



## THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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### **Press Briefing by Counselor to the President Ed Gillespie and Press Secretary Dana Perino**

Marriott Riyadh Hotel  
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

9:48 P.M. (Local)

MS. PERINO: Hi, everyone. We wanted to stop by and say hello. We apologize for not being able to do so beforehand. I think as you've seen, this trip has been chock-a-block full every single day. There's not hardly a moment of down time, and even the flights have been short. But we're here tonight, and I will just make a couple of opening comments and give you a little bit of background about the dinner this evening. And then we'll take a few of your questions before we all go to bed and do it all again tomorrow.

You saw the arrival ceremony, when the President arrived. I think that it's colder here than -- I think, 50 degrees or so, when added with the wind chill, colder than any of us anticipated. And I think the King and all of our hosts were thinking of us when they brought everyone inside right away, so we didn't stay outside for everything. But the President was certainly able to see a lot of the ceremony that they wanted to put together as he walked with the King to the room. And then they rode together in the motorcade, and then they arrived at the guest palace, which is where a lot of us are able to stay tonight. And that's -- they're being very gracious to allow us to be there.

And we had a little bit of time there, and Adil al-Jubayr was very kind to take us around to some of the rooms, a couple of which I'll mention. In the 1950s, the King of Saudi Arabia had been in Iran, and had seen a beautiful mirrored room. And then the Shah said, well, I will make sure that you have one. And so he sent some craftsmen down. And it's a beautiful -- it's mirrors all from floor to ceiling, and then on the ceiling, actually, and all beveled. And it's quite spectacular. Our photographer might have gotten a shot in there, but I'm not exactly sure how that would have worked out with the flash. But it was really beautiful.

And then next to that is another Iranian design of a mosaic room. And then the European Salon is where they put all of our equipment, so that we could do a little computer work. And so we stayed there for a little while. They also have two large reception rooms. I think that you might have seen that one -- the pool covered that when we first came in.

And then we made our way to the King's Palace for a dinner tonight. I think that the King was certainly -- knows the President well, because he knew that dinner should be held relatively early for our early-to-bed President. And then the dinner actually moved along very quickly. We had very nice dinner guests.

I'll give you just a -- I'm not going to read out the entire menu. I'll let the Saudis do that if they want to. But some of you really like a little bit of this color, so I will provide you just a couple of things that we had: artichoke soup, which was really nice.

Q Soup?

MS. PERINO: Artichoke. They had a mixed grill, which included lamb cubes, and they call it chicken shish, tauck lamb chops and grilled potatoes, also chicken Biryani, which most of us are familiar with from eating out at Indian restaurants in the States. They had red rice with shrimps and also potato stew. But the dessert, in addition to having the fresh fruit, they also recognized this President's vices, and had apple tart with vanilla ice cream.

I'll let Ed make a few comments, and we'll take your questions.

MR. GILLESPIE: Thanks. A lot of the conversation was about the weather and how cold it is, which is unusual, obviously. Tomorrow, apparently, it may snow. I was seated next to a former minister of oil, and I asked him when was the last time he could remember it snowing here. And he thought about it, and finally determined that it was 1968. So I don't think that's an official Farmer's Almanac version, but he seemed to be pretty definitive that it was about 40 years ago was the last time it snowed. So we're anxious to see if it snows tomorrow.

It was a great dinner, a lot of very friendly conversation and a lot of interest in what's going on in our financial markets -- and we found that also in the United Arab Emirates, as well -- a lot of curiosity about policy and how we see the elections; also a lot of interest in the politics back home. Surprising to me anyway, the level of knowledge of -- I had somebody ask me today in Dubai who I thought was going to win the Michigan primary, which I thought was pretty impressive.

So it's been very interesting. And the meeting the President had today, I think -- did Hadley read out the young professionals and the meeting -- I was there for that, which was, I thought, very interesting and very encouraging. And so it's been incredibly positive. So I'm happy to take any questions of anything that may be more substantive, because I think I'm afraid all we have for you is color.

Terry.

Q One of the things on a lot of people's minds back home is the price of oil. Has that come up, or does the President plan to bring that up with the King?

MR. GILLESPIE: It has come up. It's come up in different context. There's been questions about -- and again, I don't know about the President's conversation with the King; I'm talking more generally about conversations in the region. There was interest in reducing\* -- alternative fuels and the efforts there, and how that's going. There has been talk about the oil prices, but I don't know if the President will raise it in his one-on-one, or if he's raised it yet today. I can't answer that question about the King.

Q Why wouldn't he?

MR. GILLESPIE: I didn't say he didn't, I just don't know if he's going to. It has come up in other conversations and other context in the region.

Q Two questions. First of all, how much of this trip is designed to give the President and the King an opportunity to have kind of private time, have conversations, since, reportedly, the King doesn't like to use the telephone that much? And so I think it's the first time in three or four years that they've actually met. Can you address that issue?

And then, number two, just in general about the trip, in the conversations that the President has had with his counterparts, how much do you find that the region is looking beyond the Bush presidency and thinking that this President has only a year left and we have to wait to make big decisions until we find out who the next American President is?

MR. GILLESPIE: I'll take them one at a time. In terms of the visit with the King, he is -- and I think actually one of the things I've noticed is that with all these leaders, the direct conversation, the one-on-one contact is very important, it matters a lot, and I think it's been one of the reasons it's been a very productive trip.

With the King, I do think that the opportunity to sit down one-on-one and talk about things that are going on in the region is a very timely conversation. The President was looking forward to sharing with the King, as he has with other leaders, his conversations and his insights from his time in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and obviously sharing with him why he's optimistic about this being a good time for that.

And so I think, obviously, in terms of the time, why it's a good time, one of the reasons it's a good time, I do think that all of these leaders know this President, they understand that he does have a year left in office and I think they see that as an opportunity for all of them to deal with someone they know. And that's not to say that they're not going to know the next President; possibly some may, some may not. But I think they have faith and they have confidence and trust, from the meetings I've sat in and seen the personal interaction. It's a very positive relationship that the President has with these leaders. And I think that they -- it would -- they've been clear that they see this as an opportunity for them to take advantage of the fact that this is the President's last year in office, he's not running for reelection, he doesn't have to worry about the politics and that kind of thing. So I think they see it as an opportunity.

If they're looking past his presidency and anticipating things -- which I'm sure they are, I'm sure they're thinking ahead; they are obviously very astute and thoughtful and care deeply about the relationship with America, and I'm sure they're anticipating different changes -- but they have not raised that, that I've seen with the President.

Q How would you describe the President's sort of feelings about the fact that there's a year left in office and he seems like, this trip, he's been really -- a very pensive trip for him, lots of meetings, very clear message on a couple different issues. I mean, does the President feel a sense of urgency, and does this --

MR. GILLESPIE: I think he feels a sense of opportunity. And I know you've heard from him and from Steve and from others about why we feel that this moment in time with the leaders that we see in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and the fact that the -- many of the neighbors also seem interested in trying to help make this work and are supportive of the process, that there's an opportunity here. I think it's coincidental that it occurs in the last year of the President's presidency, but I think that's a good thing, and I think that does allow him to put much focus on it. As you know, he said as he was leaving Israel that he'll return to the region again in May; Secretary Rice obviously very deeply committed to the process and spending a lot of time and travel on it, as well.

And so I think it's more, Mike, the circumstances, one of which is the fact that it's the President's last year in office and he doesn't have any political agenda to bring to bear into the process that I think is an advantage for him.

Does that answer the question? Let me go over to the left here. James.

Q While I, too, am interested in your predictions on the Michigan primary -- (laughter) -- I will spare --

MR. GILLESPIE: I appreciate that. (Laughter.)

Q -- you from actually being asked about it. Two questions. First, to follow up on what we've just been talking about, it struck me that the Abu Dhabi speech was in some parts designed to reassure people in this region who are supportive of the agenda that there's a certain continuity to American foreign policy, and that even if George Bush maybe soon leaving office, the United States will have, as he put it, a lasting commitment to this region. Was that part of the design of the speech?

MR. GILLESPIE: That was a part of it. I think that the President clearly believes that the interests of this region and the interests of the United States are closely intertwined, and that it's important that we encourage the growth of freedom, liberty, justice in the Middle East and in these countries; and not only because it's in the interests of the people of the Middle East, but if that happens, as we know from history and experience, it makes it much less likely that societies produce extremists intent on killing innocent people in pursuit of their own political objectives. And if you look at where you have free societies and people are empowered, then you don't have that kind of repression, that that is -- and so that's in our interest as a country. It's in our own interests, as well as in the interest of the region.

So I do think the President wanted to convey the lasting commitment. I think he wanted to make clear the depth of his commitment. And I think he also wanted to continue to promote the freedom agenda and to give a gentle push, as I think we put it, to folks in the region.

I think that's the first time, by the way, a speech like that has ever been delivered by an American President on Arab soil. I thought it was notable. I thought it was -- we got very positive feedback from people here. And so I'm hoping it will be -- have a positive impact, obviously.

Q This is addressed to both of you, if you could answer. My question is based to some extent on the exchanges that the President had with my Fox News colleague, Greta Van Susteren. In your own discussions with the President about the NIE and its central finding that the weaponization aspect of the Iran nuclear program has been suspended, do you find that the President fully accepts this conclusion? Or is there any -- has the President expressed to you, are you aware of any feeling on the President's part that, however sincere the analysts might have been, they might have gotten it wrong? Has he admitted the possibility at all in his mind that the analysts may be wrong about this?

MS. PERINO: I've not heard the President express anything but support for the intelligence community. But I think what he has said, and he has repeated both privately and publicly, is that he does not believe that the NIE that was produced -- was it two months ago -- should provide anyone any comfort that Iran is not a threat. In fact, it underscored for him and for many others, as we've learned from around this region, that they also believe that Iran remains a threat.

And the very fact that they were hiding their weaponization program from the world, that nobody knew about, should not give anyone comfort that all of a sudden now we know that they had one, and that they halted it. What the international community has called on them to do is to halt their enrichment of uranium. And we are united in that, and we are going to continue to press for sanctions.

But there is no doubt that across the world the NIE that was put out by our intelligence community did cause some confusion. And one of the things the President has done at every stop is to tell them that he believes that Iran was a threat, they are a threat, and they will continue to be a threat if they are allowed to have a nuclear weapon. He believes that they have the right to have civilian nuclear power. He has provided, along with his international partners, a way for Iran to come to the table and have a negotiation for civilian nuclear power if they verifiably suspend. And so until we see that, I think that we will remain concerned and skeptical, and continue down the diplomatic path.

Another point that the President has made when this has come up is that he does believe that this problem can be solved diplomatically.

But I also want to underscore for you that it is a mistake to think that these meetings that the President has had across this region have been about Iran. If it has come up, it has been brief. Now, I'm not there, sitting at the President's shoulder, or by his side, when he has one-on-one meetings, but I can tell you, in the meetings that we have been in -- and we have been very fortunate on this trip to have been included in everything except for the one-on-ones -- my observation is that while it has come up, what they were looking for was reassurance from President Bush that he agrees -- that he still believes what he had said before the NIE came out. And the fact is that that is what he believes.

Q But my question was not about perception or misperceptions of the report's findings, or the implications, or whether or not Iran remains a threat. My question to you is whether or not the President admits at all in his own mind of the possibility that the central finding was actually wrong?

MS. PERINO: Again, I said he has complete confidence in the intelligence community. They work very hard to get as much information as they possibly can. They brought this new information to the attention of their superiors back in late August. They said they were going to need some more time to vet it out before they were able to fully understand it. And intelligence is not an exact science and they continue to seek out more information. But the President agreed with the intelligence community that it was important to get this information out so that everyone knows what they're dealing with. And again, the fact that the Iranians had a secret, covert program that they were hiding from the world should not give any of us comfort.

Q This is for Ed again. I'm going to try once on the oil question. These are four countries that are -- are major producers of oil in the world. Did the President at any time bring up with any of these rulers, either in a private session or in group sessions, the Americans' concern about the high price of oil?

MR. GILLESPIE: Yes, they talked about oil. The President made the point about the -- part of his agenda is alternative fuels and alternative sources of fuel. They talked about the nature of the market and the vast demand that's on the world market today for oil. That was a point that was obviously made in the course of these conversations by our friends, and that's a legitimate and accurate point. So there has been discussion of oil and energy, along with other issues that have

come up in these talks.

Q Did those leaders in any way indicate some possible ways they're going to -- of mitigating against those high prices?

MR. GILLESPIE: I don't want to characterize -- I'm more comfortable letting other governments characterize the nature of the conversation from their perspective.

Q I want to ask you about the President's trip to Israel in May, which is seen as a Palestinian anniversary in Arab countries -- (inaudible) -- follow up that statement? Also, did he talk about the subject of Iran -- (inaudible) -- Syrian problem?

MS. PERINO: Well, I think we're going to have -- we don't know the answer to that question. As I said, we arrived, we had the arrival ceremony, and then the President then -- they went to dinner. I'm not exactly sure what the dinner conversation was about, but they'll be meeting this evening, and so we don't have a way to tell you tonight.

MR. GILLESPIE: I'm going to make another point, Jim. I failed to mention, in his discussions of alternative energy, the President also mentioned nuclear energy as an important source of energy in the future.

MS. PERINO: Last one.

Q On the JDAMs which have now been notified, can you just rehearse for us the -- what you see as the strategic importance that going ahead with it still, in the face of what, at least early this summer, was some reservations in Congress about -- (inaudible) -- Israel and whether it benefitted U.S. --

MR. GILLESPIE: In fairness, we'll give you another last one, because I know Steve Hadley talked about the JDAMs today, and the State Department is handling comment on JDAMs. So I will refer you to the State Department -- in which case I'm happy to take one more question. In the back.

Q Thanks. Some of us who have had an opportunity during this trip to talk to foreign policy officials of governments in countries where the President had visited, have heard from them that their message was, they don't want the U.S. meddling in their relations with Iran, that they can conduct their own dealings through their own channels. Is that something that the President was told in any way, shape, or form by them?

MR. GILLESPIE: I did not hear anything like that. I think -- and the President was sharing his view of concerns about Iran and I think he was making clear, as Dana pointed out, in terms of the NIE, that the fact that they are continuing to enrich uranium, they are continuing to test and deploy ballistic missiles, delivery systems, and that they had a secret weapons program that they have halted, but that clearly -- in response, by the way, to international pressure -- that doesn't mean that they couldn't start again, and that that is a concern of the United States. And we wanted to share -- the President wanted to share that that's a continuing concern, and that the -- our view of the NIE is that it reinforced that concern.

They shared views, as well, again, which I'm not going to characterize, but I don't think -- I didn't hear anyone suggest along the way in any of the meetings that I was in that this not a legitimate concern for the President, and that they also -- that they saw the -- Iran as an important relationship

for them, as well, obviously here in the region.

MS. PERINO: Yes, I would just add, of course, many of these countries have had relationships with Iran for a long time, and actually the President thinks it's important that they do have those relationships, because one of the things that we can do to help the Iranian people realize their dreams and to get out from under the isolation that their current government is making them live under -- is having channels to provide for dialogue is not a bad thing at all. In fact, the President encourages it.

Okay.

MR. GILLESPIE: Thank you all. See you tomorrow.

END 10:13 P.M. (Local)

\*There was interest in reducing (dependence on oil)...