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On-the-Record Briefing En Route Egypt

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

En Route Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt

July 30, 2007

SECRETARY RICE: Good to have you aboard. All right, I'm very much looking forward to this trip which I will undertake with Secretary Gates. The President asked us to come out to the region for several reasons: first of all, to affirm the importance of this region to the United States and to reaffirm American - the American commitment to the security of our allies in what is a complicated time. It's a reaffirmation of an American commitment that is decades old.

Secondly, we will have an opportunity to engage intensively on the numerous political and military issues in the region, political issues like Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, of course Iraq and other issues of interest.

We will have, thirdly, a chance to talk about what initiatives we might undertake with our friends and allies in the security and political areas. In that regard, I would just note that we are very concerned to be able to provide for the security of our longstanding allies in the region and Nick Burns will be coming out to the region in mid August to talk about some of the aspects of security assistance and cooperation. So Gates and I will talk about initiatives that our friends and allies want to take, and then Nick Burns will be following up in August.

And then finally, we will want to assure our allies as we move forward in this very important period that the President has made his decisions on Iraq and will continue to make his decisions on Iraq with a priority toward making certain that this is a region that is made more secure by American actions in Iraq.

And so that's the context for the discussions that I will have with Secretary Gates in Egypt and in Saudi Arabia. I will, of course, have my now fifth meeting with the GCC plus Egypt and Jordan. This is the fifth meeting, I think, since September of last year or so. It's been very intensive. And then I'll go on to Israel and the Palestinian territories and perhaps we can talk about that a little later on the trip.

QUESTION: Is there a quid pro quo, either express or implicit, in offering aid to allies like Saudi Arabia who could be potentially the most helpful to the United States in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first, let me just say that these are our longstanding and close friends and allies. These are strategic relationships that go back decades. And we are really determined to signal our commitment and to provide for the security of our allies to the degree that they need initiatives from the United States to do that.

And there isn't an issue of quid pro quo. We have the same goals in this region concerning security and stability for the region. Of course, we have many issues that we talk about. We talk about the political circumstances of the new democracies like Lebanon, about the progress that we want to make toward a Palestinian state. We have - we also, of course, will talk with - or I will - with our friends in the region about the course of reform in the region.

But this isn't an issue of quid pro quo. We are working with these states to fight back extremism and to give a chance to the forces of moderation and reform.

QUESTION: A person very near to me, in proximity, suggested that your approach to Iran is something akin to a postwar containment strategy. Is that how you would characterize it?

SECRETARY RICE: Situations are different, but there isn't a doubt, I think, that Iran constitutes the single most important single-country strategic challenge to the United States and to the kind of Middle East that we want to see, to U.S. interests in the Middle East and to the kind of Middle East that we want to see, whether you talk about support for terrorism that is a threat to the democratic forces in Lebanon, support for the most radical forces in the Palestinian territories, of course the kind of issues that Ryan Crocker raised with his counterpart, support for Shia militias and for the transfer of technologies that are endangering the lives of our soldiers and endangering a free Iraq. So if you add to that, of course, the Iranian desire to acquire the technologies that could lead to a nuclear weapon, it's a very serious set of challenges.

But we have a strategy for dealing with that, for dealing with it diplomatically. We are working with our friends and allies in the region to make very clear that the United States remains absolutely committed to and will defend its interests and those of its allies in the Gulf region. We are countering and indeed confronting Iranian activities and those who are carrying them out inside of Iraq. And of course, we're working with a coalition of states as well as within the Security Council to deny to Iran the technologies that would lead to a nuclear weapon.

And so I think we have a very - a strategy that is coherent and a strategy that is - that has many facets. At the same time, we want to reach out to the people of Iran because the Iranian people deserve to live in a country that can - to live in a country where their democratic aspirations can be met, where the great culture and the great people that they are can prosper and flourish. And so we are reaching out to them and we're going to continue to do that as well.

QUESTION: The Iranian Foreign Ministry today said that the arms package was destabilizing the region, it was just creating fear and distrust among Arab allies. I wondered if you had any comment on that.

And then secondly, if you could please give some concrete examples of how you would like your Arab allies to help stabilize Iraq.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on the first, the destabilization of the region, I think, if there is a destabilization of the region, it

can be laid at the feet of an Iranian regime that is engaging in the kinds of activities that I just outlined. But this cooperation with our allies goes back for decades. It goes to the stability and prosperity of the Gulf region, which is of great interest to the United States and great interest to our friends. And it is in favor of a Middle East that can be stable and prosperous and moving forward and in which we believe that over time reform can bring an even more - a Middle East that is truly stable.

So this is a positive agenda in the Middle East, not one that is a negative agenda or against someone. This is a positive agenda. The Iranians should stop their destabilizing activities. That's what they should do.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, yes. Well, I thought that the agenda that was laid out at the neighbors conference, which all of the states that participated in it signed up to that agenda. Giving political support, for instance, more diplomatic support, to Iraq, as was done at the neighbors conference, is important. As security permits, we hope that more states will undertake diplomatic missions to Iraq. Debt forgiveness, where I think we got a very positive statement from Saudi Arabia - Prince Saud made a very positive statement. There are a lot of details to be worked out, but I think we've had a commitment there from Saudi Arabia. To use their influence - all of the states of the region to use their influence to influence various communities in Iraq to participate fully in the democratic unity government, and so working to the degree that states have tribal and other ties, because sometimes these are ties across borders, to use those ties to the benefit of an Iraq that will be for all Iraqis.

So the agenda - to do something on protection of borders. You know, it's very interesting. The Saudis on the border issue with Iraq have been very active in denying entry of the - of terrorists trying to cross into Iraq from Saudi Arabia, which is one reason that people against the will of their government often enter through Damascus, which has not been as active in denying entry for terrorists.

So I think all in all, there is a lot that we can all do to help stabilize Iraq. But that's, in part, what we'll talk about in the GCC plus Egypt and Jordan, and there's a very good agenda that was laid out at the neighbors conference.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, the Administration and you have been very careful about how you characterize what Saudi Arabia - which specific activities Saudi Arabia has taken in Iraq that we don't like, while we're - we seem to be fine with talking about and laying out specifics about what Syria and Iran is doing in Iraq that we don't like. I'd like you - to ask you now, what specific steps has Saudi Arabia taken in Iraq that we're concerned about and what specific steps are you - what specific issues are you going to be raising with the Saudis on this?

SECRETARY RICE: Saudi Arabia was at the neighbors conference and is committed to that agenda, and I believe that Saudi Arabia is carrying out that agenda. Look, we can all do more. But I mentioned just now that Saudi Arabia is committed to debt relief. I mentioned just now that we see a more active Saudi effort to deny terrorists crossing Saudi borders into Iraq and that's why they're crossing into Damascus. They have tried to encourage Sunni tribesmen and others to be engaged in the political process.

Look, they have the same concerns - a common concern, which is that the policies of the Government of Iraq be directed toward the creation of an Iraq in which all Iraqis can participate and where sectarian agendas will not dominate.

And so that's the discussion we're going to have.

And I just want to be very clear. This is not - I think it was Anne who asked something about a quid pro quo. There isn't an issue of a quid pro quo here. We have the same interest in a stable and - a stable Iraq that can defend itself, defend its new political system, its new democratic political system, and be unified. We have the same interests and we're pursuing them.

QUESTION: Amazing. No question from Robin. If I'm Hosni Mubarak, if I'm Hosni Mubarak or King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, I might look at these proposed arms sales and say the pressure from the U.S. for democratization and human rights is off; I've got the full support of the United States and they need me. Would I be wrong in making that assumption?

SECRETARY RICE: The United States has been very clear and I have been clear and the President has been clear that in all of our discussions, particularly with our friends, we continue to discuss and press for reform and democratic reform because it is our strong belief that that is ultimately - in and of itself will be a stabilizing factor in the Middle East when you have more open political systems.

Now, the notion that you're somehow not going to help your friends defend themselves in a challenging environment because you are continuing to have a discussion about the pace of reform, I think is, if you don't mind my saying so, it suggests that you cannot hold two thoughts at once. Of course, you can hold two thoughts at once. Of course, it's important that Egypt be able to defend itself and its interests in the region. Of course, it's important that Saudi Arabia, which has been an ally of the United States for decades, be able to defend its interests in the region. And of course, that's important to the defense of American interests.

But that does not preclude discussions about the domestic course that these countries are taking, and we're going to continue to have those discussion and we're going to continue to press for reform.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.) Oh yeah, much better. I was saying that you announced specific amounts for Israel and Egypt but not for Saudi Arabia and any of the other countries. And I know that there are negotiations forthcoming, but why did you hold on to announcing those amounts? Is it because of perhaps concerns in Congress about still things to happen in the region?

And when it comes to Congress, a lot of members are asking about accountability because they have questions about it. How are you going to assure that actually what you're supplying to those countries is used for the purposes that you would like it used?

Thanks.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on the last point, Nick, let me reiterate. We aren't new at having these kinds of cooperative security arrangements with - bilateral security arrangements with any of these countries. We've been at this for a long time. And in the case of both Saudi Arabia and - and by the way, it's not just Saudi Arabia, it's several Gulf states. So the Gulf states we have had security cooperation with for a long time and we've always been able to do that in a way that was consistent with our responsibilities and obligations to the Congress. And this will be no different.

In terms of numbers, we just haven't - the kind of composition of the cooperation - package for cooperation simply hasn't gotten that far. But we will - we will talk. I'll begin or - with Bob Gates here we'll begin the discussion during this meeting, but we expect that Nick will come out and bring the others.

Let me just say we are very aware of and very determined to maintain the ability of our allies and friends to rely on the United States to help them with their security concerns. At the same time, we are also determined to maintain the balances - the military and strategic balance within the region that we've been committed to as well.

QUESTION: So it's a question for a little bit further along in the trip, but - is that close enough? When we get to the Palestinian stage of things and you're talking about the conference or meeting that you want to hold later this year, how can you, at this point, discuss a two-state solution when one of those proposed two states is in two pieces?

And the second part of that is, you know, there was a time where the U.S. reached out to Arafat before his organization had recognized Israel. Might you come to that stage with Hamas?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on the second point, we're at a different historical point where the majority of Palestinians say they want a two-state solution and where there is a legitimate Palestinian representation that accepts the two-state solution and accepts Israel's right to exist under accords that have now - that were negotiated starting in 1993 with Oslo.

And so, in effect, we're not at a position in where you're trying to find Palestinians who might be interested in a two-state solution. Palestinian leadership made that decision. And what is being said of Hamas is that they need to accept that Palestinian - and by the way, Arab - consensus that the two-state solution, as evidenced in the roadmap, as would be anticipated in the Arab initiative and that is certainly there in all the Oslo accords, is the basis for moving forward; and that violence - the violence must be renounced. You aren't going to get very far in peace agreements until you admit that violence is not a means by which to build a state.

So we're just at a different stage now than when people were reaching out to the PLO at that time. It also speaks to why you can imagine a negotiation for a two-state solution despite what happened in Gaza because you have legitimate Palestinian representation in President Abbas, who is president of all the Palestinians, who is the Chairman of the PLO which is the negotiating authority for the Palestinians, and so he can represent all Palestinians.

We would hope that at some point in time when there is a two-state solution that it would be a unifying force for all Palestinians who want statehood, and that's the time at which people will have to make a choice if they're outside of that consensus.

Just in terms of the - let me just say one word about that part of the trip. Again, we'll have an opportunity to talk about it, but I suspect that this is going to be the first of several trips to make sure that we implement the President's July 16th speech, which means both intensification of the bilateral dialogue between Abu Mazen and Prime Minister Olmert, and the convening of an international meeting later in the year.

QUESTION: Just a quick follow-up. Does that mean that you're saying a two-state solution could come before reunification of the two sides of the Palestinians?

SECRETARY RICE: A two-state solution can come whenever the conditions are ripe for it, whenever the groundwork has been laid for it, and when Palestinians and Israelis can come to agreement on what that state will look like.

I think you have in President Abbas and in the current leadership of the Palestinians people who are dedicated to that. Now, there is a lot of groundwork to be laid. Obviously, the work that Tony Blair is doing in helping to create the Palestinian partner by solidifying or helping to create strong Palestinian institutions is also a very important part of that. A security concept that would work is a very important part of that.

But as to the ability to get to a two-state solution, Abu Mazen has that mandate.

QUESTION: I have two questions. First, Saudi officials say that their position on the Maliki government has not changed since King Abdullah refused to meet - to host the Prime Minister, and that they are feeling still that, as the King said in March, this is an illegitimate occupation.

So first of all, do you see any signs that they have changed, besides encouraging the tribal leaders, their attitude toward the Maliki government? And secondly, do you intend to invite or urge the Saudis to send a representative to your international meeting at which an Israeli will also be present?

SECRETARY RICE: Robin, I'm not here to issue invitations during this trip. No, seriously, seriously, this is - as I said, this is going to be the first of several opportunities to lay the groundwork for that international meeting. I, frankly, think we need to make - or the Palestinians and Israelis need to really intensify their bilateral track as we move toward an international meeting. So I'm going to be focused on both of those.

But this is the first of several, not - this isn't going to be one. So you can --

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: I think the President made it very clear that his expectation for this meeting is that all states that accept the desirability of a two-state solution and accept the important foundational principles for peace that could lead to that two-state solution would be welcomed and would be hoped to attend this meeting.

Now, in terms of what - I'm not going to comment on what unnamed Saudis have said. I will say that, again, Saudi Arabia was present at the neighbors conference. Saudi Arabia has been active in many of the most important elements of that conference, including debt relief, including trying to cut off terrorists from their territory, including support for national reconciliation inside of Iraq.

And let me remind everybody that the statement itself in the neighbors conference takes note of the fact that the multinational force is there as a result of the request of the Government of Iraq and a UN Security Council mandate for those troops.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: I see a government that has concerns about the lack of progress on some of the elements of national reconciliation. They are the same concerns that - frankly, many of the same concerns we've had. And so this is an iterative process: it's a process by which Iraq's neighbors are reaching out to Iraq in certain ways; but Iraq also has to demonstrate that it is indeed building a government that is nonsectarian and is going to pursue a course of national reconciliation. So it goes both ways.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, how do you view congressional concerns over the military package, particularly to Saudi Arabia, and some concerns by defense analysts that this could trigger another arms race in the region?

SECRETARY RICE: We are consulting with the Congress and we'll continue to consult with the Congress. And of course, this is still early in the process. As I said, we haven't even discussed many of the details of this and some - so we will be working with the Congress. And I'm certain that we can convince the Congress, first of all, that we know how to maintain our obligations in terms of accountability for the security packages.

Secondly, we know how to be aware of and responsive to everyone's concerns that there not be any shift in the military balance between the parties in the region. That's extremely important and we have it very much in mind.

Third, this is a time when our friends and allies in the region, including the Gulf states, which includes Saudi Arabia but I want to emphasize again it's several Gulf states - Egypt, which is coming to the end of a ten-year program; Israel, which is coming to the end of a ten-year program. This is in a long line of American efforts to be a reliable partner for our allies and our strategic partners in the region in securing themselves. There isn't anything new about the United States working with its allies for security cooperation so that they can rely on the United States to help provide the kind of equipment and the kind of - the kind of equipment that they need to secure themselves.

I want to repeat: It's the end of a ten-year arrangement with Israel; it's the end of a ten-year arrangement with Egypt. We have been doing this with the Gulf for decades, and so that's how it should be seen. And it is in the context of a broader diplomatic push region-wide to deal with the multiple challenges that the region now faces. I don't think anybody would suggest that this is a region that is without its challenges. And we're dealing with it through security cooperation, as we always have, but also through intensified political dialogue, whether it is the now very frequent meetings of the GCC plus Egypt and Jordan or the neighbors conference or the bilateral discussions that we're having with strategic dialogues with a number of these countries.

Okay, thank you.

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