

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES  
BAGHDAD, IRAQ

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Transcript

April 5, 2010

AMBASSADOR CHRISTOPHER HILL  
MEDIA ROUNDTABLE

April 5, 2010  
Doha, Qatar

**MODERATOR:** Welcome, everyone, once again. We will get started very quickly, because we are late and we need to stay on time today. So we will go for about 20 minutes on the record.

I am -- first of all, you have a greeting from the ambassador, Ambassador LeBaron, who couldn't make it today. But he will be here a little bit later.

It's my pleasure today to introduce to you Ambassador Chris Hill, who has been the United States Ambassador to Iraq for almost exactly one year. And prior to that, he was Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. He has also been ambassador to Poland, Macedonia, and to South Korea, and probably other places I'm forgetting, but a long, long, and distinguished career with the American Diplomatic Service, starting in 1977. So we are very pleased, very honored to have him here today.

And with that, I turn it over to Ambassador Hill.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, thank you very much. I don't know how you want to do this, but maybe I can make a couple of opening comments about the situation in Iraq.

I thought it would be useful to maybe talk a little about Iraq and some of the countries in the region, because there are a lot of developments in Iraq. And notwithstanding the tragic developments yesterday, there are a lot of positive developments in Iraq.

And so, I was invited to come to Doha, and I took the occasion of that invitation to come here and have a day of meetings and opportunities to speak with various people. Last night there was a -- Brookings Institute did something. I will do something, I think, with Georgetown today. And I will do something -- some media outlets, and generally to try to help people understand what are the very sort of confusing and -- developments on the ground in Iraq.

There has been an election, which was on March 7<sup>th</sup>. In the United States, when you have an election, usually by the next day you know who is going to win. But Iraq has a parliamentary system, and so the coalition of parties -- some 40 parties, actually, within the coalition of Iraqiya -- led by Ayad Allawi came in first, with some 91 seats. But in the parliament you need 163 to form a majority. So his party, or his coalition, will have to be reaching out to other coalitions in trying to form a working majority.

At the same time, the coalition of Prime Minister Maliki, the State of Law coalition, came in almost in a dead heat, with some 89 seats. So were he to form the government, he would also need to reach out and try to interest some of the other coalitions. There are four main coalitions in Iraq: the INA coalition, which includes the Sadrists and the so-called ISCI, the Supreme Council Party and ISCI-Badr, that coalition came in with about some 70 votes; and the Kurds had some 57; and then there are a lot of other smaller coalitions.

So, we are into what would be a very intense, internal political season in Iraq, as the various politicians reach out and try to form a majority government. Or, they end up forming a government of national unity, where all the major coalitions come in. So it's all politics all the time right now in Iraq. I think that's a pretty positive trend in Iraq.

In the meantime, the economy, which has been very weak through this very difficult security environment over the last seven years, the economy is beginning to revive. They have reached agreements with major oil companies. Within -- depending on how quickly the oil companies are able to get to work, and depending on how quickly some of the very needed infrastructure is built, it is expected that within some 5 to 10 years, Iraq will have the capacity to be getting out of the ground some 10 million barrels of oil per day. So it is an enormous amount of oil. They also have gas reserves that are virtually untapped. So, it is a country that will have, I think -- if they can master the security and the political situation, it's a country that will have considerable economic clout in the region.

To be sure, it's a troubled land, has been for many years. And to be sure, the political issues do need to be addressed. But I think it is going in the right direction.

They have -- it's a country where -- it's a Shia-majority country. And this gives rise to the view of many people in the region that somehow there is an undue influence of Iran. To be sure, Iran is an important neighbor for Iraq, but I think it is important to -- for people to recall that when Saddam Hussein fought his eight-year war against Iran, he did so with an army that was 80 percent Shia. So I would not exaggerate the sort of organic relationship between Shia in Iraq and Shia in Iran. In fact, if you look at some of the historical antecedents of why there are Shia in Iraq, you will see it's a much more complex picture to simply say that they are one with the Shia in Iran.

So, at the same time, there is a very strong and numerous Sunni presence in the country. And the Sunnis came out to vote, and did so primarily through Mr. Allawi's Iraqiya

coalition. So, I think the Sunnis are looking to have broad and significant participation in government.

And, finally, there is another community known as the Kurds. And the Kurds have an autonomous three provinces in the north. There are some disputed internal boundaries on the question of how big the Kurdish regional government area should be. The disputes are in about 15 places along the map. Two of the most known are the one in Kirkuk and another in a place called Nineveh, in Mosul. So, these issues need to be addressed.

At the same time, I think it's fair to say that the Kurds have -- are prepared to live within a democratic Iraq. They have an important role in Baghdad. The president of Iraq has been Kurdish. Many numerous senior officials in the -- even in the armed forces are actually Kurds. So one should not look at the Kurdish issue as simply a function of some province far away where there are only Kurds, and there are no Kurds elsewhere. Kurds are -- really participate in the life blood of Iraq.

So, in short, it's a multi-community country, with all that that means, in terms of challenges and making sure everyone feels a part of the system. It is not easy. These problems have been dealt with in the past through coups and through dictatorships. But I think, as the Iraqi people have gotten a glimmer of freedom, I don't think they're going to give it up so easily.

So, with those sort of opening comments, maybe I can go to more -- to some questions.

**MODERATOR:** Who gets the first one? (Inaudible.)

**QUESTION:** You talked about Iraq after (inaudible), but you didn't talk at all about the main problem between two countries, Kuwait and Iraq, (inaudible) the border.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) How do you read the future (inaudible) between Iraq and Kuwait?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, you are quite right, I should have mentioned that. Time was short. As you know, Iraq is under Chapter VII in the UN. It has to do with a determination by the UN Security Council that Iraq is a threat to regional peace and security.

So, in order to get out from under Chapter VII, some things have to happen. One of the things that needs to happen is to address the border issues between Kuwait and Iraq. And, as you probably know, a border was delineated by the UN back in 1991, which involved a land border but also a maritime border. And so, there are issues on the Iraqi side with that border.

That said, it's our judgment that Iraq can work through, with Kuwait, a resolution of this issue. I think there has been inadequate communication on the matter. When you look at the -- when you look at all the problems of this kind in the world, I mean, and then you look at the Kuwait-Iraq problem, it is -- I would put that in the "solvable" category. Some problems I would put as unsolvable, some to be solved in the long term, and others are ones that I think, with proper communication, can be addressed. And I think this belongs in that last category.

We are very -- we are pleased that, at long last, the Iraqis have sent an ambassador to Kuwait. We think this is part of the dialogue process that should lead to discussion of outstanding issues.

The Iraqis have also addressed -- have tried to address, and have been, actually, successful -- in recovering some of the Kuwaiti archives which were looted by Saddam's forces during the invasion of Kuwait.

They have worked with the Kuwaitis on missing persons. Kuwaitis were kidnapped from Kuwait City and never heard from again. And so the Iraqi Government has worked with the Kuwaitis to try to identify and find those people, or find their remains.

So, I think there is a process ongoing. I know the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, under Hoshiyar Zebari, has been working on these issues. There are some international issues as well, not just related to Kuwait, but related to Iraq's accession to conventions on weapons of mass destruction, issues like that.

So, our hope is that the United States, which is committed in Article XXV of the Security Agreement with Iraq, committed to helping Iraq overcome Chapter VII. Our hope is that this can be accomplished, and that Iraq and Kuwait can resolve these issues. Whether they like it or not, they are going to be neighbors. They have been neighbors, they are going to be neighbors for many years. And I think it would be in their mutual interest to resolve these issues.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) in order to free the country from Saddam and stop Ba'ath Party. (Inaudible) occupying forces that led (inaudible). And what (inaudible) that transformed the U.S. forces (inaudible)?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I'm not a historian. And as a diplomat -- historians tend to look back and diplomats tend to look forward. In trying to look forward, and in trying to come up with systems that will work for the future -- such as the issue we were just discussing about Kuwait -- I think it's necessary to understand the past, but maybe not be captured by it or dwell upon it.

To be sure, many mistakes have been made since 2003. I think everyone understands that. At the same time, I think the U.S. and Iraq have developed a good relationship, and that when you look -- when you talk to all the major political entities in Iraq, there is a

desire -- they share a desire that we have, which is to have a long-term relationship with Iraq.

Now, our long-term -- our desire for a long-term relationship doesn't mean a long-term military relationship. It means a long-term relationship as we would with any other country. And so, we have spent considerable effort in recent years to reach out to Iraqi society. Not just in security areas, but to reach out to Iraqi society in education, culture, economic areas, especially, and to try to put together -- try to find areas of common endeavor, find areas where we can work on -- for the long term. And I believe we have that.

I think the role of the U.S. troops in Iraq today is overwhelmingly seen as positive by the Iraqi people today. And I think, as the U.S. combat mission ends in Iraq this year, and as U.S. troops are reduced substantially down to no more than 50,000 by the end of August, you will see an increasing shift, in terms of the U.S. presence in Iraq, from a presence based on the military to a presence based on civilians. We have in Iraq the largest American embassy in the world. The buildings are quite permanent structures. It's not a military camp, it's a civilian embassy. And we look forward to this long-term relationship.

**QUESTION:** I was wondering if you're aware of meetings between representatives of Maliki, Sadr, and Hakim in Iran, and if this at all concerns the U.S. Government.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I think there was -- as you know, there is a Nowruz celebration that's a sort of new year celebration. It's -- the holiday may be celebrated in about six countries, including Iran, including Kurdistan, including in several countries in the north there. So the Iranians hosted a gathering, and there were some Kurds there, there were -- I think the Turkish deputy prime minister came. And then two of the Shia entities came.

And while they were there -- two of the Shia parties -- Shia coalition, Maliki's SOL was represented there, and the ISCI Sadrists were represented. And while there, they evidently had a meeting to try to hammer out some -- a way forward, in terms of government formation.

I will tell you, as a general proposition, that the Iraqi people want their government to be made in Iraq, and not made somewhere else. And I will say, as a general proposition, that the Iraqi people expect their politicians to work these things out in Iraq. And I think the politicians have gotten the message.

We have not seen any announcement as a result of the meetings in Iran. There has been no conclusion of it. And, in the meantime, as there was for weeks on end before going to the Nowruz celebration in Iraq -- as there was weeks on end before that -- there is now continuing discussions between the two Shia coalitions, but also Iraqiya. And, of course, the Kurds are involved. Everybody is talking to everybody right now. It's a very intense political time.

And I think the argument that a number of these parties make is, "We're talking to each other constantly, and wherever we go, whether it's a Nowruz celebration, we continue to talk." But they don't yet have a conclusion about what the -- what a future government structure is. But I can assure you that the Iraqi people have made very clear they want that government structure designed and made in Iraq.

**QUESTION:** The last two days there have been attacks on foreign embassies (inaudible) quite new.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Is this a prelude to (inaudible)?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, the honest answer is I don't know. This was a -- the idea of attacking foreigners, of course, is not new. Most -- one of the most heinous attacks, of course, was the attack on the United Nations a few years ago. So, whether this represents a new tactic, it's really hard to say.

We are dealing with a terrorist organization which is very small, very hidden, operates in cells. They don't command any territory. The era when you could have areas of Fallujah or something run by sort of terrorist cells, that's over. They don't occupy any territory at all, so they are in great secrecy, and they're very small.

Why these people would commit these crimes -- and there is no other word for it, these are crimes, I mean they killed -- the numbers are subject to change, so I don't know precisely, but it does appear there have been, certainly over 10, maybe 20, maybe more. It seems to be, the people who lose their lives on these days, it seems almost random, who they end up killing. Why they do it, is it their ideology? Are these thugs that are being paid by somebody to build a vehicle-borne improvised device? It's hard to say. There seem to have been some suicide murderers or suicide bombers among these people. It's really hard to say.

But what I can tell you is I don't see any political purpose being served by that. Iraq is not going to become some caliphate that al-Qaeda seems to want. I mean, the direction of Iraq is pretty clear, what it is. And there is a broad consensus. People voted in great numbers in Iraq in these elections. And while there will be discussions for weeks to come on the issue of how to form the government, no one has any sympathy with people who murder innocent civilians like what these people are doing.

So, I think it's very important for everybody to condemn the bombings. I think it's very important that we work together, that -- I know that this happened just as I was coming to Doha, so my deputy, Cameron Munter, immediately called the Egyptian ambassador to pass on my condolences, but also his own, at the injuries that were caused within the Egyptian Embassy.

We will continue to do what we can to prevent this kind of thing. And I do believe that if you look at the overall trends, the overall trends are downward, I mean, because these people have nowhere to hide anymore. There is no element of support that they get any more from the Iraqi people. So I think it's one of these things where we have to continue to work against this, work with the Iraqi security forces, and just try to -- try our best to prevent these people from committing these acts in the future.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) Mr. Nuri al-Maliki lost the elections... (inaudible.) So, how do you assess the situation (inaudible), and --

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** How do I assess the what? The --

**QUESTION:** The present situation, the present parliament situation --

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** -- (inaudible).

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, it's hard to say. I mean there are two coalitions that did very well, Mr. Maliki's coalition and Mr. Allawi's coalition. When they did 100 percent of the votes -- obviously, a preliminary figure, because it hasn't yet been certified by the courts -- Allawi came out 2 seats ahead of Maliki.

Frankly speaking, he has 91 seats, he needs 163. Maliki has 89, he also needs 163. It really doesn't matter who came in first there. What matters is the fact that people came out and voted, and that people voted for different options. It's always good to see, in a parliamentary election, that someone didn't get 99 percent and the other person got 1 percent. So this is encouraging, from the point of view of the overall health of the democratic model.

But real challenges are ahead. And the challenge is to figure out how to put together a broad coalition. At the end of the day, I can make a pretty strong prediction, which is the government that emerges from it -- and there will be a government, and it will emerge in a fine item out of time, whether it takes longer than we would like -- you know Americans; we do believe in instant gratification, and so we'd sort of like to see that government yesterday -- but we understand that they need to do it right. And when that government emerges, it will have Shia in it, it will have Sunnis in it, and it will have Kurds. And it probably will also have some minorities, as well. I mean, it will be a broadly-based government. How they get there, which coalitions they get through, is something they're talking about right now.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible?)

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** What's that?

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible?)

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** You're asking for my prediction, and I would not want to rule Iraq with only Shia. I would not want to try to rule Iraq with only Shia Kurds. I would want to reach out and make sure I had Sunnis. By the same token, I wouldn't want just Sunni and Shia try to rule Iraq without Kurds. I think it's pretty clear they need all three legs of the stool. And so I think two legs would just be too unstable.

So, I think they're going to get three legs. And the question is, how are you going to get there? So, would you have Maliki and Allawi putting together something, or would they need some of the Shia from the other coalition, because the INA coalition had 70 seats? Compared to 89, 70 is not too bad.

There is -- when you look very carefully at some of the polling data, the data do suggest that secular options did better. Iraqiya, which is a secular party, did far, far better than another Sunni party, the IIP, the Iraq Islamic Party, so-called Tawafuq coalition, in the Sunni -- sort of in the middle part of Iraq. So I think secular did better than sectarian.

Now, a lot of people point out, "Ah, but what about the Sadrists?" Well -- because the Sadrists are often considered very sectarian. The Sadrists, I think, did well for another reason, and it wasn't religious. I think they did well because the Sadrists are known to try to address issues like people's health needs, social needs, and try to make that their sort of platform. And this is a country where the government doesn't yet have the funds to provide the services people need.

So, and then when you look very carefully at what the Sadrists actually did, they got some 39 seats. So 39 out of 325 -- you do the math -- it's something around 12 percent. Previously, the Sadrists had 30 seats out of a parliament of 275. So if you do the math, that's about 10.9 percent. So they increased their membership in the parliament by 1 percent, going from 11 to 12. So I think it's a bit of an exaggeration to talk about the Sadrists' resurgence. But they were a Shia entity that did not lose seats, compared to their other coalition partner, ISCI, that did lose seats.

But the big change, the big development of this election, was that Sunnis were full participants and are a much larger presence in the parliament than they were before.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador Hill, you have already mentioned the frequency of terrorist attacks has come down. But it seems, although the number (inaudible) small, they are still doing what they want when they want.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I wouldn't say that. You don't -- first of all, I don't think you know what they want or when they want it. So they are constantly being thwarted. And there are many examples where they have been caught, where explosives have been found. People have been turning them in, this sort of thing. So they don't have --

**QUESTION:** Free –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Free reign, yes.

**QUESTION:** Okay. (Inaudible) neighbors whom you have accused earlier of supporting terrorist activities (inaudible) in Iraq.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I didn't accuse –

**QUESTION:** No, not you, your country (inaudible) --

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I would say that, for example, there are remnants -- because they're not very strong now -- remnants of Shia-based militia groups -- Jaish al-Mahdi, for example -- Promised Day Brigade, to name another example. Asaib al Haq, to name still another example. And the way some of these Shia groups operate is that they will fire what are called 107 millimeter rockets. These are very inaccurate rockets. I mean they can't hit any particular building, they are just designed to terrorize people. So, when you look to see where these 107 millimeter rockets are made, you will see that they are made in Iran.

And so, now you can argue, "Well, did the Iranian Government give them to these people? Did they steal them from Iran? Did they find them in Iraq, having been sold to Iraq?" I am not going to get into all of that. But I can tell you the one that landed in my front lawn a few months ago was made in Iran.

If I were the Iranians, I would do a little better job of preventing that type of malevolent export to Iraq. As you know, on the other side, the Iraqi Government -- and in particular, Prime Minister Maliki -- has expressed concerns about Syria's involvement. And, as you know, the United States has a long-term concern about Syria.

And I think what Mr. Maliki is looking at is the fact that various ex-Ba'athists -- now, Ba'athists being people who are in this sort of party structure that supported Saddam and was shared, essentially, with Syria -- that these people have continued to be able to fund-raise, and have satellite television programs, and that sort of thing. So there is certainly concern there.

And what I would encourage all of Iraq's neighbors to understand is a stable and democratic and peaceful -- and I think democratic and peaceful are related here -- Iraq is in everybody's interest. And what is not in everyone's interest is to have a dictatorial -- and therefore, aggressive -- Iraq. So, I -- it's our hope that all of Iraq's neighbors, whether they are Iran, Syria, or anyone else, will come to understand that the new Iraq is one that's in their interest to support.

**QUESTION:** If I may ask kind of a general question, when you said the diplomat looks forward, do you –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Lawyers and historians look backward.

**QUESTION:** Yes –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Diplomats look forward.

**QUESTION:** Yes –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Journalists look all over the place.

(Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** My question is, do you have the kind of assessment which makes you believe that -- or which shows you how the (inaudible) culture of democracy--

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** -- in that country?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** In other words, what I want to know is how far do you see the country –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** -- you know, after maybe -- because Americans will leave one day.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Do you believe, really –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** -- there is a strong (inaudible) of rebuilding (inaudible)?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** That's a very important question.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** It's a very important question, it's a very fair question. I don't know if I am competent enough to answer that question, because that question is a very

profound question, not only about Iraqis accepting democracy, but also a question about what is democracy.

That is, is democracy just voting? And I think I would argue -- I think most people would argue -- that voting is an essential element of democracy, but it is simply one element. There needs to be a number of other elements.

I would argue that what a democracy needs is strong, democratic institutions. You need military that is subject to civilian control. You need police that respects -- there is there to protect the people, rather than the regime. You need police that respect people's human rights, as well. You need court systems that will not be under the influence of political power. So you need a lot of things.

So, rather than look at democracy as some kind of finished state of being, I think you have to look at trends, democratic trends, rather than whether it's a democratic system. You need to look at whether they're getting in that direction.

So, I think if you look at what they're doing in the courts, what they're doing in the media -- media is also an important indicator of democratic trends -- if you look at how they are managing their institutions, how the police are behaving, I think you see a lot of positive trends in Iraq that would support the conclusion that they want to have a democratic system.

Are we there yet? Have they -- is the journey completed? Well, first, I'm not sure the journey is ever completed. I mean, frankly, everyone's democracy can be improved; mine, too. So I think we have to be a little patient with them on things.

Do I feel there is enough of a momentum in all of these areas, such that people won't want to go back? I think if you talk to Iraqis who are very discouraged about many of the events, especially the economic, you know, the difficulty of getting the economy going, I don't think anyone wants to go back to dictatorship.

So, I think Iraqis are looking at this from the point of view of, "Do I like getting up in the morning and being able to listen to different media outlets, even though they may not be independent, they may be dependent on various political parties?" I think they like that. I don't think they want to give that back to the Ba'athist Party, for example.

Do they feel that they can get fair judgments out of the court? And I think if you look at the polling data, people increasingly feel that the courts are increasingly independent. Are they completely independent? Of course not. They need to be -- there needs to be further developments. But I think there is a growing confidence in the court system. And I think one of the most important developments in the courts is the security issue.

What al-Qaeda and what these various terrorists try to do is they try to attack one community and then attack another community, and hope the communities will fight with

each other. And what you have seen is people are allowing the police to handle these issues.

Now, are the people sometimes frustrated by the police? Yes. I mean, when the police arrive at a scene and there has been some terrible terrorist-sponsored crime, people will say, "Why weren't you here earlier? Why aren't you protecting us?" There is a lot of criticism of the police. But one thing you don't see, as you did four years ago, people don't say, "Oh, the police are on the other side. They are supporting those guys against us." There is a lot less of that going on. So, they complain about the efficacy, the efficiency of the police, as happens everywhere. They don't say the police are taking the sectarian side. I think that's a good trend.

Your question of where -- whether they will ultimately get to a self-sustaining and no backsliding situation, that's going to be up to them. And that's why I think their politicians have a great responsibility in this moment of history to do the right thing.

I have said a few times -- I mean I'm sorry to quote myself, but I mean I do believe that democracy, in the political realm, is not so much determined by the behavior of the winners. Winners are usually in a good mood. It will be determined by the behavior of the losers, who loses in the process. And will the losers say, "I lost"? There are not a lot of role models around here, around this part of the world -- frankly, there are not a lot of role models in the world of people that say, "Okay, I lost. My compliments to my opponent, who beat me." Very tough. It's tough when you lose a 1-nothing football game; it's really tough.

Did your team just lose?

(Laughter.)

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** It's really tough when you lose 91-89.

**MODERATOR:** On that note, thank you very much for coming.

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