

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES
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AMBASSADOR JAMES F. JEFFREY
INTERVIEW WITH AL-ARABIYA
CORRESPONDENT SUHAIR AL-QAISI

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QUESTION: We will start with you, Your Excellency, with the combat role for the US in Iraq today ending, what do you see as the future role of the United States in Iraq?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, thank you very much for the question, Suhair. First of all, the U.S. role in Iraq is in a transition, itself. We have ended our combat role at the end of August, brought our forces down to 50,000, and we are proceeding through a withdrawal program that will see all U.S. combat forces and other military forces out of Iraq by the end of 2011, in accordance with the Security Agreement which we have signed with the Iraqi government, and which was approved by the Iraqi parliament.

Our future role in Iraq will be set out by the vision of both the Iraqi parliament and the American government in our Strategic Framework Agreement signed at the end of 2008, and endorsed by President Obama. According to that agreement, as President Obama said yesterday in his UN speech, we are focused on building a lasting partnership with the people of Iraq - two equal partners and two sovereign countries. Our security, political and economic relations will be defined by this agreement.

And, we look forward to working with the government, once it is formed, to work on these issues and but also in areas such as rule of law, culture, science, education, health, really in a broad range of areas. In the past, the primary focus has been on security operations. In the future we want to have a more normal and a more-civilian relationship with the great nation of Iraq.

QUESTION: As you talk about the role of America in light of the crisis of forming the government, what kind of role are you playing in this respect, sir?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, first of all, it is very important to note that the formation of the government is an issue for Iraqis to deal with. Iraq is a democratic country operating under a democratic constitution. We respect that very much and we support the idea of a democratic system. And, of course, the formation of a government is

a responsibility of the Iraqis, and the Iraqis alone. Our role, and that of other friendly countries, is to observe the process and to, from time to time, make suggestions and recommendations about the sort of partnership we look for in a new government.

As a general rule, we, like Iraqis, are hoping for an inclusive, representative, and accountable government, stood up quickly.

QUESTION: We heard a lot of talk about American-Iranian dealing to support one candidate for the government. How true is that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Thank you very much for that question, Suhair. If there is one thing I would like to leave your viewers with today, it is this: there is no truth whatsoever to this lie. There is no agreement, formal or informal, explicit or implicit, between the United States and Iran, or for that matter, the United States and anybody else on the political system in Iraq.

First of all, government formation is the business of the Iraqis, not the business of anybody else. Second, our relationship with Iran is quite difficult. As you know, on the nuclear issue, Iran is under UN Security Council Chapter VII sanctions and our focus with Iran is, frankly, trying to get Iran to change its policies on its nuclear activities.

We do not have any relationship or deal or anything else with Iran concerning any Iraqi issue.

QUESTION: Well, in terms of this information, you are saying these rumors are not true. But why are people they being spread now, and who would be behind spreading such rumors about such a deal, sir?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, that's a very good question, Suhair. I have heard these rumors, too, but I tend to hear them in the media. I don't hear them from Iraqis who talk with us -- and we talk with many, many Iraqis. I think that perhaps it would be helpful to bring some of these people into your studio, as you have me in your studio today, and ask them why they are saying these things, what documentation they have, what proof they have, what logic would like behind such an absurd idea.

QUESTION: We are talking about such evidence and such rumors. Some link these rumors to the developments between Iran and the U.S. Some are afraid that the Iranian influence can be interpreted on the grounds of Iraq. How do you comment on that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Once again, our relations with Iraq are transparent, they are honest, and they are open. They share a vision with the people of Iraq for a democratic, economically-viable nation that trades with the rest of the world, and that is integrated into the global and regional economies and political systems.

We, frankly, are somewhat skeptical as to Iranian motives concerning Iraq, and concerning Iraq as a sovereign, independent, and strong country.

QUESTION: So, if today the politicians who won or lost the elections are talking about outside influence and the regional role related to the complexities of -- forming the government, many entities, who are these external forces that are influencing in this complex of governmental formation?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, again, it would be good to get some of the people who are saying that to explain in detail. Obviously, all of Iraq's neighbors have an interest in a stable, democratic Iraq, with an effective, inclusive government. We, the United States, are not the only country with an interest in the region, or with a presence in the region, that wants this outcome. It is legitimate for Iraq's friends and partners, to want to see a stable, healthy, well-governed Iraq.

What isn't legitimate are the actions by some forces, some countries, some forces within neighboring countries to influence -- particularly through violence and other non-transparent ways -- the political processes in their neighboring countries.

QUESTION: Among the things that were reported in the U.S. media, they said that there is a plan, a U.S. plan, to limit the prime minister's mandate. And how do you comment on that, sir?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, first of all -- and thank you very much for that question, because it gives me the opportunity to say on the record that there is no American plan, nor should there be. Nor should there be an Iranian plan, or a plan from any country, because Iraq is a democratic country, and a sovereign country, and they should determine how they organize their own government.

Obviously, many people are talking to each other about the roles of this political leader and that political leader. It is our hope and our expectation that whatever government is formed will assign responsibilities, such as prime minister, president, and such, in accordance with the Iraqi constitution.

It is a very good constitution, it is a democratic, and it is a wise constitution. And it lays out the basic functions of the basic positions of the government. And again, we are very confident that any government that is stood up would be in accordance with the provisions of that constitution concerning the various positions.

Now, obviously, the various coalition parties have their own views on how much power within the terms of the constitution this position might have or that position might have. That's normal, it's natural, it occurs in every country, and it's occurring here. But it is not occurring because of any American plan.

(COMMERICAL BREAK)

QUESTION: So we come back with our official interview with the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Mr. James Jeffrey. Welcome back, sir.

We ask you now about the U.S. vision for resolutions, for solutions that could contain the crisis in Iraq of the formation of government, sir.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, once again, this is an Iraqi issue, and it's an Iraqi responsibility, as a sovereign nation, and as a nation under a democratic constitution, to resolve. As friends and partners of Iraq, we, like many other countries, and like Iraqis themselves, believe that an inclusive government that is representative of the Iraqi people, that is accountable for its actions, and that is stood up as quickly as possible, would be the best solution, given the challenges that Iraq faces, given the many issues that Iraq wants to deal with in the near future, from energy policy to relations to the neighbors, to the UN chapter VII file, and on and on.

There are also very important issues of national reconciliation and ending what's left of the violence in this country. We want to be Iraq's partner in this. We think that a government that meets these criteria would be a very, very effective government. And, again, we are looking forward to it being stood up as soon as possible.

QUESTION: Well, are you ready -- this government to be formed, are you ready to deal with a one common government that is a government that will come up with an opposition in Iraq? How would you deal with such a government that would face up to opposition, if there was one?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, again, we believe that an inclusive government would be the best kind of government for Iraq. At this stage in its development, emerging from many years of dictatorship, of several wars, of internal conflict, the normal approach in a system such as that is to have a very inclusive government that helps with national reconciliation. And that is the sort of government that we would find the most likely partner for the many things we are trying to do.

QUESTION: But there are today some forces that are asserting if they were eliminated from the government, there would be opposition. You know that government formation might lead to opposition. This is so plausible. Have you -- do you have an idea how to deal with this, if it happened?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Frankly, we're still waiting to see the outlines of a new government. And a hypothetical question like that is very difficult to answer at this point. Again, Iraqis tell us -- and I would say every Iraqi that we have spoken to has told us -- that he or she wants an inclusive government with all of the political forces represented. And we take the Iraqis at their word.

So, I think that, Suhair, we are going to have to wait and see exactly the -- what the composition of this government will be.

QUESTION: Today, after the withdrawal of the U.S. forces in August, and the minimum number that remains, many Iraqis believe this withdrawal comes at a very critical moment. Sir, how do you respond to that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: That is an interesting question, because we have seen criticism over a number of years about having a presence in Iraq. And now people are saying, "Well, why are you withdrawing so quickly?"

First and foremost, we are withdrawing in accordance with an agreement that was worked out in 2008, and approved by the U.S. government and approved, not only by the Iraqi government, but by the Iraqi parliament, and thus, has the weight of the Iraqi people behind it.

Secondly, this was not a random agreement. It was based upon indications that the Iraqi security forces are growing ever better, and that the level of violence is dropping. Levels of violence today are less than one-tenth of where they were several years ago. The Iraqi security forces now number some 650,000. And thus, the need for a significant American military presence is gradually slowing down. And we are very, very confident that with the continued improvement of the Iraqi security forces, there will be no need for this military force by the end of 2011.

QUESTION: But, Your Excellency, it is clear that we are still in a very critical time, not because of the political crisis, but rather because of the security deterioration. Do you think that the U.S. might see a rise in violence again now?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, thank you for raising that point. Secretary Clinton, yesterday at the UN, addressed this question after meeting with Foreign Minister Zebari. And she did say that continued delay in standing up a government could create a security vacuum. We have seen some minor increase in the levels of attack. There have been some horrific attacks, largely car bombs and suicide bombers, we believe by al-Qaeda in certain areas, and there has been a certain increase of rocket attacks.

But even with these increases, the security situation today is far, far better than it was several years ago. Nonetheless, the first criteria in long-term success - in any security struggle - is to have an effective representative government. And right now, the Iraqis are struggling to put one together. Thus, we hope that, in the near future, they do succeed in doing so.

Nevertheless, we have full confidence in the Iraqi forces. Our job is to assist and advise them with the forces that we have remaining. Those are capable forces. They are out there every day with the Iraqi troops in the advise-and-equip mission. And we are convinced that our remaining forces and the Iraqi forces that are on the streets today will maintain security.

QUESTION: We saw lately that the US forces are interfering in Fallujah and in Diyala, and some are saying that they will remain in Iraq if Iraq was at risk. Can we really know what kind of presence, what kind of force would that be, with 50,000 troops only?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Certainly. President Obama laid this out in February of 2009, in accordance with the security agreement that was signed in 2008. The remaining U.S. forces, in agreement with the Iraqi authorities, do three kinds of jobs.

One is, obviously, the self-defense mission for themselves and for the American civilians here.

Second, they conduct targeted counter-terrorism operations, which are joint operations with the Iraqi forces, typically against terrorist cells. And that was the kind of operation that took place in Fallujah last week.

Third, they conduct very broad advise-and-assist missions to help equip, train, and advise the Iraqi military forces. However, we do not conduct our own operations. We conduct operations only jointly with the Iraqi forces under overall Iraqi guidance and control, as laid out in our security agreement.

QUESTION: Is the U.S. afraid now that there would be security deterioration from the continuance of the government formation process?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, as a general rule, as I said, we have great trust in the Iraqi security forces, and in our ability to continue to advise-and-assist.

However, we are concerned, as Secretary Clinton indicated, and as the Iraqi interior minister spoke out yesterday, we are concerned about some increase in certain acts, based upon the fact that terrorists and people with outside forces influencing them may see that this is the right time to try to influence the political process, influence the government formation, or otherwise exploit the situation to create havoc for whatever purpose.

QUESTION: Your Excellency, James Jeffrey, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq. Thank you very much.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Thank you very much. It was a great privilege to be here, and to talk about our efforts to work with Iraq, and to help this country, as we move forward to a new government under democratic principles.

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