, as well. It's Dr. Ali Al-Dabbagh, who is here from -- there he is -- from Iraq. He is the spokesperson for Prime Minister Maliki. Prior to the role as the government's spokesperson, he was elected to the Iraqi national assembly. And he can talk to you about why he is here, and what they're trying to achieve, and the progress that they're starting to have in Iraq.

I have a couple of announcements. The President had his opening -- I'm sorry, his normal briefings at 8:00 a.m. At 10:10 a.m. this morning, one of the reasons I'm going to have to scoot out of here, is the President will meet in the Oval Office with the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. It will provide an opportunity for the President and President Johnson-Sirleaf to talk about Liberia's accomplishments nearly two years after Liberia's historic democratic election. And the President will use the opportunity to reiterate that the United States has a continued commitment to social, economic and democratic progress in Liberia. And they will discuss areas of cooperation such as education, reconstruction, trade and investment, security sector reform, and debt relief.

On Ask the White House today at 2:00 p.m., the Director of the Peace Corps, Ron Tschetter, will discuss the history, future and current work of the Peace Corps. He is currently back from visiting volunteers in Niger and Burkina Faso.

Also, Mrs. Bush leaves for the Middle East on Saturday. And tomorrow Anita McBride and Elliot Abrams will provide a 30-minute briefing regarding Mrs. Bush's trip. Just a reminder, she's going to the following countries: United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan. During the trip Mrs. Bush will meet with key officials, medical and educational leaders, and leaders of women's groups. She is also going to visit several cancer treatment centers, and the screening centers for cancer. She's going to be launching some new initiatives about cancer awareness in the region, and she will observe first hand the U.S.-Middle East partnership for breast cancer awareness and research program and the expansion of its role. And they will provide more detail about the schedule at that briefing tomorrow.

Q When is the briefing?

MS. PERINO: I'm sorry, the --

Q When and where?

MS. PERINO: -- specific time to be determined. We'll try to put it on the schedule tonight, just to let you know, or as soon as we know. She was working on schedules, to make sure everyone was still available.

The National Counterterrorism had an announcement today. Vice Admiral Scott Redd has told the President that he plans to resign. This is a man who has had 40 years of government service. He has served his nation with distinction. The National Counterterrorism Center is part of the Director of National Intelligence operation; it plays a crucial role in protecting us from terrorist attacks. And we certainly wish Vice Admiral Redd all the best, and thank him for his commitment to serve.

With that, I'll take your questions.

Q Is the White House concerned about Iraq awarding energy contracts to Iran and China?

MS. PERINO: I saw those reports this morning and I need to check into it. I think that we've encouraged foreign investment in the country, but obviously we are concerned about negative influence from Iran in the country. And so let me see if I can get you any additional information about that. Some of these reports that first come out don't necessarily pan out to be -- in full context, so I want to make sure that I get that before I respond.

Q Can you shed light on the President's World War III warning yesterday? I don't know whether to ask what countries he feels might be involved, or what in particular about a nuclear-armed Iran would lead to World War III.

MS. PERINO: Well, I think that the President was not making any war plans, and he wasn't making any declarations. He was making a point, and the point is that we do not believe and neither does the international community believe that Iran should be allowed to pursue nuclear weapons -- that that would lead to a very dangerous -- a potentially dangerous situation, and potentially lead to a scenario where you have World War III. But he was using that as a rhetorical point, not, you know, making a declaration.

Q It's the scenario that I want to get at. I mean obviously Iran has threatened Israel, and we have had military officials, for example General Abizaid, who said there are ways to live with a nuclear-armed Iran. The President disagrees, so tell me precisely --

MS. PERINO: Well, it's not just the President that disagrees, the United Nations Security Council disagrees. It's the international community that has unanimously said that Iran needs to halt its -- suspend its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities, because they don't believe that Iran should be allowed to have a nuclear weapon. We have a path for Iran to be able to have civilian nuclear power, but I'm not going to get into hypothetical situations and discussions about a possible war scenario, because as I said, the President was making a point that one of the reasons that this international community is united is because we believe that Iran should not be allowed to pursue

nuclear weapons.

John.

Q Thank you, Dana. Turning to the domestic front, two nights ago, the County Board of Supervisors in Prince William County took some tough measures once again to deal with their illegal immigration problem, creating a special crime unit to deal with it, and denying eight public services to those who are found to be in their county illegally. Is the administration monitoring local communities taking the offensive on this issue? And does the President regret he did not push security only in the immigration package?

MS. PERINO: No. The President feels strongly that the best way to solve the immigration problem was to solve all the problems at once through a comprehensive bill. We are aware of the reports about a patchwork of immigration laws being passed throughout the country, through either state, local or city laws. The President is concerned about the immigration problem for the impact that it has on national security; that's why he advocated for more border security first.

For the people that really wanted to have border security improved, they should have voted for comprehensive immigration reform, because that's where the President's focus was, not only just on the border, but also on ensuring enforcement and cracking down on employers. So we are trying to do what we can through administrative means and we've also asked Congress to continue to take a look at it. But we're not going to wait for them.

But one of the things that we're trying to do is make sure that employers are held to account; that they're not hiring illegal workers. And the federal judge, threw that out -- threw one of those measures out last week when he threw out the No-Match provision, that Social Security Administration was sending --

Q Judge Breyer?

MS. PERINO: Well, I don't know the name of the judge, but yes, that provision was thrown out. And the President believes that this is one of the problems of not having a federal national program to deal with the comprehensive immigration reform problems that we have. He proposed a comprehensive solution, and border security was a large part of that.

Mark.

Q Dana, has the President been briefed on the investigation of the incident in August in which the Air Force flew live nuclear weapons across the country?

MS. PERINO: I believe that he was. I don't -- I wasn't there for that, but, obviously, there's an investigation ongoing, and Secretary Gates is taking it very seriously. And I don't have --

Q What was the President's reaction to that?

MS. PERINO: As I said, in August, I wasn't with him when that situation occurred. And I can check, but, obviously, he would have been concerned and appreciates the fact that Secretary Gates on top of these things right away to make sure that people are held to account; find out what went wrong, make sure it doesn't happen again, and hold people to account if anyone did something wrong.

Q Dana, President Putin said today that the United States is at a dead end in Iraq and it should set a date for its withdrawal, he said, and an end to its occupation of Iraq. Do you have any reaction to that?

MS. PERINO: I didn't see his comments, but what I can say is that we have obviously shown through the surge, with General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker working together, that we are starting to see good trend lines moving upwards in terms of better national security in Iraq. Protecting the population has improved. Their economy is improving, and the bottom-up reconciliation is happening on the political level. And I think you just have to look at one -- some of the things that Prime Minister Maliki has done in showing leadership, especially just this week, in sending Vice President Hashimi to Turkey in order to work with that nation, and making sure that they can resolve problems.

So, luckily, I can turn things over to Dr. Al-Dabbagh here in a minute, and he can talk to you about that, as well.

Q Given the Putin statements and the President's reference to him being "wily" yesterday, and his extensive comments about Russia and the leaders' future there, is that the kind of thing that would generate a phone call, a staff contact, things like that? Should we expect that since they're speaking from various podiums, that they might actually have --

MS. PERINO: Well, they speak regularly. And what the President said yesterday, that they have a good relationship. And one of the reasons that they can speak very frankly to one another when they're together and on the world stage is because they have a relationship of trust that they will each say what the other believes.

Obviously the President had Secretary Rice and Secretary Gates in Moscow last week, and we'll let you know if there's an update in terms of a phone call. But the President did say yesterday he'd like to have a readout of President Putin's meeting with President Ahmadinejad. So as soon as we have one on that, we'll let you know.

Elaine.

Q Also on Iraq, Iraq's National Security Advisor today said in an interview that he's made clear to the U. S. the Iraqi government is against the idea of permanent bases in Iraq. But then he went on to say, probably we are talking about facilities, we're talking about other things, but not bases.

MS. PERINO: This is not a -- that would not be news. In the August 26th communique that the leaders of Iraq signed, they talked about forming an enduring strategic partnership, and that's one of the follow-up items that both the Iraqis and the Americans need to work on to make sure that we can have a presence there that helps continue to support the region and helps the burgeoning democracy in the

heart of the Middle East.

Q How would a base differ from a facility? Are facilities different from a base?

MS. PERINO: Well, they're working on all those details, but the President has said that we'll only be there at the invitation of the country. If they wanted us to leave, we would leave. But I think what you saw in that document on August 26th, which I think almost everyone in this room missed -- and maybe we'll put it out because we keep referring back to it. It did come on at one of those weekends on a Sunday in the middle in the summer, but it was a very significant document, because it talked a lot about where the country is headed and this national political reconciliation where you have the leaders from the different parties all coming together to decide, okay, we need an enduring partnership we need to work on. They sent the de-Baathification law to the Parliament, and they're working on the national oil law and the provincial elections -- all within that document.

Q Dana, what's the administration's reaction to Benazir Bhutto's return to Pakistan from exile, and what does this mean for the political process there?

MS. PERINO: Well, we'll let -- what we would like to see in Pakistan is a peaceful, democratic Pakistan, an Islamic state that is a moderate force in the region and one that can be an ally to help us fight extremism and radicalism in the region. I'll have to refer you to Benazir Butto's officials from her party about her plans, but I think that Pakistan has shown a willingness to work towards making sure that they can have a stable democracy, and we encourage them in that role.

Q Do you think this is a positive sign in that direction?

MS. PERINO: You know, I'll let -- those are internal politics that they'll have to sort out. But I think that as they're talking to one another, increased discussions and negotiations amongst people is not a bad thing.

I'll do one more and then I'm going turn it over to Dr. Al-Dabbagh.

Q On electoral politics, Dana, have you heard the President express any comments or concern about the moving forward of the primary process, and the impact on the country of voting so early?

MS. PERINO: Well, I think he does think about it. Obviously he went through it in 2000 and he remembers as a candidate that that was a grueling process. Thankfully, he says, he is not a candidate in this race. He watches with interest as we all do, because we all have a fascination with politics. He'll leave that to the parties to sort out. The Democratic Party and the Republican Party are going to have to decide whether this is a way that we think that we should run our primary system. And it could be that they realize that moving it earlier and earlier isn't good for anybody. And the President, one thing he will say is that it is really hard on the candidate, there's -- you have to be in a lot of places at a lot of different times, you get worn out pretty early, and you've got a whole election cycle to go though, so -- and that the President doesn't really have a dog in the fight.

Last one in back.

Q The American government gave the Iraqis any guarantees in case of any invasion of the Turkish in the north that United State will be responding?

MS. PERINO: Well, we are working closely with them. General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker are working with the Iraqis as well as the Turkish government, and I think again I would point to that the Iraqis themselves want to have good relations with Turkey, and that is why Vice President Hashimi was sent there yesterday by Prime Minister Maliki to establish those good relations and make sure that the PKK problem in the north can be dealt with forthwith. What I'm going to do now though is turn you over to Dr. Al-Dabbagh who might have more on those things.

Welcome.

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Thank you. Good morning. Prime Minister of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki has called the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr. Erdogan, and explained the interests of Iraqi government to have a diplomatic solution for the current situation with Turkey. And the interest to promote the relation with Turkey. The visit of Vice President Mr. Tariq al-Hashimi had played a positive role in this issue. Turkey is very important partner with Iraq. Iraqi government is calling the Turkish government not to use the military solution and refrain from crossing Iraqi borders. The government of Iraq understand the great suffer of Turkish people from terrorist attack of PKK. Iraqi government is doing its utmost to ban the activities of PKK in northern of Iraq.

I am ready to take your questions. Yes, sir.

Q Why should the Turks not want to deal with the PKK in Iraq just as the U.S. wants to deal with al Qaeda in Iraq?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Could you say it again?

Q Why should the Turks not want to deal with the terrorist threat in Iraq, just as President Bush says he wants deal with the terrorist threat in Iraq?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes, well, this is the Turkish -- it is a Turkish decision of the Turkish government. But we do understand that there is this problem that cannot be solved by any military. Turkish had tried since 15 years to cross the border, at the time of Saddam, but they didn't get rid of PKK, so we are calling Turkish to use other means. It is their issue, it is their decision, but not to use a military solution only.

Q We've been hearing a lot about the level of violence going down against Iraqi civilians, except it seems as if the insurgency is targeting very high-profile people. Do you think that they are getting more sophisticated in who they go after?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: No, we had noticed that al Qaeda has been limited down, all their activities, due to

the success in al Anbar, and at the same time in Diyala and in neighborhood of Baghdad. They are moving toward north now, al Qaeda. We have noticed many activities, many attacks in north of Iraq, especially around Mosul area. We believe that we need a regional effort not to allow al Qaeda to move again from Iraq to neighbor countries. And this is -- Iraqi government is calling all the neighbor countries -- we have a meeting in Kuwait on the 23rd. The interior ministers we are calling, and we are asking the neighbors to help the Iraqi government to defeat --

Q Would you agree that your government has two different tones for talking about Blackwater? One distinct for domestic Iraqi audience, and one for American officials? And does the Prime Minister want Blackwater out of Iraq, regardless of the results of ongoing investigations?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: We would like that the Blackwater to leave Iraq. This is at the end, is their position, is the State Department position. But there is an anger, there is a great anger among the Iraqis against the Blackwater. They should be kept accountable. This is what Iraqi government needs. It's a crime, what they did in Baghdad. We have declared it. It's a crime and they should be kept to justice whether in Baghdad or United States.

Q Sir, what in your view and the Prime Minister's view constitutes a U.S. military facility that would be acceptable in a long-term situation, versus the idea of a permanent base? What is the distinction, or generally what do you think the distinctions are?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: We are working with Americans, it's not yet finished. We need to regulate the presence of the United States troops for long-term, for the strategic relations which we have. But until now there is nothing comes out. It is under negotiation, and related to the extension of the multinational forces, which is going to be the last extension this year. We are looking to have a bilateral arrangement with the United States.

Q Is Chemical Ali going to be executed anytime soon?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Well, I think so, yes, in the coming days the execution will come.

Q Did I understand you to say the U.N. extension, the U.N. mandate this year will be the last?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: The presence of the multinational forces will be -- this year will be the last extension.

Q Will be the last extension?

Q Is there a sense of time on those bases we've talked about? I mean, isn't the likely outcome that you would have Americans operating on bases jointly with Iraqis -- and to get some perspective on that, the U.S. Air Force is in about year three, I think, of a 10-year plan to stand up the Iraqi Air Force, and has built up this massive base -- isn't that going to take years for that transition to happen, and won't they have to share the bases eventually?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: It's too early to decide what -- how it's going to be bases or presence, what sort of a presence. We do understand that we need the protection for our borders, definitely. We are not until 10 years -- Iraqi forces will not be -- Iraqi security forces -- will not be able to defend the country. We do need the help of the American.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you, Doctor. You said that the Maliki government was moving to ban all activities of the PPK [sic] in the north, correct?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Correct. Right.

Q Could you be specific -- beyond banning anything, are they going to, say, arrest their leadership, or will there be punishment for people who are open members of PKK?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Look, we are not going to work as a police for Turkey definitely. But we are -- as for the constitution, it's not allowed for Iraq -- for the Iraqi government to have any activities, of any organization, which are threat the neighbors. This is the Iraqi government that is taking this --

Q Offend the neighbors?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: To threat the neighbors --

Q Okay.

DR. AL-DABBAGH: -- whether they are the Mujahideen Khalq Iranian organization, or it's PKK.

Yes, sir.

Q A few months ago, President Bush named General Lute as the new war czar. I'd like to ask you whether the Lute-NSC team has helped move things along with Baghdad. How have things changed?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes. Definitely, you could see that the -- since the strategic plan of President Bush, until now we had great success, we had good improvement in the security. And this is due to the cooperation -- better cooperation between the multinational forces and Iraqi forces, as well as the tribes. This is -- it shows that -- how the cooperation, coordination improved after the plan of President Bush, which makes us now enjoying a better situation, a better security situation.

Q And do you ascribe that to General Lute's work?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Definitely. General Lute is part of the team of working to have better coordination between Iraqis.

Yes, sir.

Q Iraqi Kurdistan is very much autonomous and there is in the Iraqi Kurdistan a lot of support for the PKK. So how do you intend to make good on your promises to ban all PKK activities?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: We don't deny there is a feuding between the Kurds -- Iraqi Kurds and the Turkish Kurds; and this natural. But this doesn't entitle the Kurds, the Iraqi Kurds, to support the activities of terrorist activities of PKK. They had denied they have committed. They are also liable to respect the decision of the Iraqi government that the PKK is a terrorist activity, it's not allowed in Iraq, and not to provide any support. They had declared that they don't provide any support for them, but the natural feeling, which is that they are at the end, Kurds, and it is one race, so naturally they do feel sympathy with their brothers in Turkey.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Do Iraqi citizens view all security contractors as they do Blackwater? Do they make a distinction, and if Blackwater were to leave, would there still be a feeling of concern and caution about security contractors?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: We do need all the security companies to be liable and questionable and subject to accountability. No country in the world allows security companies to work in the way which they are working here in Iraq. Definitely that we do understand that they are -- they did good job for protection -- diplomat and the contractors, as well as they are subjected to high level of threat. But this will not entitle them to be immune from any questioning of -- from any accountability. That is what Iraqi government is working in order to keep them from accountable.

Yes, sir.

Q Yes. Last -- two weeks ago , (inaudible) -- in a conference, that all what the Iraqis need from the American forces is to train the Iraqi forces, and the rest can be carried out by the Iraqis themselves. How -- can you please describe the readiness of this force for the Iraqi forces? Thank you.

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Well, the Iraqi government feel that we are improving. The security forces is good improvement since the beginning of the year, but still, we do need them. We do need the support, we do need the training of the multinational forces and especially American forces. Till then, we feel that the -- this is a common objective we have between us and the -- all the international community. Iraq is subjected to high level of threat, and this is beyond the capacity of Iraq to defeat this organizations, especially al Qaeda. That is what we are calling the -- all the international community, especially Americans to continue supporting Iraqi forces until we could do it ourselves.

Yes, sir.

Q When will the Iraqi forces be able to take control of security in all of the provinces of the country?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: It's difficult to give a time, a specific time, but we are improving. Now we have -- we are working to have Basra be in the transfer of control in month of November. And then Karbala also, it will be in the near future. So we are enjoying now 10 -- will be transferred. And accordingly, this is going on. But it is difficult, it's not easy to give a time, but we are -- minus and plus, we are following the schedule, and I hope that within 2008, we enjoy some more withdrawal of the troops.

Q But your original deadline was November of this year. You're saying by the end of next year for the handover of security?

DR. AL-DABBAGH: Handover of the government. Handover of the battalions, of the army, Iraqi army, which will be fully under the control of Iraqis.

Thank you very much.

END 10:00 A.M. EDT

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