

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq
July 22, 2009

President Obama. Good afternoon, everybody. I am very pleased to welcome Prime Minister al-Maliki back to Washington. We've just concluded a very productive discussion about a wide range of issues.

We meet at an important moment. Substantial progress has been made since Prime Minister Maliki's first visit to Washington in 2006 and since the Prime Minister and I had a chance to sit down together in Baghdad. Violence continues to be down, and Iraqis are taking responsibility for their future. This progress has been made possible by the resilience of the Iraqi people and security forces and also because of the extraordinary service of American troops and civilians in Iraq.

Now we're in the midst of a full transition to Iraqi responsibility and to a comprehensive partnership between the United States and Iraq based on mutual interests and mutual respect. The success of this transition is critically important to the security and prosperity of our people, and it is a top priority of my administration.

Now, recently we took an important step forward by transferring control of all Iraqi cities and towns to Iraq's security forces. This transition was part of our security agreement and should send an unmistakable signal that we will keep our commitments with the sovereign Iraqi Government. As I said before, we seek no bases in Iraq, nor do we make any claim on Iraq's territory or resources.

Going forward, we will continue to provide training and support for Iraqi security forces that are capable and nonsectarian. We'll move forward with our strategy to responsibly remove all American combat brigades from Iraq by the end of next August and to fulfill our commitment to remove all American troops from Iraq by the end of 2011.

As we move forward, Prime Minister Maliki and I have no doubt that there will be some tough days ahead. There will be attacks on Iraqi security forces and the American troops supporting them. There are still those in Iraq who would murder innocent men, women, and children. There are still those who want to foment sectarian conflict. But make no mistake: Those efforts will fail.

The Iraqi people have already rejected these forces of division and destruction. And American troops have the capability, the support, and flexibility they need to stand with our Iraqi partners on behalf of a sovereign, secure, and self-reliant Iraq. Because we believe that the future does not belong to those who would destroy; it belongs to those who would build.

To that end, America strongly supports efforts by the Iraqi Government to promote national unity, which will help ensure that people in all parts of Iraq can live in peace and prosperity. Prime Minister Maliki and I discussed issues like the hydrocarbons law and disputed internal boundaries that will be fundamental to the future of a united Iraq. I reiterated my belief that Iraq will be more secure and more successful if there is a place for all Iraqi citizens to thrive, including all of Iraq's ethnic and religious groups. That's why America continues to support efforts to integrate all Iraqis into Iraq's Government and security forces, and we have increased our assistance to help displaced Iraqis return to their homes.

Prime Minister Maliki and I also agreed to build a broader basis for cooperation between our nations. The United States and Iraq have known difficult times together. Now both of us agree that the bonds forged between Americans and Iraqis in war can pave the way for progress that can be forged in peace. The strategic framework agreement agreed to last year helps lay the groundwork for this progress. America stands ready to help the Iraqi Government build their capacity to provide basic services and to promote the rule of law. And together, Americans and Iraqis can expand economic cooperation and trade that opens new doors of opportunity. Together, we can broaden our educational, our cultural, and scientific engagement to make a positive difference in the lives of our people. And together, we can take steps to advance security and prosperity throughout the region and around the globe. And Prime Minister Maliki and I are both deeply humbled by the sacrifices that have been made by Iraqis and Americans to create this opportunity.

There are many important meetings that will take place over the course of the Prime Minister's visit. I am especially pleased that he intends to visit Arlington National Cemetery. That hallowed ground is the final resting place for so many young Americans who have paid the ultimate price to help forge this hard-earned progress. They've set an example of selfless sacrifice that all of us must strive to meet, as do the Americans serving in Iraq today. And I want to thank Ambassador Chris Hill, who's here and is doing outstanding work. Under the most difficult circumstances imaginable, they have completed every mission they've been given, and they have forged countless partnerships and friendships with the Iraqi people.

I know that this story is one that can be told by people in both our countries and that the Iraqi people have endured extraordinary hardship in their pursuit of a brighter day. So many Iraqis and Americans have made so many sacrifices on behalf of a better future. Now, as we work to end this war and to look beyond it, we must live up to their example and live up to our own responsibilities to see that their legacy is truly one of greater peace and prosperity.

I thank you. And with that, I'd like to welcome Prime Minister Maliki and give him the opportunity for some remarks.

Prime Minister Maliki. In the name of God, the most merciful, the passionate, thank you. I thank the President of the United States, Mr. Obama, for your warm hospitality and regarding all the issues that related to the positive relationship as well as the aspiration to deepen that relationship.

My meeting with the President was a positive and constructive meeting. It reflected the deep conviction on the part of both sides to establish a strategic friendship and in order to continue the successes that we have achieved, and perhaps we referred to the security successes that led to the stability in Iraq.

We have also referred to the sacrifices by our sons and daughters on both sides to confront Al Qaida members, those who are outlawed and those who voice sectarian wars. If they succeeded in their efforts, they would not have been killing only Iraq but the entire region through the danger of sectarianism. Our sons and daughters succeeded both—on both sides, which led to stability and the return of the strength of the Iraqi Government under full sovereignty.

And we can—among the things that we can refer to in a positive way is the positive commitment in following up with the commitments that were signed by both sides, either those are related to the status of forces, or those are related to the strategic framework agreement that will govern the relationship in the future.

I have discussed today with President Obama about ways in order to activate the strategic relationship on the economic front, cultural front, educational front, commercial front, and in every possible area where the United States can play a role in supporting the Iraqi Government and the efforts of the Iraqi Government to build a state of law, a state based on constitution and federalism that works for the aspiration of its own people, using the wealth of that country and that nation.

We are about to activate such a strategic framework agreement. Efforts on both sides are there in order also to convene an investment conference in October of this year that will combine all foreign investors and all companies that would like and wish to work in Iraq.

All of this comes as a natural reaction to the stability and to the direction of the Iraqi National Unity Government to provide what is needed for rebuilding, reconstruction of a country that was destroyed by wars, by dictatorship, and by adventures, affected its infrastructure, affected the services that should have gone to the Iraqi people. Therefore, the relationship between the two sides, as it did see and witness progress on the security front and in combating terror, it will see great cooperation in the areas of economic, commercial, and cultural activities.

Our forces, as it proves its successful role and as it proves when it received the security file, that these forces proved to be capable of performing. And those who thought that the Iraqi forces, if the American forces can leave, will be incapable of imposing peace and security, these people proved to be wrong. Our forces benefited from working closely with the American forces and the multinational forces. Our forces became now highly capable, and they will continue to do their role and their part to provide the opportunity needed for reconstruction, rebuilding, and developing Iraq.

Iraq has suffered a great deal from being marginalized, from the policies of sectarianism, and from wars. We will work very hard in order not to allow any sectarian behavior an opportunity to flourish. We will work on a national plan where all sons of Iraq and all daughters of Iraq are equal in their contribution and in their services. They will be unified by Iraq; they will not be divided by other elements. We will be strengthening the relationship between the people of Iraq.

This is the direction of the Iraqi National Unity Government, and that made us work very closely in meeting all the challenges that we are facing. It helped us on the security front. It will help us in reconstruction. And we will benefit from the strategic relationship with the United States.

Thank you very much.

President Obama. Okay. Mark Smith of AP Radio.

Progress in Iraq/U.S. Role in Iraq

Q. Thanks, Mr. President. I'd like to ask about the flexibility that you spoke about that you said U.S. forces still have in Iraq. Since the handover of control in the cities, the Iraqi Government has imposed new limits on how U.S. troops can operate. They can't patrol on their own; they can't conduct raids on their own. Did you raise this with Prime Minister Maliki? Did you object to this, or do you think this is just a great sign of increasing Iraqi sovereignty?

President Obama. Well, I think that we have seen both improved capacity and greater confidence on the part of the Iraqi security forces. We're very pleased with that. I'm in communications with General Odierno on a regular basis. He provides me a weekly report of

how this transition has proceeded. He has been extremely positive about the progress that has been made.

Now, what we've seen is, is that there are going to be, at times, differences in strategy, in the interest of the Iraqi security forces in setting up a checkpoint at some point, and our Armed Forces suggesting that from our experience a checkpoint might create a target for AQI, and so it's better to be more mobile and to go after them. There are going to be those kinds of strategic and tactical discussions that are continually taking place between the two sides. But overall, we have been very encouraged by the progress that's been made.

It doesn't mean that there aren't still dangers in Iraq, and obviously, we've seen that in some circumstances, those who want to sow sectarian division inside of Iraq are going to still resort to the killing of innocents and the senseless bombings that plagued Iraq for such a long time after Saddam Hussein was deposed.

But what we've seen is, is that the violence levels have remained low, the cooperation between U.S. forces and Iraqi forces has remained high, and we have every confidence that we will continue to work together cooperatively and make adjustments where necessary to assure that, as we move into the national elections, that Iraq continues on the progress of stability and that Iraqi security forces are continually ramping up their capabilities, so that, ultimately, we are going to be able to fulfill our commitment to pull out our troops entirely and interact with Iraq as a full, sovereign country that it is.

Prime Minister Maliki. First of all, excuse me, regarding—the relationship between the Iraqi forces and the Iraqi forces after the withdrawal from cities and towns are good, constant cooperation. There are the support coming from the American forces next to the Iraqi forces that are operating. It is normal that the responsibility is bigger and the role is bigger as a result of the security agreement, but also based on the agreement of the withdrawal.

If the Iraqi forces would require the support from the American forces, they will ask the American side through coordinating committees that organize these operations. And I believe what's happening is organizing the roles between the two sides and cooperation. It is not to marginalize the role of any side. Based on the agreement, we are still under a joint responsibility to face any threats the Iraq is facing.

[At this point, a reporter asked a question in Arabic.]

President Obama. My translation is not coming through here, guys, and my Arabic is a little shaky. *[Laughter]* Here we go.

[The interpreter translated the question into English.]

Status of Iraq under United Nations Charter

Q. Based on the agreement, the security agreement between the United States and Iraq, the United States should help Iraq to get out of chapter 7. What steps will you be doing in order to help Iraq to get out of chapter 7?

President Obama. Well, this is an area that Prime Minister Maliki emphasized, and we have made a strong commitment to work with Iraq to get out of the chapter 7 constraints that were imposed after the gulf war. As I stated before, it, I think, would be a mistake for Iraq to continue to be burdened by the sins of a deposed dictator.

Now, in order to do that, we're going to have to obtain cooperation from various members of the United Nations. I think that there are going to have to be some specific disputes that are

resolved between Iraq and some of its neighbors. We intend to be very constructive in that process, but we have said clearly, and I've repeated today to the Prime Minister, that we will work diligently with Iraq so that, in fact, Iraq is no longer within chapter 7. Okay?

Prime Minister Maliki. President Obama and the American administration agree with us that Iraq is no longer representing a threat to international peace and security because there is a democracy in Iraq, not a dictatorship. Iraq is looking forward to positive, constructive relationship with its Arab neighbors and with the international community and to deal in—through a law internally and injustice internally.

I have seen a clear commitment from the President and the administration to support Iraq and to be committed to all elements of the agreement and to help Iraq to get out of chapter 7 and international sanctions which were imposed as a result of the ventures and the wars that were led by Saddam's regime, including occupying the neighboring state of Kuwait.

Iraq has gone a long way, and it will continue to solve all problems. And there are so many problems that we are paying the price for from the previous regime in order to have friendly relations with all members of the international community.

President Obama. Okay. Thank you very much, everybody. *Shukran.*

Prime Minister Maliki. *Shukran jazeelan.* Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 3:21 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Christopher R. Hill; and Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq. Prime Minister Maliki and a reporter spoke in Arabic, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Joint news conferences :: Iraq, Prime Minister Maliki.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Hill, Christopher R.; Maliki, Nuri al-; Odierno, Raymond T.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication; Iraq : Democracy efforts; Iraq : Economic growth and development; Iraq : Insurgency and terrorist attacks; Iraq : Iraqi military and security forces; Iraq : Iraqi refugees, U.S. assistance; Iraq : Prime Minister; Iraq : Reconciliation efforts; Iraq : Reconstruction efforts; Iraq : Relations with Arab States; Iraq : Status of Forces Agreement with U.S.; Iraq : Strategic Framework Agreement with U.S.; Iraq : Trade with U.S.; Iraq : U.S. Ambassador; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Graduated withdrawal from urban centers; Iraq : United Nations Charter, status under; Middle East : Arab States, relations with Iraq; Middle East : Peace and democracy efforts; Science and technology : International cooperation.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900589.