



**THE WHITE HOUSE**  
PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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## **Press Background Briefing on the President's trip to Saudi Arabia by a Senior Administration Official**

Emirates Palace Hotel  
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

3:05 P.M. (Local)

MR. JOHNDROE: This is a background briefing on the President's trip to Saudi Arabia, by a senior administration official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We'll spend Monday and Tuesday in Saudi Arabia -- Saudi Arabia of course being one of our oldest and closest allies in the region. The President going there reaffirms the ties between our two nations, long-standing ties.

It will also reaffirm his personal relationship with King Abdallah. It is a close, personal relationship. The President views King Abdallah as really a remarkable figure. He has been active in the diplomacy in the region. You may remember the Crown Prince Initiative, which became the Beirut Initiative, which was then reaffirmed in the last year, became the Arab League Initiative, which basically offers a framework of potential reconciliation between the Arab states and Israel as part and in support of the reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. And it is a framework that could provide both support for President Abbas and also support for Olmert, as they try to negotiate a peace.

You also may remember that Saudi Arabia was very active when Lebanon was under siege, right after the period of time that Syria had departed and the Siniora government was standing up, put a billion-and-a-half dollars at the availability of the new Lebanese government, to try and show a sign of both financial and diplomatic support. So Saudi has been active in diplomacy; it is supportive of the effort the President is making with Israelis and Palestinians to try and find a permanent peace.

He's also a man who thinks very much about the future of his country. It's a very conservative society, as you know. He has started some steps in movements towards reform; a dialogue on the future of the country, as you know, that has involved various segments from the country; beginning municipal elections. Again, this is a conservative society and it is moving at a pace that King Abdallah believes is appropriate to that society, but he's a man who thinks deeply about the future of his country and I think understands that it needs to change.

The President going there of course will reaffirm our traditional ties with Saudi Arabia. It will reaffirm and strengthen his personal relationship with King Abdallah. It will also have, I think, a message of the importance of the time in which we are in. I think King Abdallah and the President

both see a struggle between extremists and those who have a more hopeful vision for their countries. And you see it playing out in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, in the Palestinian Territories, the struggle between extremists and those who are willing to oppose them. And they will talk about that overall strategic challenge to the region and to stability into the future of the region.

And I think one of the things the President will urge His Majesty is to continue to do what he did in Lebanon; that is to say, to make a strategic investment in the future of the region, a region which would not be dominated by extremists, and that means, of course, support for the unity government in Baghdad, support for Fayyad and President Abbas -- Prime Minister Fayyad and President Abbas, as they try and build the institutions of a Palestinian state and negotiate with Israel; support -- the continued support for Lebanon and Siniora government and the Hariri-led March 14th group; and generally supporting the cause of those who would oppose extremism both in their diplomacy and in, of course, the financial resources, which Saudi Arabia has and could make an enormous difference in places like the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and other locations.

So that is really the framework of the conversations. It is what they will be speaking about. Obviously they will be talking about the character of the overall challenge to the region and what we two countries can do together, with other right thinking countries in the region to deal with it.

I'd be glad to take any questions people might have. Yes, ma'am.

Q I checked the -- I was confused about the Saudi arms sales, what's expected. What I saw that the administration originally proposed was only about \$620 million for AWACS and targeting -- sniper targeting pods, and no question of the JDAMs and things like that. Can you talk about how the sale is going to be modified and when you're going to announce it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's a big package that we have offered to the Saudis. It actually gets sort of negotiated between us and the Saudis in pieces, and those pieces then get notified to the Congress. But it is overall a pretty substantial package -- we can get you the details on that -- but it is being rolled out in pieces as we get definitization, as I say, between us and the Saudis and are ready at that point to notify to the Congress.

Q Isn't there something being announced tomorrow in conjunction with his arrival?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There's some discussions. We'll probably -- if we have an announcement tomorrow, we will make it. But I think there will be a --

Q When should we expect it, early or late?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Probably pretty early. There will be a notification in the Hill going up.

Should we put this out? No? No, I'm told not to put it out.

Q This is separate from the stuff I just referred to?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This is one of the elements of the overall package that will be notified tomorrow.

Q The President is kind of an early-to-bed guy -- (laughter) -- and the King likes to stay up late, and the meeting tomorrow starts at 9:00 a.m. What do you think, how long is it going to go?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, we'll see.

Q We have a wager, hence the giggling. (Laughter.)

Q We have a wager. (Laughter.)

Q You think it could go pretty late, though, right? I mean -- (laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You know, this is a matter of great sensitivity and I don't really want to be wading in -- (laughter) -- very significant. But if someone wants to offer me 10 percent on the side, I could see what I could do. (Laughter.)

Q Well, the meeting is supposed to be, like, at 9:00 a.m. -- we were thinking 9:10 a.m. (Laughter.)

Q All right, enough.

Q Do you expect the President to bring up the question of Saudi efforts to modify their textbooks and purge them of anti-Christian and anti-Jewish sentiments, which apparently they're not actually doing much of, although much has been discussed.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There has been a traditional concern that we've had about the extremist threat. Saudi Arabia has done a very good job internally of going after al Qaeda, as you know, in terms of finding cells, going after leadership, and the level of attacks is down in the country. We, of course, have been encouraging them to also recognize the extent to which money coming out of Saudi Arabia, fighters coming out of Saudi Arabia and literature and the like can be viewed as having a -- feeding, in some sense, the extremist cause.

This is something we've talked to them about. They are taking some steps to deal with it. Obviously we have said publicly on things such as financial support to terrorists, that is -- what I mean by that is money that seems to come from private hands in Saudi Arabia and gets out of the country. We've raised that with them; they've taken a number of steps. We've encouraged them to cooperate in those steps and encouraged them generally to go further, there's more that needs to be done on those.

Q When you talk about literature feeding the extremist cause, I mean, we're talking about textbooks; we're talking about forming the minds of their citizens. That's more than just a bunch of literature out there.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, that's something they need to do internally, and they have talked about that. But I'm also talking about the flow of funding for mosques and literature that goes outside the country and shows up in other places where there is very much a struggle between extremists and moderates, and it is used by the extremists. And this is something we've talked to the Saudis about and will continue to talk to them about.

Q You did not mention Afghanistan when talking about Saudi support for governments. This might be a naive question, but you also didn't mention Israel, and I just wondered if Afghanistan was left off because it's -- will that come up? Will Israel come up?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** I mentioned Afghanistan the first time I did the list, I did not the second. I think we will probably raise Afghanistan as one of the items where there is the struggle between extremists and those that would oppose it.

And in terms of Israel, we have said very clearly that one of the things we are looking for, in terms of how Arab states can advance this possibility, is providing diplomatic support and financial support to Abbas and Fayyad, but also making clear to the Israeli people that an Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation could go forward in the context of a broader Arab-Israeli reconciliation. That is what is suggested in the Arab League Initiative. That was, as you know, King Abdallah's initiative originally when he was Crown Prince. And we have said, in connection with Annapolis, and subsequent, that we would like Arab states to begin to take steps to expand their relations with Israel. That's something that we have said, the President has said in the last three or four days at the front end of this trip, and we will continue to have that as a message in all the countries that we are visiting on this trip.

**Q** And does the price of oil come up in any of these meetings?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** It has not come up so far. Let me say, to answer that question, it has not come up so far in the conversations that I have been party to. The President has obviously had a number of one-on-one conversations in the course of this trip, and I can't recite on what came up in those.

**Q** I mean, if it did come up, do you have any idea what would be said?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** No. Obviously, look, it's a sensitive subject, and it's something that I'm sure that the President, if he covered it, would cover it in a one-on-one setting.

**Q** King Abdallah has also formed a relationship with the President of Iran, and has invited him personally to come to the Hajj.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** That's what we are told, interestingly enough. We are told that Ahmadinejad, as he has done from time to time, invited himself. And one of the things about the Hajj is that it is -- the Saudi Arabian government makes it very much open to all Muslims to come. So if someone asks to come, the Saudis' view is, it's very difficult for them as the custodian of the two holy mosques, which is the whole point of the Hajj, for them to say no. So I think the Saudis would tell you they did not invite him, he invited himself, and they let him come, as they do generally when Muslims come and want to participate in the Hajj.

**Q** They were photographed arm in arm at the GCC. Is there any particular meeting that the President will -- any particular message the President will extend to the King regarding Iran, Ahmadinejad particularly, or --

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** The President has had a message generally to the region, when talking about Iran, and it does come up at almost every stop, and I'm sure will come up on this one, and that is the importance of sending a firm, clear message to Iran about the behavior that they -- about aspects of their behavior that is destabilizing for the region, and the very importance for all the countries in the region, and indeed countries in Europe, the United States to be sending a clear message to Iran about what they need to do if they really want to have improved relations with the region and the international community, and if they want to get out of the isolation of the Iranian people that their policies, namely the policies of the Iranian regime, are

creating.

Q If nobody else has anything, can you reflect at all on sort of the impressions of the U.S. delegation as you're going through Abu Dhabi? You mentioned some impression with the hotel and the city, and anything the President said or -- in terms of his impressions of this area?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, one of the things that's interesting leaving Bahrain, for example, is to look at the number of construction cranes that are on the horizon as you leave Bahrain. It's clear that -- some people have said that the future of the new Middle East is emerging in Bahrain and the UAE, and that obviously is a very exciting thing, the prospect for it to be a major financial center, and the like. So these are obviously places that are very much on the move, are going to have a big impact on the future of the Middle East, and we'll all be watching.

Q Just to go back to Iran for a second --

MR. JOHNDROE: Let's go here, everyone. We'll have to go -- we all have to go to the speech.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Can I say one other thing? The President, when he was at the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, got a brief briefing by the Admiral, in response to a question of the President about the incident involving the Iranian small boats. And basically the Admiral outlined the kinds of protocols, very careful protocols that our commanders go through in incidents like that.

And he talked about the behavior of the vessels, and why they were threatening. And he reminded the President -- not that the President needed any reminder -- that we lost life to the Cole, which was attacked by small boats filled with explosives; that we had had an incident within the last year in which U.K. ships had been attacked, and hostages taken. And we all remembered the difficult [sic] that thing posed.

He talked about -- he, the Admiral, talked about the authorities that the local commander has, because when these small boats turn and become hostile, he said you have about 10 seconds to deal with the problem, or it's going to be on you. And so he described a system of sort of a protocol that the captains of each of these ships are authorized to go through, to try and avoid a confrontation, but also the extent to which in close quarters with fast boats it is a real threat, and we need to allow our commanders to have the flexibility to deal with it.

It was a pretty instructive and sobering discussion, and one that suggested that our people have behaved in a pretty responsible way. But also it explains why the President was so clear in his message to the Iranians that they engage in this kind of behavior, it is risky, and it's risky for them.

Q Did they say how many seconds away they were from firing?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Did not.

MR. JOHNDROE: All right, thank you all.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks a lot.

END 3:23 P.M. (Local)