



IRAQ'S ELECTIONS—AND IRAQ'S FUTURE

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2010
12:15 TO 2:00 P.M.
WASHINGTON, D.C.

WELCOME/MODERATOR:

Jessica T. Mathews

President

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SPEAKER:

Ad Melkert

United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq

Transcript by Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.

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JESSICA MATHEWS: Good afternoon. I'm Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment. It's a great pleasure to welcome you here today to hear Ad Melkert, the United Nations secretary-general's special representative for Iraq and who also serves as associate administrator of the UNDP. He is joining us today, as you all know, to discuss Iraq's upcoming elections – only the second such event since the invasion in 2003. These elections, which are scheduled for March 7th, occur, as you all know, as the United States prepares to withdraw its military forces from Iraq, and they will do much to determine both peace in the country and its political character going forward for years to come, and probably as well Iraq's place in the political context of the broader Middle East.

Mr. Melkert is a Dutch politician. He served as his country's minister of social affairs and employment in the mid 1990s, during which time he established a reputation as a phenomenally productive, active executive. He later served as chair of the PPDA's parliamentary party from 1998 to 2001. He has brought both his political skills and his tremendous work ethic to his current job and I daresay he's going to need every ounce of both of them.

The United Nations Security Council launched its assistance mission in Iraq in 2003, shortly before Iraq's first parliamentary elections and as its current head, Mr. Melkert directs the entire U.N. presence in Iraq, managing both its involvement in and monitoring of the elections and its ongoing and considerable role in resolving the country's internal territorial disputes – so, basically in charge of two of Iraq's greatest political challenges.

As everyone knows, I think, despite the real dearth of media coverage of these enormously important events, there's been substantial disagreements in Iraq, not only over the future of – its political future, but over the process for determining it, and in December, the country's Justice and Accountability Commission banned 15 political parties and roughly 500 candidates from running in the forthcoming election, on the grounds of Ba'athist ties. A later attempt at a compromise fell through and it's now pretty clear that sectarian conflict is flourishing again, both over full representation of Sunnis in the election and perhaps for the future conflict between Arabs and Kurds as well.

The issues that are at stake here, I think probably everybody in this room would agree, are among the world's most important. American casualties and European casualties have disappeared in Iraq and to a much greater degree than is warranted, our attention has disappeared as well. But what's happening now is as important as what happened on the ground when casualties were spiking and Iraq was making front-page headlines across Europe and the U.S.

The political issues – the can has been kicked down the road for years and years and years now and it has landed squarely in the U.N.'s lap, and therefore in Mr. Melkert's lap. We're very lucky to have you here today. We're very eager to hear what you have to say. We'll be taking questions after Mr. Melkert's comments from the audience here and from an Internet audience – we are streaming this live as well. So we welcome you here. Thank you for coming. (Applause.)

AD MELKERT: Well, thank you very much for that kind introduction and really also for the opportunity to speak here today, because it is important that developments in Iraq are known, are understood, and also for us working there to have the feedback from the world, from the important U.S. audience and from others as to what the role of the international community there should be.

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And truly, from my side, it is a fascinating experience to have the opportunity there to work with a U.N. mandate that is stretching from direct political advice to humanitarian assistance and everything that is in between and that provides, also, an opportunity for the U.N. to show what it's up to, but what it's up to is of course defined by the major actors: the Iraqi government and people, in the first place – in our mandate, it's explicitly stated that we act at the request of the Iraqi government – and of course also by the role of the U.S., the interaction with the U.S., with neighboring states, with the Europeans and others.

But there is space for the U.N. to contribute and that is basically our everyday motivation for the many U.N. officers, international and national, that now are operating in Iraq but also from outside Iraq, from Amman or Kuwait, but increasingly from within Iraq, under often very difficult circumstances, and also for that reason, it's an inspiring way to interact with you today.

I'd like to share with you three messages. One is that it is necessary to acknowledge that there should be ongoing engagement with Iraq, that nobody could afford the luxury to turn its back to Iraq and its future. Second, that that engagement should be respectful engagement and I mean with that really the recognition that the Iraqis are in the lead. And that is after the checkered past – basically a past that is not only going back to 2003 but even 1922 or before. It's not self-evident at all. And thirdly, that it's time to draw a line under the divisions that have marked so much of the debate on the engagement, particularly from the American side or the European side with Iraq. I have provided that same message last week when I was in Europe speaking to the political security committee of the Council of Ministers, and I'd like to repeat that also here, looking at the partisan dimensions of the discussion about how to deal with Iraq today and tomorrow, but that should be different than what the discussion was about dealing with Iraq yesterday.

Clearly, I'd like to start with talking about the elections, as that is the immediate urgency and, in many ways, also the condition for dealing with all the other issues that are of importance and will define, also, the future course of developments. After dealing with the elections, I'd like to say a few words on some of the priorities that, from a U.N. perspective, will be key in our work in Iraq after the elections probably, because first we have to go through that stage. And then I'll leave it, with pleasure, to the discussion to see what other elements you would like to discuss more specifically.

First, on the elections. The elections are really crucial for the purpose of consolidating the gains that have been achieved in many ways in recent years. Particularly the two last years have shown an increasing understanding about the way that government and the parliament and the general state institutions should interact and should work for the benefit of the country. I mentioned particularly the last two years because in the years before, as you know, Iraq was at the brink of a civil war. So much was defined by the high level of insecurity.

It's the question that always comes up: How is the security actually doing? On average, it's undeniable that in almost every part of the country, the average number of incidents with people killed or injured has gone down very substantially, particularly compared with 2006, 2007. But it's a trend that actually we have seen also evolving after the 30th of June last year, when the American combat troops went back to their bases, out of the cities. But there have been big incidents, big explosions, particularly directed against a number of ministries – so the heart of the state – and also directed recently against pilgrims, the Shia pilgrims.

Still, on the scale of what we have seen in the past 6 years, it is down very substantially. Yet, it is on an everyday basis more than, for instance, is happening in Pakistan, even when Pakistan and Afghanistan catch the headlines. So there's nothing about normalcy in that sense. But it is important to know that and it is important to note that looking also at the elections from the security perspective, that we still anticipate incidents, smaller

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or bigger, before the 7th of March. Individual candidates will be targeted – last week, a female candidate in Mosul got assassinated. Election organizers are vulnerable.

But it is hard to see how violence could derail the process towards the 7th of March, which is a big achievement, where the Iraqi security forces are playing an important role, the High Electoral Security Committee is completely led by the Iraqi army, backed up by the U.S. forces but certainly not the other way around, and our impression is that the preparations for the 7th of March and also election day itself are relatively well on track, also from the security perspective. So it is about consolidation of essential processes in state-building.

The organization of elections in the first place is in the hands of the independent High Electoral Committee, again led by Iraqis. The U.N. plays a very important advisory role – it's difficult at this stage to imagine that it could be done without that advisory role, yet the Iraqis have developed considerable skills in order to organize elections and in that sense, technically speaking, we think that the preparations are, by and large, on track.

It's also consolidation of constitutional processes. Very important moment was the agreement on the election law last autumn. It took, of course, a lot of effort. There were different stages – I won't go into the details. But at the end of the day, it was very interesting to see how true facilitation of the U.N. and also with the assistance of the U.S. administration in a very constructive way, at the end of the day, all parties came together and consensus was achieved for an election law. That is a very important marker, of course, of a next stage in the consolidation of essential constitutional processes.

Also, consolidation of a relatively open climate of discussion. It is quite remarkable when one sees every day the Iraqi press – basically everything is said, from right to left and from top to bottom. It's a big discussion going on, on an everyday basis. The reports also on the discussion in parliament – it's quite like in other democracies, but when one is aware, of course, of the history of Iraq, it is an unprecedented phenomenon and sometimes a bit difficult to grasp, really, what one sees. So for all these reasons, successful elections would be a major new step in this consolidation process.

Now, there's a second very important objective, basically, that could be achieved by having good elections, and that is strengthening the basis for reconciliation. That is still very much under pressure: the pressure of the events in the past 4 years and the violence that targeted many groups, many stakeholders, and basically we've seen here also something of that in this so-called de-Ba'athification process. And let me say a few words on that in order to share with you our understanding of what has happened.

Basically, we have, also in our own interaction with the Iraqi stakeholders, distinguished between two dimensions. One is that in 2008, a law was adopted on accountability and justice which basically identified persons with a certain rank in the past in the Ba'ath party that should be excluded for that reason from holding public office or standing as a candidate for elections. We've always stated that this is a legitimate thing to do. It's entirely also the Iraqi responsibility. It is not unlike what one has seen in other countries with fundamental regime change, for instance, in East European countries.

However, the next dimension was the process: the process to define who should be disqualified and the transparency and the consistency of that process. And there we have expressed concerns and concerns remain basically on where we are right now, because that transparency and consistency can frankly not be verified in an adequate way, adequate on the basis of the general international standards that we would like to see applied, which is also our responsibility as the U.N., to remind our partners about their obligations on that point.

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Yet, it is important to see what has happened with this de-Ba'athification process in proportion, the proportion of elections that will bring more than 6,000 candidates to the voters from more than 300 parties which shows a truly pluralistic expression of positions as part of a process of opening a society that has been closed and indeed oppressed for such a long period of time. Now, initially the Accountability and Justice Commission headed by Mr. Chalabi also proposed to exclude political parties, and on that score we have strongly advised against, as that would certainly not meet international standards and it is important that that decision has been withdrawn so that, in other words, candidates of the party of those that have been excluded are still on the list, which enables voters to still cast their vote for the parties of their preference, even if some of the candidates have been excluded from participation.

All in all, we see now around 150 candidates excluded which, as I said, is a reason for concern due to the lack of transparency, not necessarily from a principle point of view, but it's 150 candidates on the overall more than 6,000 that will stand. And that's why we have said, as the U.N., our assessment of this particular episode will be part of the assessment of the overall process that includes the candidate lists, the campaign, the election day, dealing with complaints and the final results. And that assessment, of course, we will give honestly on the basis of our mandate.

Let me add one other important element to what we see right now with regard to the elections. There were many fears and there are still concerns about how the election campaign will evolve, because, also in the past, for instance one year ago with the provincial elections, we have seen a very polarized climate and also leading to attacks and assassinations and what have you. I found it very interesting that just yesterday, a number of the key parties in the Council of Representatives agreed on a code of conduct – how to deal with these elections with elements like equal opportunities, no abuse of state resources, no arrests for electoral purposes, no threats, slander, libel, no sectarian and ethnic tendencies (as they call it), and they call the votes for a candidate “a sacred right of each and every Iraqi citizen.”

Now, one could look at this in a skeptical way and say, well, that is nice language and what does it express? And I had to smile a bit when I saw as another point that the code of conduct says that there should be no interference with the work of the independent commission on the elections because, believe me, in the past few months, we have had a number of fights to keep that away.

But I like to think that this is a very important process: that parties of such different backgrounds with such different interests, with such a checkered and often bloody history, come together in order to agree on those principles. It's an important step forwards and hopefully also a precursor to what we would see after the elections. And let me say there, you hear me probably being cautiously optimistic about the next few weeks, including election day.

But it's harder to predict what will happen after election day because actually as a consequence of this process that is relatively well underway, competition for seats and votes is fierce and the expectation is that after the election there will be four or five coalitions relatively strongly represented but all in a minority position, thus with the need to come together in a majority on the basis of a government program and how that will play out actually in the first moments, that it is really the Iraqis themselves that are going to decide on their future, because this is the big difference between these elections and those of 4 years ago. That's going to be a tough call to everyone to follow, basically, the spirit of the code of conduct and I'm not going to give you any predictions on that just to say that the process so far, with all the ups and downs that we've seen, has given – provided some confidence that very interesting developments are underway.

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Then the question of course will be – let's assume that the elections would go in the spirit that I've mentioned and I'm hoping for – what will then be the capability of the government to really address the key issues?

What are these key issues? I'd like to mention just a few that certainly also interact with what the role and the mandate of the U.N. is. First of all, we – many expect quite a long process of government foundation. Last time, it lasted five months or so. It might easily take half a year. Some would get nervous of that – I myself, with my Dutch background, am not getting so nervous because it's a kind of permanent feature in our own political system, where minorities have to come together into a majority coalition after elections. And sometimes it's even an opportunity to address, say, the key issues for the future in a negotiation process that is often much more difficult to set in motion once a government is there and positions are very much entrenched.

Now when that's – with that perspective in mind, we hope that it will also be possible to interact with key leaders and key parties on the three big issues that we see in the short run. One is the – what I'd like to call the national coexistence agenda on the relations between the Arabs and Kurds. There's a lot out there that is potentially explosive. As long as it is not arranged for, it will remain a source of potential instability.

I'm referring here to the administrative and territorial boundaries between the Kurdish region and the federal Iraq. I'm talking here about the revenue-sharing of the oil proceeds, both in the Kurdish region and in Iraq generally and I'm referring to the joint security arrangements that recently, after a long period of preparation, have been put into place through the good offices, I must say, of the U.S. forces. I think they have played a very positive role in trying to bring together the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdish region, in organizing joint patrols and joint checkpoints in the provinces where these disputed boundaries are, where a lot of tension is around between the Kurdish and the Arab and sometimes also the Turkmen population – that's Diyala, province of Kirkuk and the province of Ninewa.

And there is some very cautious working together underway but it is clear that this, for the future, still on the one hand holds a promise but on the other hand needs to be organized in order to create a basis for stability. So in all these areas, the boundaries including the future and the administrative organization of Kirkuk, the oil revenues and the security arrangements, we hope that we can engage partners into a process of setting an agenda and trying to find a basis for enhancing stability in the long run.

I'd like to call it like that because I don't think that any blueprint could serve the outcome of that process. I know that there are many blueprints around how the future of Kirkuk should look like, but I don't think it's going to work like that. The only way to have a sustainable outcome is to have an inclusive process and to make sure that the Iraqi partners themselves see it as their interests to ensure that stability in the long run will be agreed upon or that the conditions will be created for that and for the Kurdish region, with a lot of economic investment going on. And also for the economic and political prospects in terms of stability for Iraq generally, one hopes that that common interest will be recognized and will serve as the basis for the process where the U.N. might play a facilitating role.

Second important item to address is the normalization of the relations between Iraq and Kuwait. There are still issues pending from the Gulf War in 1990-1991. I won't go into the details of that, but it basically comes down to the needs of a reaffirmation of the border, reaffirmation by the Iraqis and then also some agreement from the Kuwaiti side that compensation payments and other issues with regard to missing persons, et cetera, could be dealt with more on a bilateral basis than still under the umbrella of chapter seven of the U.N. charter, which is still the case at this point in time.

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Thirdly, it is the social, economic, say strategic policy agenda: governance effectively dealing with the oil revenues that will increase, as can be expected in the years ahead. But that of course should be to the benefit of the country in terms of its infrastructure, the social services, pushing back the huge disparities that at this moment exist with the very dilapidated education system, for instance. So how to spend wisely the oil money, which is a big issue in many countries in the world and certainly will be a big one in Iraq, and that's why the U.N. organizations and the World Bank and others stand ready to support the Iraqi government on that.

So these are, a bit, the prospects. Let me finally say a word about the regional context within which all of this evolves and then make one more remark on the elections. The regional context remains of crucial importance to understand the future of Iraq. I am, as a U.N. civil servant, not in the position to be extremely specific in this regard – sorry if I disappoint you. But it is very clear that actually all the neighbors have a stake in the elections in Iraq and all have their linkages, their preferences and their influence one way or the other.

And this is a matter of concern, not because engagement of your neighbors is a bad thing because after all, the future of Iraq would be very much – would very much benefit from a more regional approach to economic development, et cetera, a thing that is quite well understood, I must say, by particularly Turkey, as a neighbor that is increasing its economic stakes in both the Kurdish region and Iraq generally substantially, and also sees it as a kind of way towards the Gulf and engaging that whole region in the economic development of Turkey with also a European component to that. So that's all important but there can of course also be engagement of their own nature, of their own kinds, and that's what we also see.

And that, basically, is a kind of constant feature of Iraq's history, that it has never been left alone and that always others decide it for them. And the question is how the right balance can be found, which is a huge strategic issue also for the Americans, for the Europeans, for the Turks and for the other partners in the region. And that's why the point of long-term engagements is so essential. Stability in the region – I'm sure I don't need to explain that here – is crucial and borders there, they are very volatile borders in terms of instability and sources of instability, terror and what have you. When one wants to deal and needs to deal with Afghanistan, with Pakistan, Iran, it is impossible not to want to deal with Iraq in terms of the future and promoting stability in the region.

And then, of course, the economic interests. Particularly important from the European perspective, as I discussed with them last week, there is the energy perspective – certainly one of the reasons why Turkey is also engaged, why it's an interest for the Europeans. But from a global market perspective, it's of course also very much an American interest. For all those reasons, the long-term engagement is important.

The respectful engagement is crucial because the Iraqis are not going to accept the kind of prescriptions that they had to accept in recent years. And drawing a line under the partisan divisions in Europe or in America in order to really think through what the longer-term strategic interests are – that is what I would like to share with you from the U.N. perspective.

To conclude, it is interesting to say, to understand this course and the climate around the elections, to quote a statement that was issued this week by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, who is of great influence in the Shia community. And he said, "The next election is very important, especially at this difficult time, and it's the only means for improving performance of the legislative and executive authority. And therefore Ayatollah Sistani urges all Iraqis to participate in the next elections, since refraining from participation will allow bad parties to achieve their illegal schemes."

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The reason that I'd like to share this quote with you is that it tells us that although the constitution and the notion of elections was very much an imported product, for all the reasons that you know, it's very much incorporated now into the interaction within Iraq and is subscribed to by really key leaders in the country.

And that is an opportunity that has not been seen in that country, that is hard to recognize in the region and that is worth supporting and working with and that's why I hope that the long-term engagement, particularly also here in the United States, will be higher on the agenda than, frankly speaking, it is right now. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MS. MATHEWS: Okay. Let's open up for questions. Please wait for the mike. And please introduce yourself. Let's start right here. Right up front here.

Q: Thank you. I'm Hussain Abdul-Hussain with Al Rai newspaper. My question is about the commission on accountability and justice. And since you mentioned you've been in touch with them: Have you ever brought to their attention that it's against international standards and it's a conflict of interest for their officials to be running – and here I'm referring to Mr. Chalabi and Mr. al-Lami? Thank you.

MR. MELKERT: Sure.

MS. MATHEWS: Let's start with that and then perhaps we'll collect a few.

MR. MELKERT: Okay. Well, I should point out here that on the basis of our mandates, our interlocutor is primarily the Iraqi government and then of course also parliament in the interaction between the institutions. We do not directly interact with a special committee like in this case. I have spoken to Mr. Chalabi, but more by way of having him explain what they did in order to understand the process.

Yet the point that you mention has certainly had a lot of attention that candidates for elections who are in fact heading this committee – it has been part of our advice basically to the authorities, particularly also to the speaker of parliament, to clarify basically the position of that committee. If you also have another kind of oversight committee under the council of representatives and the role that these different organs should be play in defining the final list.

As I mentioned, I think the impact of our advice was particularly noted on the distinction between political parties and individual candidates. And in the end, we have to acknowledge – and I think it is important to know that – that it was an Iraqi responsibility to deal with the responsibility as such.

MS. MATHEWS: Henri.

Q: Henri Barkey, the Carnegie Endowment. Your predecessor, Mr. de Mistura prepared a very long, 500-page report on the disputed territories and that report is still kind of under wraps. I mean, it hasn't been made public. What I'm wondering is given that the first he tried to something, there was a lot of opposition to his suggestions. This time the process is different. But now it's in your hands. So what are you going to do with it? What are your plans? Tell us everything that you will be doing. We want to know. (Laughter.)

MR. MELKERT: Well, the way that – well, let me first say on the reports. They are important reports, but deliberately have been left in a kind of draft status because what we have noticed is that once you start to describe – and that's basically what these reports have done – say, the history of each and every one of the

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about 15 districts where there is a dispute – that are part of the disputed areas – that there are many versions of that history.

And what one would like to avoid is that the discussion will be about the interpretation of history because, frankly, when one reads the history, it is hard to see how the history could guide the solutions for the future. But one needs to understand history in order to understand these sensitivities and the claims and the aspirations.

So that's why our approach in the next stage deliberately will be to ask the parties to tell and to share with each other what their ideas are, their proposals are. I'm pretty sure that on the basis of that inventory we might come close to some of the ideas that had been suggested at the time of the presentation of the reports. But I'm also convinced that suggesting solutions up front will not work because the only thing that will work is an outcome of a process with real buy-in by the partners that will have to maintain the arrangement themselves in the first place.

So that's going to – so in that sense, I'm in favor of a process approach. The time has come that that initiative is taken. That's also what I said to the Security Council this week. I have spoken to quite a number of representatives of parties – all the key leaders – that we hope after the elections to bring them together. There is a willingness to consider that, but it will be a very informal process to start with in order not to create expectations and certainly not to create an alibi to start to stay away – to try to stay away from that process in the first place. That's the plan.

MS. MATHEWS: Here.

Q: Hello. Brian Schull from the U.N. Refugee Agency. You had talked about how many of the political parties have talked about the importance of each Iraqi having the ability to vote in the upcoming elections. Can you comment a little bit on the ability or possible challenges of Iraqis outside of Iraq in voting in the upcoming elections?

MR. MELKERT: Yeah. That is a complicated issue. There are 16 countries where Iraqis will be able to vote, including, of course, also the United States. It is complicated because it was rather late in the day that that decision was taken and clearly it needs a lot of infrastructure – particularly in the neighboring countries where quite a number of Iraqis are living.

And there may be also some concerns about – (clears throat) – excuse me – the way that this out-of-country voting could be monitored. I mean, the monitoring of the elections inside Iraq is rather well developed, we think. But monitoring of out-of-country voting has its own requirements which is in some countries is easier to put in place than in other countries. And you are not going to challenge me to be more specific than this. Thank you. (Laughter.)

MS. MATHEWS: We have a question from a watcher in Sweden who asks, given the sheer number of political parties, many of whom are armed, can there be a fair election? I would just like to rephrase that a bit or add to it. It's hard for an American to even conceive what 300 political parties means. It's bad enough here with two. (Laughter.) And even if one thinks of only the 50-odd main political parties, it's still pretty hard.

Can you give us a feel for what it tells us about the sort of underlying political fabric in Iraq? Even if there can be a fair outcome on election day, but what does it mean about the underlying set of issues you have to deal with that you have a country with almost as many parties as there are seats open?

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MR. MELKERT: Well, first a remark on that number of parties. I mean, it's not as confusing as it looks like because many parties have come together in a coalition. And that's what one will see after the elections is that four or five of those coalitions are really the big blocs in parliament, so that makes it already look much more like, say, a parliament in some of the European countries with minority parties competing for power.

The second thing is that - I don't have here scientific data with me - but I think that one can say that in many countries where democracy was introduced, one saw immediately a big surge of parties. We've seen it also in a number of European countries after the communist regime. And only later parties start to consolidate because people discover that just by being yourself as a party - I mean, the good thing is that nobody is against what you're thinking - (laughter) - but of course, it doesn't help in parliament, in the interaction with the media and with the electorate.

So and then there's a third element and your question in that sense is a very important one. That with such fragmentation, it makes it of course more difficult to see, say, the institutional procedures in place that people adhere to, that people understand in the first place. This was also one of the things that struck me when I was dealing with the election law and we were asked to advise.

There was nothing established in terms of process - decision-making processes. With my parliamentary backgrounds, I'm used that - on the basis of decades of experience - there are all kind of rules that you have to deal with. And in certain moments you have to take a decision. But that's not existing; that's all developing. That's all learning by doing. And that is the consequence also of what one sees. But it will consolidate over time. There's no doubt about that.

MS. MATHEWS: Yes. And then - I tell you, we've got enough now that I think I will take three, then - if that's all right with you - and then we'll -

MR. MELKERT: Sure.

Q: Hi. I'm Allahmana Jiburi (sp) and with National Endowment for Democracy. I was a key player on the last three elections in Iraq. How you going to basically assure that on the monitoring exactly the day of election - because my experience from the last three election - what I call them the daylight monitors people come and - 30,000 or 40,000 monitors - domestic monitoring.

For the security reason, basically, most of these monitors left the polling station during the light. The cheating all happened during the time they were basically collecting, transferring boxes. How we going to be sure? I mean, you just said little bit about your little monitoring inside - it is okay. I am not sure about that honestly.

MS. MATHEWS: Okay. Marina.

Q: Marina Ottaway with the Carnegie Endowment. You said that the - you talked about the widespread expectation that it will take months before a new government is being formed. And that is not unlike what happened after the previous election, but the big difference, of course, is that after the previous election, the United States was keeping control on the country and so on. Can the Maliki government survive a process of six months - or five, four months whatever - before the new government is formed?

MS. MATHEWS: Okay. One more back -

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Q: Hi. James Kitfield from National Journal magazine. I wonder if you could just address this issue of why Ahmed Chalibi seems to be the gift that keeps on giving here. Ever since he was put in charge of de-Ba'athification back in 2003 in those original elections, where the Sunnis basically boycotted and they're making noises again they're going to boycott.

Yet once again, he is in a position of power to sort of eliminate his Sunni rivals. We have Gen. Odierno in town this week saying that he's been meeting with the Iranians and has sort of has an Iranian agenda. Could you explain to us why this guy seems to be able to maintain this power center that thwarts our plans on trying to get them on a path towards democracy?

MS. MATHEWS: Okay. So we have monitoring, the transition and the eternal presence of Ahmed Chalibi.

MR. MELKERT: Well, let me start with the last point. Here you're over-asking me. I could just say from my position that I understand your question, but I couldn't possible give an answer. (Laughter.)

The second question on the transition. That's a very important point, I believe. There has been actually – they're having discussions in the council of representatives to put in place a kind of special transition authority with the inclusion of representatives of parliament, of the different parties, of the presidency council and the government in transition. And that obviously expresses also concern about what could happen. That proposal was not adopted, so it's still open basically how the transition will evolve.

This is going to be really a new experiment for the Iraqi side. I guess that much will depend on the elections because if it would appear that Mr. Maliki would be in a strong position actually to claim the prime minister position again for the next period, it would be an entirely different case, not legally but politically, as compared to the situation that it would be virtually clear that he would not be the next prime minister.

Let me just say that we are also preparing here to advise – also advise the council of representatives to meet very soon after the final results of the elections will have been declared because primarily it should be the new council of representatives that keeps in check the transition government in order to ensure that the transition government would interpret its role as is normal in these kind of systems:

Just to do the things that keep the business running or respond to emergencies, but not to launch new projects or new legislation. That would be the normal interpretation of a transition government responsibility. Certainly we will advise the government on that. Whether they will respond is of course their responsibility.

Now, on the monitoring on the election day, it's a very important question that you raise. It's indeed worth noting that there's a huge group of Iraqi monitors around – more than 200,000 this time. We will have around 50,000 voting stations, so that's really a huge crowd of people. And one of the interesting things about that high number of voting stations is that it's deliberately a high number because it means that per voting station, the maximum number of voters will be between 400, 420 – which makes it more difficult, actually, to tamper with the votes.

And on top of that, there's another important addition compared to previous elections that is that the results of the voting station should be published immediately after the counting there. So of course, these results will also be collected in the polling centers and then to the data center. But they will also have to be made visible at the location of the voting station itself, which is again a way for the voters in that region – and many people know more or less what a normal outcome will be – to check.

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Apart from the monitors, there will also be observers. But it's fair to say that the observers – the number of observers is certainly not high enough to cover the country. So it will be a more kind of sampling and anecdotal evidence that will be important also for the overall assessment.

But all in all, we do think that, say, the checks and balances are better in place than before. But of course, I'm not going to predict here that everything is going to be perfect. On the contrary, we have to factor in quite some risks that there will be efforts to tamper with the votes. So we cross our fingers.

MS. MATHEWS: This gentleman right here. It's right behind you the other way.

Q: Mr. Merkel, thank you for the presentation. I'm Ahmed Ali from the Washington Institute. You spoke about the joint security forces and the disputed internal boundaries. I'm wondering how important are those forces for UNAMI's plan and working with the Iraqi Arabs and the Iraq Kurds. And the second part of that question is, why was there been so much opposition to those forces in Kirkuk and in the Ninawa province, specifically from the Iraqi Arab parties and the Iraqi Turkmen parties.

MS. MATHEWS: I don't see any – yes. Right –

Q: Hasin Awaftab Karim (ph), IFIS (ph). The question I have for the secretary-general is he indicated in his speech that there would be more incidence of violence in the lead to the election. Who's responsible for the security, given the fact that there is now a huge number of polling station? Do the Iraqi have the forces to mandate the security of these polling stations? Or the American military forces will be engaged again to secure the elections?

MR. MELKERT: Yep. On the joint security arrangements in the province of Diyala, Kirkuk and Ninawa. I find it significant, first of all, because in the short run it helps diffuse tensions that are permanently around. Relatively small things can spark quite some violence or confrontation. And the more one can keep that under control through joint arrangements, the better it is.

But you are right in linking it with the more longer term ideas about the region, so let's assume that there would be willingness to agree on the future of Kirkuk and other disputed areas. Obviously, this is part of the optimistic scenario. But let's assume that that would happen. It will be very important that there will be credible security arrangements underpinning it. That's a matter of confidence building.

Certainly also an important matter from the sight of the Kurds that they would feel sufficiently guaranteed, say, in the outcome of the process. That would require compromises from all sides. And in order to, say, have those compromises accepted by your own people, it is important that they have a feeling – we are really better off in future because it's more stability, more security for us.

So that's why it's highly relevant. How this will play out is very difficult to say. First thing is, of course, that there is the American withdrawal schedule. Second thing is that no doubt there will be discussions by a new Iraqi government and the U.S. government about the relationship in the future.

Thirdly, from the U.N. perspective, we will certainly also engage the Security Council in thinking about how the international community can in any case back up political progress on this particular agenda. And how that could be translated – that's a matter of speculation and I don't want to get into that now.

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The reason that particularly Turkmen and Arab communities in Kirkuk especially are not happy with the joint security arrangements is not entirely clear. Well, I mean, they say of course that they don't like to see the Peshmerga in fact being legitimized in positions that they – Arabs and Turkmen – don't think they should be. At the same time, it is also their interest – one would assume – that there is in any case more predictability in how the security is organized. But basically you should ask them in order to understand why they have difficulties there.

The responsibility for security around the elections is in the hands of the Iraqi army. There is a high election security committee chaired by Gen. Aiden and a number of other Iraqi generals. They are – as far as we can tell – doing a pretty good job, but they are in very close – operating in very close coordination with the U.S. forces that do not have primary responsibility in ensuring the security but could be seen as a kind of standby – and of course, important standby arrangement.

MS. MATHEWS: Yes.

Q: Dan Legalman (sp). Iraq has been through this before – a little sniff of democracy, then a bad smell and then military dictatorship. But it seems that it has more problems today than any time. There is more separation between the groups than ever before. So what is different now? Once the American troops leave, what is the Velcro or glue – what is different now than before that could help keep Iraq together?

MS. MATHEWS: Are there other questions? I wanted to add one which may be a little bit related – and that is, you've warned – you mentioned that you raised this in Brussels when you were there and that part of your reason for being here is to remind Americans of the long-term challenge on political stabilization. And of course, I think we're all aware of governments' tendency to – when confronted with uncomfortable political problems they can't or don't want to solve – handing them to the U.N. and saying, you do it.

What do you – as you look ahead, beyond the election, maybe even beyond the formation of the next government – what do you most need from governments? Is it money or is it attention or is it – or can the U.N. do it alone? Tell us what you think the need is.

MR. MELKERT: First on the glue – I hesitate to give my views there, partially because I think for all of us it is very important to take the time to really try to grasp the DNA of the society and how that would work out and certainly not think that we could prescribe that in any way. I very much believe in the homemade character of states and nations and how they come together. It doesn't go via imposition or import.

And on top of that, as a student of Iraq's history, I think one sees that this has been the permanent feature of – partially of conflicts, of the challenge, of the way that Iraq was organized, also under the dictatorship which group was in charge of what and excluded the others who had to go out as refugees to other countries. So it's not easy to say what's – and there's no certainly no single factor that would bring people together apart from the fact that they want to build a future where they live. And they have to do that despite the differences and the different interests.

And here, of course, the mechanisms of institution building and political arrangements, including the notion that through the ballot box, one could also express a preference and organize the system of government, is something that has never been tried for and in that sense, may have a potential to serve as a glue. But here, I must frankly say, time will tell. Nobody can predict what the next stages will be. It's much too young; it's much too fragile for that purpose.

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Yeah, what could governments do? Well, there's certainly different dimensions. Let me start – if you allow me – with our own interest as U.N. But it's quite an existential issue because you are right that the role of the U.N. in Iraq is probably a bit more central than it is some other places because of the context including the American withdrawal plans. And that leaves the U.N. under high demand by the Iraqis themselves and by many other partners in a country where it's very difficult to organize yourself and where there is a huge security infrastructure needed.

This, to a large extent, to date is still provided by the American sides. The normal thing would be and we hope that we will arrive there rather sooner than later – that the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi police will provide that security. But I don't need to explain that that is not self-evident in many ways.

So it means that with the American withdrawal in the short run, the United Nations assistance mission and the United Nations country team really need to be backed up by more resources for our transports, for our security, for our own organization in the country. And this is what we are preparing now for a discussion with the membership of the General Assembly. But the General Assembly has not a reputation of wanting to spend more money on the type of missions that we represent.

And yet the consequence of not more resources – and I'm talking about substantially more resources – would be that there would be less U.N. people on the ground in Iraq. And they would go back to Oman or to Kuwait and I know myself that this is far from ideal to try to operate from those places in order to advise and assist the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people. So it's really an important point and I hope that also in Congress, this point will be noted as it will be quite vital for the continuity of our operations.

Now, apart from this particular point, I think a very important engagement need is really the interaction between Iraq and the neighboring countries. So trying to influence the neighbors of Iraq, that they create space for that relatively autonomous development and refrain from negative forms of interference is very crucial for the future. Some countries are better placed than others to do that.

But this is also the reason why I spoke about this with the Europeans and obviously the United States plays an important role – maybe some other players in the region, a country like Egypt, for instance, Turkey is quite relevant – that the more that will be part of a kind of overall kind of joint approach or at least joint understanding, the more it would benefit Iraq.

And then there is the energy and economy side. Economically Iraq is on its way to become member of WTO and some other organizations where they're not yet full member of. That is of interest because we should still understand that talking about Iraq is talking about normalization – normalization of the position of the country in the community – amidst the community of nations, which hasn't been the case for decades because of the wars, because of the sanctions, because of the dictatorship.

And in the energy policy area, one thing that is important is the oil contracts and there is, of course, interaction also between governments and the Iraqi government and how they deal with that. That includes also the transparency of oil contracts in the Kurdish region. That's not only a matter of the Kurds but also others are involved there.

And interestingly, I think that is that Iraq has now subscribed – it's on the preparation right now – to become partner of the extractive industry's transparency initiative. I find that really important because that has been an important initiative and it's also a way that, say, different stakeholders, including governments, are

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basically subscribing to certain standards of transparency to deal with that important source of oil, which is also important for the regulation of the global markets.

Those are a number of ways in which governments could engage, where it would be helpful if that would be part of a plan.

MS. MATHEWS: A big agenda. Are there any last questions? Yes.

Q: I had a follow-up question on the EITI.

MS. MATHEWS: Introduce yourself, please.

Q: I'm Amy Lehr, I'm from Foley Hoag, which is a law firm here in D.C. On the EITI, what was the impetus for Iraq to sign up. I mean, that was clearly good news from a transparency perspective. And to what degree do you think that will provide all the needed transparency? I mean, different countries implement it different ways.

MR. MELKERT: Yeah, I mean, we should of course be modest on the second point in our expectations. After all, it's a voluntary initiative where there are no enforcement possibilities. But I think it has been in a number of cases a way, in any case, to increase, say, the accountability of governments or to create a platform at least for NGOs or others to raise issue with the way that key resources are being managed, particularly from the perspective of the benefit of the people. So it's a good point of entry in other words.

Now, what has been the impetus? I'm not quite sure about that. I was positively surprised frankly when I heard it. As you know, there are concerns. That's also what we have expressed from our side, particularly on the management and the lack of transparency on the oil contracts in the Kurdish region.

But fortunately, Prime Minister Salih – prime minister of the Kurdish region, Salih – has pledged to ensure that that transparency – the disclosure will follow very soon. And the auction recently of the oil contracts in particularly the southern part of Iraq has been relatively transparent as far as we can tell.

So those are all steps forward that definitely also help Iraq in that process of normalization because it becomes more part of, say, a group of countries that wants to organize itself on the basis of a number of principles – global principles – and I think that's a very interesting development.

MS. MATHEWS: I would just want to say that I – I think everyone here leaves with enormous respect for the challenge that you've undertaken under really difficult conditions and an appreciation for how important its success is to the long-term future of Iraq. And so for that and for what we've all learned today, our great thanks. (Applause.)

(END)