

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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