

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES
BAGHDAD, IRAQ

For Immediate Release

January 22, 2009

AMBASSADOR RYAN C. CROCKER
ROUND TABLE WITH
WESTERN MEDIA

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AMBASSADOR CROCKER: As I get ready for my own transition to civilian life, I guess that's on my mind. It is profoundly a time of transition in America, obviously. And I was privileged to talk to President Obama last night via video conference with General Odierno.

It is a time of transition in the Iraqi-U.S. relationship. Again, as we concluded the Security and Strategic Framework Agreements late 2008, they went into effect January 1. And, you know, for the first time since 2003, our presence here is now regulated by these agreements, and not by a Security Council resolution.

It is a time of physical transition, as we move out of the palace and into this embassy compound. And it is very much a time of transition in Iraq, as Iraq moves into a cycle of elections in 2009, beginning, of course, with the provincial elections at the end of January. I think these elections -- provincial, regional in the Kurdish region, local in the summer, national around the end of the year -- are going to mark, again, I think a significant transition within Iraqi politics.

And, finally, as I just kind of, you know, look back to when I arrived here in March 2007, and how it looked and felt then, a really remarkable transition within Iraq itself, obviously within security terms, but politically, as well. There are enormous challenges in front of this country, clearly. But you know, when you take a second to catch your breath and look back, it really is extraordinary, how conditions have changed.

So, that is really all that I would offer you by way of opening. I know that you have got things on your mind. I also can see it is obviously a very slow news day in Iraq, as you are all here, but happy to deal with whatever is on your mind.

QUESTION: Jane Arraf, Christian Science Monitor. Could you just tell us a little bit more about the chat with President Obama, whether he gave any indication of what he -- I wonder if you could clarify something for me, at least.

If he does agree to decide to pull out within 16 months, is that any different from what's already in place, with the possibility of the referendum that would have withdrawn --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, again, the framework for withdrawal is there through the Security Agreement. It sets some deadlines, but obviously it doesn't restrict either government, with regard to numbers and timings within those deadlines.

The President issued a statement last night that I think you all saw. General Odierno and I offered him our assessments on conditions and prospects in Iraq. And, as he noted in the statement, he asked that further planning take place for a responsible military withdrawal.

I really wouldn't want to characterize the conversation any further. I will leave that to the President and his team. But, again, this was his first day in the White House. So, you know, there were no decisions taken.

In terms of, again, therefore, what the time table is, moving forward, you know, I have no idea. The referendum is part of the Iraqi internal process; I don't know how that's going to proceed. Nor, obviously, can I predict what decisions the President is going to make.

But I do note in his statement, he -- and as he has said -- he said in his inaugural address, he said it in his statement, he's talking about a responsible military withdrawal.

QUESTION: Sir, Lourdes Garcia-Navarro. NPR. Can you tell us what you recommended, and what you feel, at this point, Iraq is ready for? Is it ready for a 16-month withdrawal?

Under -- you know, you are the senior diplomat here, and --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Right. And, you know, I -- as a career diplomat, I serve the President, and am proud to do so. I have had my first discussion with President Obama. I did give him my assessment, but I think he would like it if the assessment I gave him was something I gave to him, and didn't rebroadcast it over the media.

QUESTION: How stable is this country right now, do you feel? I mean --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: No, it's a very important question. Again, one looks to challenges going forward.

I think the Iraqi security forces have made enormous progress during my time here, both quantitatively and, more important, qualitatively. And, you know, we see that as they have taken the lead for, sometimes, some very challenging and complex security missions. I mean, that -- the things they are doing in areas throughout Iraq they could not have begun to do as recently, again, as two years ago.

There still are challenges going forward. These forces still have a ways to go, I think, to acquire the full potential of their capabilities, also the need for logistics for what are called enablers, systems they don't yet have. There is work to be done. But again,

Iraq is a far more stable place than it was 18 or 24 months ago. But there is still a ways to go, and clearly, I think, still a continuing need for our security support.

QUESTION: Jonny Dymond, BBC. What would you say is the biggest challenge in the forthcoming year?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I would have to list several things. Again, as I noted, it is a year of elections. And the conduct and outcome of those elections, I think, are going to be very important for the country, in particular that they be, and be perceived as, free and fair in at least a general sense.

I mean, they're not going to be perfect elections, I think we all know that. But it is important that they be credible elections. It will be Iraq's second round of elections, and I think, in many respects, that's at least as important as the first round in the development of a lasting democratic society. So it's this balance between wanting to be in power and respecting the basic norms of democracy that are going to be important for Iraqis to work through. So, clearly, this cycle of elections is a key challenge.

Another key challenge is political development, more broadly. One thing that has struck me, at least, is, as violence has come down and stayed down -- you know, it's kind of the smoke and dust of the violence of 2006 and 2007 has subsided -- unresolved political issues have, in many respects, actually emerged in sharper relief, so that we see complex debates over, you know, the shape of the state.

What's the proper role and authorities, responsibilities to the federal government vis a vis the regional government in Kurdistan, for example, vis a vis the provincial governments? And a lot of it sounds like the states rights debates in American history.

There are clearly tensions within the system and within communities. You see, for example, the emergence over the last six months of Kurdish-Arab tensions. And that, again, touches on, I think, another challenge for the year, which is of disputed internal boundaries. And I just would make a point there that even I have to remind myself of sometimes. I was here, as many of you were, during the Saddam years. But even with that experience, sometimes it is easy to lose track of how profoundly traumatized this country, its society, and its people were through the Saddam experience.

And this issue of disputed internal boundaries is a case in point. He literally redrew the map to reward and to punish. He created a dramatic climate of fear that all Iraqi communities still suffer from. I mean, if there is one word that I think still does describe a state of mind in Iraq, it would still be fear, now conditioned, I think, by a lot of hope that wasn't there before, and some optimism. But fear is still very pervasive. So, disputed internal boundaries have to be worked through.

And, finally -- well, not finally -- but security does have to be maintained. Neither the Iraqis nor we can take our eye off that ball. Because, as we have tragically seen, there are still elements out there, particularly al-Qaeda, capable of delivering devastating attacks. And it reminds us that they have been much diminished, much weakened.

But as long as they can cling to some hand-hold here, they are going to keep trying to literally fight their way back.

So that would be -- I could add to the list of major challenges, but -- and that's what I said at the beginning. Progress has been really significant, but you cannot underestimate the challenges and the time it's going to take to work through those.

You know, it shouldn't surprise anyone, but we in the West are often a very impatient people. I have said this so often to my staff, that they will probably run screaming from the room. But you know, when I was getting set to deliver some 4th of July remarks, I did a little bit of arithmetic. If you take 1921 as the creation of the modern Iraqi state, the installation of the king, and go forward 87 years, you're in 2008. If you take 1776, and the Declaration of Independence as America's starting date, add 87 years, and it's the day after the battle of Gettysburg.

So, even in a much more homogenous and much less traumatized society, the challenges of building a working federal democracy were, for us, very, very substantial. No surprise that the Iraqis are looking at a lot of challenges going forward. They certainly got their constitution done a lot faster than we did, and didn't go down the dead end of the Articles of Confederation, so --

QUESTION: Ambassador, Anthony Shadid from the Washington Post. I think it may have been in the column by David Ignatius, but I'm not sure. There was a point you made that I thought was very interesting, about the psychological impact of the surge, and how that changes certain dynamics within the country, that a commitment was demonstrated.

I'm wondering if you could -- and this might be a little bit of speculation on your part - - but if you could, describe what the psychological impact of a more precipitous withdrawal would be to the country.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, I think it was with David. And I will just restate one part of that.

I think the surge surprised people, in many respects, inside -- in most respects inside Iraq -- very pleasantly. In the region, in some respects, pleasantly, and I think others were unpleasantly surprised. I think the Iranians and Syrians, in particular, were looking to the U.S. involvement in Lebanon as an example. You turn up the heat, apply the pressure, cause pain, you know, and the Americans go home. Totally different context, obviously, but I really do think that is the principle that the Iranians and Syrians have been operating on for a quarter of a century. The surge told a completely different story.

I said in my congressional testimony in September, and then again in 2007 and April of 2008, that a precipitous withdrawal runs some very severe risks. I mentioned earlier, you know, that al-Qaeda is incredibly tenacious. They will have to be killed or captured. And as long as they hang on, they are looking for the opportunity to regenerate.

If we were to decide suddenly we're done, they would certainly work to use space that that opened up to do just that. I think it would encourage neighbors with less than benign intentions to carry them out.

And, perhaps most importantly, I think it would have a chilling effect on Iraqis. I think if they perceived -- and you saw the Ali Dabbagh statement, I guess, the day before yesterday, that they were worried about a too-swift withdrawal -- that's when I think the spirit of compromise, of accommodation, of focus on institutional development, all of that would run the risk of getting set aside as people started to look to, "Uh-oh, we had better pull back, dig the trenches, build the berms, and get ready for whatever comes next."

So, I'm not saying that that would happen, but I think these are dangers that could happen.

QUESTION: Related to that, with the summer of 2010, that will be just after perhaps the formation of a new government, if that happens in the spring -- it had happened in the past. What kind of dangers do you see related to that, as well, in terms of the uncertainty that surrounds that time period, as had in the past, and potential for violence to increase, or certain tensions to increase?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Wow. Summer of 2010.

QUESTION: I know that's a ways away, but in terms of, you know, some of the time frames that we talked about --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: You know, to try to look ahead 18 months, look back 18 months. And who among us would be able to predict we would be anywhere close to where we are today? I just can't do it.

But it is a valid question, obviously. Elections are obviously critical for democratic development. Elections also do raise tensions. And that is, again, why the -- how these provincial elections are conducted, I think, is going to be very important.

And, to some extent, I think they will show the way forward. What happens in the provincial elections, in some respects, is going to inform us -- or inform Iraqis, really - - as they look ahead to national elections.

So, again, I would expect tensions to increase. But whether that brings with it a threat or actuality of heightened violence I really couldn't say. I would be knocking on a lot of wood. I am cautiously optimistic. I mean, we are, what, nine days out? There obviously have been some attacks, and so forth. But I think arrangements are tracking pretty well. And if they go through these elections in good order, I think that's going to give them a lot of confidence approaching national elections.

QUESTION: Ambassador, Leila Fadel, McClatchy. I guess my question is about the foundation of democracy in Iraq. As American pressure eases off, the implementation of an agreement come 2011, do you worry about a danger of just a reversion back to the strong-man leader? Because some -- you know, some Iraqis want that. They're

sick of having the democratic institution that they do have. So is that a concern for you?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: You know, again, almost anything is possible here. I make no predictions. That said, I will make a prediction. (Laughter.)

I am struck, as we head into these provincial elections, you know, 14,400 candidates for 440 seats. People are really enthusiastic. It is extremely difficult to get the attention of any senior political figure in this country for anything that isn't related to elections. They've all got their minds on it.

And again, while I am not going to sit here and tell you that democracy is absolutely firmly rooted and here to stay. When you go back to that climate of fear that I talked about -- and I find this in discussions with a wide range of Iraqi political leaders -- it is -- it's the constitution which made -- you know, everybody argues over it, but everybody also has referenced it. The constitution and the democratic process it enshrines is the assurance that the republic of fear doesn't return.

I think one of the challenges they are going to have is developing the -- developing institutions in a way that really does provide the checks and balances that are envisioned in the constitution. But I think the individual and familial, communal, and collective memories are still fresh enough from what it was like with the ultimate strong man --

QUESTION: They're also very fresh of what it was like in 2007.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Exactly. And, you know, that is a key point. The -- or those of us -- which is just almost most of us who were here for all or part of that period of just horrific sectarian violence -- could that recur? What are the dangers? What are the likelihoods?

You know, and I come from long experience in Lebanon, where it's kind of woven into the national fabric. I am as struck as much by, kind of, the repudiation of that kind of violence, as I was horrified by its occurrence when I saw it when I got here.

And it's worth remembering that, while clearly, sectarianism does exist, has existed in this country, it has never defined it in the way that it does so in Lebanon. And when you look at periods of significant sectarian violence, boy, there aren't many of them in Iraq's history. I mean, you go back to what the Wahhabi invasion, beginning of the 19th century. That triggered some pretty bad sectarian violence. But I literally think between -- when was that, 1804, or something like that -- between 1804 and 2006, you don't find much in between.

So, again, I think there is very much a stand against that that gives me some encouragement that, at this juncture, Iraqis will see a way forward that doesn't involve trying to find the dubious protections of a dictator against its recurrence.

QUESTION: Larry Kaplow, with Newsweek.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Larry, yes.

QUESTION: As an example, what you said about the repudiation of sectarian violence, I mean, before 2006 people repudiated too. Most people would say, "There will never be a civil war in Iraq," and, "We are all brothers," and then it happened.

And many of the things we're saying -- we're seeing from, both from the military and from the embassy now, are things we heard before as well. There is -- the militaries used to talk about how great the Iraqi army was progressing in 2004 and 2005.

And I guess my question is how well do you really think you know what you think you know --

(Laughter.)

I mean, and how do you guard against that, especially as the diplomatic presence here, probably like the military presence, will decline over the next couple of years?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, and that's why I keep adding the caveats. I mean, Iraq, as everybody at this table knows, is enormously complex, and faces enormously complex challenges that even the best informed Westerners cannot pretend to fully understand, let alone predict.

So, again, as I said earlier, look, anything can happen. That's why you have the mantra of, "Still fragile, still reversible." I would put the still in front of it as a modifier, because I think things have solidified a bit.

But yes, you know, we went through a vicious spiral that I think the surge started to reverse in early 2007, that triggered a virtuous spiral. Sunnis rejecting al-Qaeda which led to Shia being less threatened by Sunnis, and therefore, less enchanted with Shia militias, which led to a climate in which Maliki could take on Jaish al-Mahdi, and also at a time when he had serious security forces to work with.

Yes, they had some problems in Basra, and yes, our help was essential. But they carried the main effort, as they carried the main effort at a number of other places in the south, and the sole effort against Jaish al-Mahdi. They couldn't have done that before. So, I think there is a qualitative difference here.

I also think -- and this is, it's just -- it's an opinion on my part -- that the very horror of that violence is what helps ensure against its sudden or dramatic recurrence.

We all talk to lots of Iraqis, and many retain great bitterness over the losses that they suffered. But even -- in some cases, especially -- among those I hear a lot of the "We are not going there again." I wasn't here in that 2004/2005 time frame, but clearly, Iraqi security forces are in a very different place. Again, numbers and capabilities.

QUESTION: Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times. Can you tell us what hasn't happened up until now that you had hoped would have, or that you think should have happened?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, it's a great question. You know, in sort of the concerns and disappointment category -- and again, you know, given the magnitude of the challenges, that may be too strong a term. But work that needs to get done, let's say. Rule of law, including corruption.

You know, they are, what, 178 out of 180 on the transparency international scale, or whatever it is. I think that may be a bit harsh. But it does highlight the significant problem of corruption. And, you know, corruption corrupts.

If people believe that corruption is widespread in their government, they don't have confidence in it. And it does not take you to a good place. I am pleased that they have now ratified the United Nations convention against corruption. That sets certain requirements in front of them. And there is, of course, an open discussion of this, which I think is also important. But that needs to get better.

And then, the overall challenges in the rule of law. There needs to be -- and I kind of extract this from the pure security issue -- there needs to be more, I think, public confidence that there is rule of law: that, you know, when a warrant is issued, there is a criminal reason for it, not a political reason; that people taken into custody will be treated humanely; that there is due process; that there is access to counsel; that there is not prolonged or indefinite pre-trial detention; that when a case does come to trial, it will be fairly adjudicated. We are clearly not there yet.

And again, I don't mean to come across as being overly negative or overly critical. I understand the issues here. I particularly understand the issues with respect to judges. Since 2004, I don't know, it's, I guess, 37, 38 judges have been assassinated. Judges have to -- if you're going to have fair trials, your judges have to be protected.

Because if you've got a situation in which the phone call comes through to say, "Judge, I hope you know how to rule on this case, because we know where you, and more importantly, your family live, and we've got a track record to back it up. And, by the way, it doesn't have to be that way. You can be just fine financially, as well as living to enjoy it," it's not hard to see how you start to have problems in the courts. And there are some hugely courageous judges out there. In fact, I think an increasing number, as things stabilize a bit.

But those would be -- I guess one is a subset of the other, but that's something I really do worry about.

QUESTION: Michael Christie, Reuters. Ambassador, are you pleased to see Prime Minister Maliki emerging as a far stronger, more capable leader than some had expected him to be, and claim the mantle, perhaps, of the one who presided over the drop in violence?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I am pleased to see, again, the progress in Iraq, the way the country has progressed. And he was the prime minister while it happened.

It is -- you know, it's kind of interesting. We all remember a period in which he was strongly criticized for not being able to get the job done, being ineffective, and so

forth. And now you hear him criticized for getting too much done. So I guess that's life in an open political society.

But that goes back to the point I made earlier about institutional development. You hear the criticism that he is asserting dictatorial powers. Well, you know, again, there is a constitution, there is a council of representatives that has a number of prerogatives, including control of the budget, as well as oversight. There are lots of checks and balances built into the system. And I hope, in this period ahead, we see institutional development that the issue is not sort of politics of individuals, but also a government by institutions. I think that is part of the evolution here.

QUESTION: Has the new White House offered you any guidance on what they would like to see you do in the remaining time here?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, again, the Administration is waking up to its second full day. I did have the conversation last night. The President was looking for our read on how things were. I am -- and again, as he said, he has directed that planning proceed on responsible military withdrawal. I expect I will be getting guidance in the days ahead. My new boss just got confirmed last night, our time. So I am sure I will be hearing.

QUESTION: As a follow-up, did former-President Bush offer you any guidance in your remaining time?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, again, throughout my tenure here under his administration, I regularly got guidance. He was, as you know, very much personally involved in Iraq, and certainly gave me the benefit of his thinking.

QUESTION: Can you share it?

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Aamer Madhani, USA Today. Just give us your read on the stresses on the economy, particularly with oil prices dipping down below \$33 -- I think about \$33 a barrel right now, and a projected deficit that is pretty significant, based on, I think, rosy predictions, but the Iraqis are expecting they will have \$50 a barrel over the next year.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, it's a great question. Their revised 2009 budget does, indeed, assume \$50 a barrel oil, which it isn't now.

The IMF, though, was okay with that. They thought that was a reasonable planning assumption. Yes, they will have a significant deficit projected for 2009. I think in the -- again, who knows, but I think they're looking at \$17 billion, maybe \$17 billion or \$18 billion, as a deficit.

But they also have a substantial pre-existing surplus. So I think they will be fine for 2009. The real question would be what happens if oil stays depressed going into 2010 and beyond. But for the coming year, I think the unspent surplus is -- and here I am

not talking about Central Bank reserves, that's aside, they need that to keep inflation down and support the dinar as these are surpluses within the DFI and the banks --

QUESTION: Long-term, though, does it have that sort of ability to sort of be stabilized, or even sort of spill into sort of security concerns?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, again, it's like Gina's question. Extreme long-range planning for me normally runs in the area of about two weeks. So, to look even beyond 2009, I couldn't say. I think it does underscore the importance of doing what I think they're trying to do, which is focus on their oil infrastructure.

And, you know, maybe you can say 2008 was the year of electricity with the General Electric and the Siemens deals that will more than double installed capacity when it's all here, plus the summer surge, whatever that is, between 1,000 and 2,000 megawatts.

I think the focus now really needs to be on hydrocarbons, and that's what they're doing, to be able to increase their oil export ability. Because, whatever the price, if you're selling more of it, you're making more. And this country is, and will remain for some time, really hydrocarbon-dependent. So I think that's going to be a key priority for them.

QUESTION: Yes. A simpler question, perhaps even more difficult. What are your plans?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: My plan is not to have a plan. (Laughter.)

I am retiring, and I have been making that clear since last spring to anyone who would listen and many who wouldn't. But again, with the pace and the pressures of Iraq, I don't think I could make a sensible judgment until I am out of here, doing something else.

I will head back to eastern Washington, which is where I am from. We will have the interesting challenge of building a house. And while we are doing that, I will figure out what comes next.

QUESTION: Jomana Karadesheh from CNN. Mr. Ambassador, you spoke about people criticizing or critics of Prime Minister Maliki. What is your opinion of him? Like, how would you characterize his role? Is he heading towards a dictatorship? Is he trying to?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I will say a couple of things. He is clearly a man of courage and that is what -- the one thing that has kept me going in this place through the roughest of times are the Iraqis, themselves. They are, individually and collectively, some of the bravest people I have ever seen, even if they're on the wrong side of the fight.

You know, these really are courageous people that stick it out, that survive assassination attempts and brush it off, go out again. I mean, there are governors who have been through 10 or more attempts, and they still do their job.

But again, I think the prime minister has shown, you know, great political and even personal courage in, for example in Basra, Sadr City, you know, it just -- it surprised everyone. But he did take that on.

You know, I talked about unresolved issues, the existential issues, constitutional issues. The prime minister's critics argue that he has too much power. He will argue that he has too little. And both sides can be taken seriously on this. Both sides can make a case.

On the prime minister's side, for example, he does not preside over a cabinet, as we all know. It is a council of ministers. And those ministers are not chosen by the prime minister. They are in those positions, and in many cases -- not all, obviously -- because of the political blocks behind them.

As you know, we concluded the Strategic Framework and Security Agreements as executive agreements on our side because, in our system, the President has the authority to do that. The prime minister does not. They don't have executive agreements here. He is not able to conclude a binding international agreement without taking it to the Council of Representatives.

So, those are just a couple of small examples of why I think the -- you know, the Maliki-is-dictator stuff is certainly overblown.

QUESTION: Thanks. President Obama talked about presenting, basically, a new face of America to the world. And here, to senior officials, you are America. Can you comment at all about what that new relationship might look like, and what Iraqi officials are expecting from the new administration?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I had people over for the inauguration. We set up a widescreen TV here. We actually had a delegation of U.S. educators here, and I need to mention something about that, because it's how things are changing.

And I had a number of Iraqis over, government officials, university presidents, members of parliament, and what not, and you could have heard a pin drop through the whole thing. I mean, it was quite extraordinary.

And I think the Iraqis in the room were profoundly moved, as were the Americans in the room. But, you know, the kind of universal comment was, "That is what we aspire to," that peaceful change of power, you know, a transformation in America. "That's what we want to see happen in our country and our society."

So, I think part of it is at that level, which is really global, universal. And then, the other part is kind of waiting to see how the new President sets his policies and priorities for Iraq. My overall sense is that certainly the officials I talk to are positive. But again, it is about to be the dawn of the second day. So we will just have to see what they come forward with.

QUESTION: Has the relationship changed since you've been here, the American-Iraqi relationship?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Oh, goodness. It is constantly changing. And that's why I made the point I did at the outset, that a movement from a Chapter 7 Security Council resolution to these Agreements is a profound change.

And the focus is on the Security Agreement, for understandable reasons but the Strategic Framework Agreement is really interesting. Obviously, it depends on implementation, but I sense clearly strong enthusiasm on the part of the Iraqis to take advantage of that agreement. And I just touch on the education delegation here in the context of the -- one of the joint coordination committees under the Strategic Framework Agreement that focuses on education, culture, science, and technology.

Iraq announced some time ago a major scholarship program abroad for young Iraqis. And we, working with Iraqi government representatives, helped them organize this visit of -- what was it, how many total --

PARTICIPANT: Twenty-four.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Twenty-four from the U.S. and --

PARTICIPANT: Another equal amount from the UK, also.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes. You know, representatives from 24 U.S. universities and colleges came out here -- are here now, they were in Baghdad, and they went up to Sulimaniya -- to start the partnerships that will bring these Iraqis to the States.

And the Council of Ministers, two days ago, voted \$55 million to get the program started. That should land about 400 students -- I mean I should separate the money from the number, because I don't want anybody to divide the one into the other and say, "Wow, it's that expensive." They're looking at 400 students to the U.S. for this coming academic year, and they want to ramp it up substantially from that.

And while they were at it, they voted \$2.5 million to double the size of the -- our Fulbright program with their funding. And this, I think, is profound. Because if you look at Iraq since not just the Saddam years, but back from the 1958 revolution, it defined itself in hostility to most of the region and the West. Iraqis who were not in exile, by and large didn't study, not only in the U.S., but anywhere in the West.

So, here is a government and a society that is kind of fundamentally in a different orientation. And I think as we move forward, again, with the areas under the Strategic Framework Agreement: economy, energy, information technology, central services, education, culture, science, and rule of law -- there is a joint coordination committee on rule of law, reflecting their interest in getting to a better place -- you could see an Iraq that is oriented for the long run in a way that Iraq has not been for literally half a century. And I think, you know, who knows how this will go. But at least we have, literally, a framework in which to pursue it.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, Bob Reid from AP. What about the relationship in the East to Iran?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, important question and a hugely complex issue. You know, Iran has got to have a relationship with Iraq. They share a very long land border. They also share a very difficult history.

So, certainly, we're not saying, "Iraq, you shouldn't have anything to do with them," they wouldn't listen to us anyway, and it wouldn't be the right thing. I think what Iran needs to do is figure out where its own long-term interests lie.

And you know, they have been through some significant set-backs here. I think the whole experience with Jaish al-Mahdi damaged their standing, and kind of rekindled some of the latent bitterness on the part of Iraqis toward Iran because of the Iran-Iraq War. It kind of brought that back.

And, you know, there is a simplistic notion in the region, as well as in the West, that, "Well, somehow Shia equals pro-Iran." You're reminded here constantly that Iraqi Shia died by the hundreds of thousands in, you know, in some respects, a compulsion to fight, but also a lot of defending Iraq, defending their sense of an Arab Iraq.

So, we will see where the Iranians go next. I would think it is very much in their interest to actually execute a policy that they pay rhetorical service to, which is supporting a developing democratic society in Iraq.

But, you know, the legacy of the war is, I think, still considerable on both sides of the border. And we have all talked to veterans, Iraqi veterans of the war. And, you know, I guess it's a bit like what it would have been, talking to a British or French soldier who went through World War I in the trenches twice, not four years, but eight years.

And, you know, as they -- they all knew, boy, where they fought, and what they did, and what they suffered, and what they achieved. And, you know, we think of it as Saddam's war. He started it. For Iraqis, many Iraqis, it is kind of the great patriotic war. It doesn't matter that it was an evil dictator. I mean, they were fighting for Iraq.

And same on the Iranian side. And it is worth recalling that there are a number in the leadership, military and civilian, on both sides who went through that. So it is time for, I think, a fundamental rethinking.

You know, I think the Iraqis are fine. They are prepared to assert their interests. They did against Jaish al-Mahdi. They did vis a vis the agreements with us. As they say, you know, Iranians need to understand Iraq is still and always will be Iraq. But I think the Iranians kind of need to rethink where they want to go. I think the potential is there for a productive relationship, but that doesn't seem to be the way the Iranians have wanted to run it so far.

MODERATOR: Time for one more question.

QUESTION: Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, National Public Radio. Some people would say that you presided over the end of the Iraq War, you negotiated an agreement that, you know, we all see as perhaps the end of the U.S. troop presence here. I am curious to know what you think the legacy of this invasion and of this war is in this country.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: It -- anybody care to use that for a headline, "Crocker Presides Over" -- (Laughter.) No.

QUESTION: Well, some might argue.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, this -- Iraq's development, in many respects has -- over the last couple of years, has been hugely impressive. But I am -- you know, as I wind down my time here, I am not going to leave you with any sweeping prophecies or claims of millennial developments.

I think, as dramatic as some of these things have been, there is still a substantial distance to go. And I think that distance will be covered by chipping it out. It's going to be -- they always warn you, "Do not use sports metaphors." (Laughter.)

But it is going to be three yards at a time. I don't see, you know, that long touchdown pass. I don't think that's where we are now. We had some good long runs in there, certainly more than three yards. But I think this is a ground game. We are -- they have come a tremendous distance in a short period of time. They have got a long way to go.

QUESTION: That wasn't the question, though. I am not asking you to look forward. I'm asking you to look back. The legacy of this war on this country.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: It is a judgment I, at least, cannot make, because it is still very much in the time. You know, that may be a question that has to be answered a decade from now. You know, what will Iraq's evolution be? What will steady state be here?

I do think we are at a very encouraging, hopeful point. But it is not a culminating point, by any means. And it is not a point at which I, at least, can lay claims to legacy or make anything resembling a definitive judgment as to, you know, what the answer to your question will be. I am not trying to duck it. I mean, that is something I genuinely believe.

MODERATOR: One last question.

QUESTION: Ambassador, just curious what will be the greatest mistake the United States could make, as it goes forward in Iraq.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, it's one that I do not think the United States is going to make. I mean, the President, as I noted, has spoken repeatedly of a responsible withdrawal. There will be a withdrawal. That's what the agreement says. The President and -- on his side, and the Iraqi government on their side, will determine what the pace should be.

If it were to be a precipitous withdrawal, as we discussed, that could be very dangerous. But I think it's clear that that is not the direction in which this is trending.

MODERATOR: I think we should draw this to a close now, and thank you everyone for coming.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thank you, thank you.

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