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Special Briefing  
**Office of the Spokesman**  
Washington, DC  
September 12, 2005

## U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad on Reconstruction Efforts

(11:15 a.m. EST)

**MR. EREL:** Welcome, everybody. We have the pleasure today to welcome our Ambassador to Iraq, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad who is here to brief us on developments in Iraq, his tenure there so far, progress that we've made and where he sees things going. So without further ado, we have Ambassador Khalilzad. Thank you.

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Thank you very much. As you know, I'm here to accompany President Talabani on his visit to Washington. And I have been in Iraq for about five or six weeks before then. What I'd like to do is to make four points and then I'll take your questions.

Point one is that what's at stake in Iraq is extremely important. Iraq is the centerpiece of the defining challenge of our time. During the Soviet era, Soviet Communism was a defining challenge of our time; now it's terrorism and extremism that's the defining challenge of our time and Iraq is at the very center of it. And there's a huge struggle going on there. It's not only a struggle for Iraq itself, people of different regions, but also regional forces are involved in Iraq in order to shape and determine the outcome. And what happens there will affect us all, because Iraq itself is very important. It's a rich country, you know, in terms of oil, in terms of water, in terms of land, in terms of people, the numbers of people, the education level of the people, their sophistication.

But also Iraq is part of this region that we call a vital part of the world. So therefore, what happens in Iraq will affect the region. And what will happen in that region will affect us all. We are all very dependant on the region. If people like Zarqawi were to dominate Iraq, it will make Afghanistan under the Taliban look like a picnic, given the resources of Iraq -- given the resources of Iraq, the location of Iraq. So the American public needs to know that what's involved here is huge, as what we did with the Soviet Union was huge and what we did in World War II was huge -- point one.

Point two, that we're making progress in terms of our goals. What are our goals in Iraq? We want a democratic Iraq. We want a unified Iraq. We want a self-reliant Iraq, an Iraq that can look after its own security, and an Iraq that's prosperous and it's a successful country, that's a model for the broader transformation that's absolutely necessary of this region. It will take a long time. It will take a long time to do. Transforming regions, such as the Middle East, is not easy, but it's absolutely necessary. It's a region of the world that's producing most of the security problems of this era, and, therefore, we need to deal with it. And the way to deal with it is to get Iraq right, first, as we work on other problems of the region, too. Whether it's Israel-Palestine, whether it's Lebanon, whether it's other problems of the region, we need to shape the region environment towards positive change and Iraq is very important.

What are we doing, point three, with regard to moving towards our goals?

One, in the security domain: We're trying -- our goal is to get Iraq to stand on its own feet, as I said before. We're making progress: 190,000-plus Iraqis have been trained in police and military forces. Positively, too, we see Iraqis beginning to fight for themselves who are not even part of the security forces. You've probably seen in recent days that in places like Qaim, that tribes like Albu Mahal are fighting against Zarqawi. And it's critical for success of Iraq that Iraqis, whether Sunni, Shia or Kurd, protect their country, defend their country. And the sign that I see in these tribes, in Sunni tribes, standing up to Zarqawi are a positive development. We are discussing with the Iraqis over the transfer of security responsibility more and more to Iraqis.

We have formed a joint committee since I have been there with the Iraqi leaders and ourselves to define conditions for increased transfer of responsibility, and we will come to some agreement with them in the next couple of months as to a vision of transfer of responsibility and a plan for transfer of responsibility. It will be condition driven and we'll make that known to every one. But the trend is towards increased transfer of responsibility to Iraqis and a decrease in the security responsibilities for the United States and the coalition.

One key other factor that links to the initial point that I made with regard to security is the role of external players, particularly Syria. People are coming out from Syria to Iraq. People are coming from other parts of the region to Syria, whether it's to Damascus or whether it's to Latakia, whether it's to Aleppo, and then from there, they come to Iraq to kill Iraqis. The vision of these people, the Zarqawi people, for Iraq is not a democratic, unified, self-reliant, successful Iraq. It's an Iraq that's very much what we saw in Afghanistan under the Taliban -- an Islamic caliphate with a dark vision to take the region back, where women will not have the right to vote, where there will be no democracy, where there will be a center of international terror in a rich, powerful country. That's their vision. And Syria is allowing forces to advocate that, who want to prevent Iraq from succeeding to come across.

Our patience is running out with Syria. They need to decide: Are they going to be with a successful Iraq or are they going to be an obstacle to the success of Iraq? Iraq will succeed. Iraq will succeed. Syria has to decide what price it's willing to pay in making Iraq success difficult. And time is running out for Damascus to decide on this issue.

Politically, which is the other key prong of our strategy for success in Iraq, is a constitution. The draft of the constitution has been produced. The TNA in the next two to three days will vote on a final draft. The TNA is the transitional assembly in Iraq. It's an enlightened document. It's a good document.

As far as the Sunnis are concerned, there are discussions going on with them. I understand their difficulties. Because of the terrorist threat there, some of the people who support the document cannot say it publicly because they're afraid. Some are brave enough to -- who are saying with some additional minor adjustments, they would be willing to take the risk of standing up and supporting the document. The discussions are going on and the Iraqi people need to look at the final version of the document and when it's voted out of the assembly and decide.

I'm very, very happy with the trend in terms of Iraqis registering to vote. That means that politics is coming to Iraq, that people will participate in the process. You know, the Sunnis did not participate in the previous election and now they recognize that was a mistake. They're registering. I think the numbers are above 85 to 90 percent of people, who are qualified to vote, are registering to vote and that's extremely positive.

And then there will be an election. The referendum will be on the 15th of October -- elections in December. A permanent government will come about and that permanent government will have a broad mandate because all communities will participate in the elections, indications are. And a permanent government will be able to deal with some of the challenges that Iraq faces, particularly on the economic front.

It will be helpful obviously politically, because in order to win against the insurgency, not only you need qualified Iraqi forces to deal with the threat -- with support of the coalition, but you also need to win the people away from the insurgents through their participation in the political process. Indications are that that is a trend.

But they also need to deal with the economic needs of the people. And a lot of economic changes have taken place. Many new companies have been formed. Many projects have been carried out that I'd be glad to talk about if you have questions. But there are some issues that have not been dealt with yet: subsidies, whether it's oil, electricity, other issues that a permanent government will be in a better position to deal with.

On my final point, Iraq is going through a difficult transition, it's clear. It's a difficult transition because, you know, change in authoritarian regime, a one-man rule system, where one man was the constitution to a system where the people are deciding for themselves their political system, participating in the process, respecting each other's rights, compromising, self-relying more and relying less on government. These are processes that ordinarily would take decades. We are, in Iraq, learning how to crawl, walk and run at the same time. We're doing multiple things simultaneously that ordinarily would take -- be done sequentially over a very extensive period of time.

We're making progress but there are significant challenges that remain. I believe we have a good plan for how to proceed, and we need to stick with it and resource it. With that, I'd be glad to take questions that you might have.

Yes, ma'am.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, you mentioned Syria. What are the consequences if Syria doesn't -- I mean, you said time is running out. Well, what does that mean? What are the consequences for Damascus? What would you like to see the United States or other countries do if Syria does not act the way you would like it to?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Well, I would not like to elaborate any more than that. I think they'll -- they should understand what I mean. It simply is not tolerable that they, with impunity, can allow terrorists to come from other countries in the region, get training or just either pass through -- or Baathists want to have the old order returned, get trained in places like Latakia or Aleppo or near Damascus and then come across the border, kill Iraqis and pursue policies or actions that are unhelpful to the success of Iraq.

As I said, our patience is running out; the patience of Iraqis are running out. The time for decision is arriving -- has arrived for Damascus. It simply must close the training camps. It should not allow youngsters, misguided by al-Qaida, from Saudi Arabia, from Yemen, from North Africa, to fly into Damascus International Airport. It shouldn't be that hard, if you see young men between the ages of 18 and 28, who are coming without a return ticket, landing in Damascus Airport, to control that. If they cannot control that, if they need help to control inflow and processing of people, well, they should ask for help. I'm sure help can be provided. But it's gone on for too long and it simply needs to be dealt with.

**QUESTION:** Following on that, I mean, would you like to UN Security Council action on the line of 1559 against Lebanon -- this time talking about --

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Well, the range of options -- everything is on the table.

Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, I was struck by your opening statement where you felt a need to make the case that the United States must stay with Iraq, that it's an important issue. Do you feel -- have you sort of -- do you see a change in the mood here in the time you're here in terms of the priority of Iraq and the nation's larger priorities?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Well, I have -- during my confirmation hearing and my calls on the senators, I got a sense that there was a beginning of sort of a crisis of confidence, perhaps, in what we're doing in Iraq, whether we know what we're doing. I've gone there now. I've taken a look at the situation, both in terms of what's at stake and also working very hard with our military folks, with our political folks, economic folks to develop a strategy that has specific goals, not only long-term goals but interim goals. And also not only a strategy but a plan with timelines and with an attitude, with an approach that seeks to under-promise and over-deliver.

And I'm confident now, having spent some time, that we are putting a plan together on the economic front, on the political front, on the security front that can do the job. And hopefully in the coming weeks, we'll have the opportunity to present that more broadly. And therefore, my point to the U.S. audience is it's very important that we succeed. And we can succeed if we follow, as we will, an integrated plan that brings the various instruments of our power -- influence together in a way that can deliver for the American people. You know, I had the same experience in Afghanistan.

Before going to Iraq, as you know, I was the Ambassador there for a period. And based on lessons learned there as to on the integration, on sequencing, on the importance of defeating an insurgency through a joint effort that is political, that is military, that's economic, that we can do the job here as well. But the stakes are much higher here. The set of players is much larger. The external factor, although in Afghanistan, too, we had the issue of the sanctuary in Pakistan that I spoke about when I was there often. But here, I think, and the interference, particularly from Syria, is much more blatant than what one saw in Pakistan. And that's why I've put a great deal of emphasis in my opening statement that this must be dealt with, and it will be dealt with, and that the Syrians have to know that, you know, it's time for them to decide on this -- which way they want to go.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) may I follow up?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** What I'm trying to get at is you saw a crisis of confidence during your hearings last summer.

**UNDER SECRETARY KHALILZAD:** Right.

**QUESTION:** Now we have a whole new problem here in the United States and public attitudes toward Iraq have changed in the last 10 days. Do you worry that things are even worse in terms now than they were last summer, in terms of how the United States will view this?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** I can understand in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy that we have experienced as a nation that there will be a focus, as there should be, on dealing with this crisis. But I believe the American people to be very wise, to be very pragmatic. I believe the stakes are such that they will stay with the Administration, if they believe that we have a strategy and a plan that can deliver. And I believe we do have a strategy and a plan that can deliver. And I believe that if properly explained, I believe in the, as I said, in the wisdom of the American people. They know what's at stake here. They will stay with it. My concern was that perhaps if there is a sense that we don't know what we're doing.

**QUESTION:** On Anne's question on Syria, doesn't your vague response that all options are on the table lack credibility? I mean, this message has been sent to the Syrians for a long time now. I remember Armitage's visit late last year. So what's the -- you know, where's the beef? I mean, what are you telling them that's different from what was being told to them a year ago?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Well, let me tell our Syrian friends that they should not miscalculate -- that they need to decide. And Iraq will, as I said before, will succeed. Iraq is a neighboring state of Syria. Iraq is going to be a rich country. It's going to be a strong country, a powerful country. It behooves Syria to have good relations with such a country. Iraqis do not want interference in the affairs of -- in their affairs and they are saying they will not interfere in other countries' affairs. There is blatant interference by Syria in Iraqi affairs by allowing these terrorists to come across.

And as I said before, our patience is running out, their's is running out. We have given them every opportunity to mend their way, to change. They have not done that. I think -- while I see some positive signs in other parts, with regard to other countries. Jordan, for example, there is a positive change in Jordanian attitude -- the Prime Minister's visit to Iraq, Jordan and the Prime Minister visit the day before yesterday was very positive. Some of the latest discussion in the Arab League on Iraq was positive two days ago. So there are positive things that are happening with regard to the region. Syria is out of step. Syria -- as I said, we have given it every opportunity. It simply needs to -- time is running out for more of the same.

**QUESTION:** Do the options include a military option?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** As I said, everything is on the table.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, President Talabani has called the Iraqi-Iranian relationship as "good and friendly." What is your assessment of the Iranian actions in Iraq? Are they helpful in bringing security and stability to Iraq?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** I think Iran is following a two-track policy. There is a track of engagement and positive relations with the government, but there is also a track that has ties with groups that are not as helpful to the development of the kind of Iraq that I described. And -- but at this point, the number one offender, in terms of in a regional context to impede the success of Iraq, to make it more difficult, to complicate it, is Syria. And I want to make sure that that is understood in Damascus, as well as here.

**QUESTION:** But aren't you concerned about the Iranian influence in Baghdad?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Well, we don't -- we are not against Baghdad having good relations with all of its neighbors. America's agenda is not an Iraq that's hostile in terms of its relations with neighbors. We want Iraq to have good relations with their neighbors and we also want the neighbors to have good relations with Iraq and that means non-interference. And that means helping Iraq succeed, not to take advantage of this difficult transition that Iraq is going through. And not to add fuel to the fire, but to assist a neighbor in need, to -- for Iraqis to be able to make their own choices through a political process that has started building for their own security and for their own prosperity, which will have a positive effect on the region as a whole.

Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, I'd like to return to the issue of the "hearts and minds" question that you talked about a little bit in your comments, that from the outside, I mean, we've read in the papers just in the last couple of days this major offensive that was taken by Iraqi and U.S. forces with some success, although it seems like a lot of the insurgents have kind of disappeared and gone somewhere else. And so we'll probably have a similar action at some other point, you know, somewhere down the road.

But the question is people from the inside are saying that some of these actions, even with or without Iraqi forces, create a great deal of animosity among the population. They see that breaking into the houses and everything, which is necessary militarily in such an action, as something that is aimed against them. And so it seems to me that we have not really tackled this issue, that we do not have the minds and hearts of the people at this point.

And the difficulties over the constitution especially among the Sunnis may very well, indeed, be many people who don't want to support it because of fear of terrorism, but a lot of others who feel that the Sunnis kind of are getting left out in this, that they are going to get the raw end of the deal. And if we would launch some kind of action against Syria, military or otherwise, wouldn't that also tend to inflame the situation? Again, I mean, we seem to be in a catch-22, because you can't get the economic stuff going unless you deal with the terrorism and we don't seem to be able to do that effectively in bringing the people on our side.

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Well, for winning the war against the terrorists and the insurgents, it's very important to separate the people from them. And you can do that through, one, the approach to them politically, encouraging them to participate, engaging them, indicating to them through not only word, but action that you want an Iraq in which every community can see itself or all Iraqis can see themselves

in the picture. And on this one, we are very much proactively involved with the Sunnis engaging them, talking with them.

I have myself personally, during the constitutional process when my help was sought, talked with the Sunnis and there were issues that they raised of concern to them with regard to the constitution that we pressed hard with the others and they got quite a number of things that they were asking for dealt with in the constitution. And I think they now, more and more of them believe that we are not there on an anti-Sunni agenda, that we want an Iraq that can succeed. And Iraq can only succeed if all the communities in Iraq see themselves as part of this bouquet that President Talabani describes his country -- his communities. So we have enhanced that engagement with them.

Second, on the military track, we're reviewing our tactics both unilaterally as well as part of this transfer of responsibility activities and how we might address our counterinsurgency strategy to provide security for people so that they can freely decide for themselves, and to avoid things that inflame dislike of the United States or of the coalition. When we go to a place like Talafar with the Iraqis, as you saw, it was a joint operation of Iraqis and coalition, that there has to be a plan for afterwards, that there has to be great care taken, that the political means to resolve the issue has been exhausted, that the application of forces is as precise as possible and that is very quick reconstruction effort because, unfortunately, in any use of -- significant use of force, there is collateral damage, there's destruction to property, sometimes innocent people get caught in the crossfire. So that we need to be sensitive and responsive to circumstances that are produced by a situation like that.

And also to have an integrated approach that I talked about, not only you want to make sure the intelligence is good. Not only you have a military plan that is integrated into a political plan that has exhausted the alternative, but also that you have economic opportunities -- steps that need to be taken after an operation has been carried out.

I think we're making progress on our approaches with Sunnis, but I think the threat, the intimidation that they feel is a real significant issue that we need to deal with. And that's why I've emphasized Syria. But also it's very important to be able to provide security for the people.

Yes, ma'am, and you'll be the last one.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, Janine Zacharia of Bloomberg News.

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Hi.

**QUESTION:** Two questions: One on the Syria issue, has the U.S. resolved the issue of Iraqi money in Syria bank accounts? And can you give a sense of the scope of how much you estimate is still there?

And secondly, President Talabani was quoted as saying that U.S. forces would have to be there, I think, until 2007. He said this on the eve of his visit here. Can you give us a sense of what you expect to come out of his meeting with President Bush? Will he try and win an assurance, you think, that troops will stay there? It's sort of a follow-up on what Joel was asking about, you know, the lasting power of the U.S. commitment there.

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Right, sure. Well, with regard to how much money there is -- estimates I've received from Iraqis exceed \$500 million -- there may be more than that as well. And there have been discussions between Iraqis and Syrians about the return of those assets. Iraqis have other concerns, too -- the presence of senior Baathists in Damascus or in Syria. They have concerns about the media in Damascus glorifying the terrorists as resistance fighters, being anti-Iraq, anti-new Iraq, and, of course, being a transit point, as I focused on; training of opposition. So the list of concerns is great, but on the economic front they've talked to me about something around half a billion.

With regard to President Talabani's visit, he has some ideas as to how the transfer of responsibility ought to take place, with Iraqis taking more and more responsibility for security, U.S. stopping to do some things that are being done. These are good ideas and, as I said, we have a joint committee with the leadership of Iraq on the very issue of transfer of responsibility. We believe that substantial withdrawal can take place of U.S. forces within the next two years. This is precisely one of the issues that we're looking at together. And I'm sure these issues, you know, issues having to do with security, issues having to do with the constitution, issues having to do with elections, will be part of the agenda that he will cover with President Bush tomorrow.

Yes, ma'am.

**QUESTION:** You say that all the options are open against Syria. Would you be ready to present proofs of the accusation, for example, the training camps? Do we have proof of that?

**AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD:** Well, I wouldn't say anything that I wasn't sure about with regard to what's happening in Syria: the transit point, flights coming in bringing in people through Damascus International Airport, training that takes place, presence in cities such as Aleppo, Latakia, Damascus. The Syrians know better than we do what's going on in Syria. We are in touch with them. We will be in touch with them, but it's simply unacceptable.

It's intolerable for this to go on indefinitely. And it's unacceptable to Iraq and Iraqis and it's certainly unacceptable also to us. So, it's time for Damascus to change its way and to assist this new Iraq, rather than be an impediment to it.

Syria has to know that Iraq will succeed. They can affect, perhaps, the speed of success, but it will inevitably succeed because of our determination and the determination of the Iraqi people. You've seen it in the registration that they want to participate. They want to move forward. You've seen them in the elections. Of course there is one community that has not participated as much in the political process -- the Sunni Arab community that a couple of you have referred to, and it's changing there as well.

As you see in the registration, that they believe that the Shiites made the mistake in the 1920s when the Brits were there by not getting involved in politics. And they don't want to repeat that mistake -- they say that themselves. And that their lack of participation in the previous election was a mistake -- that they will participate and that makes me very hopeful. That's a very positive development and that's what we want -- the differences to be resolved politically and not by tanks, as was the case in the previous era in Iraq. I mean changes came through coups. They called it a revolution, but they were mostly coups. I mean military coups and very violent coups for the most part.

Well, thank you very much.

(Concluded 11:50 p.m.)

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