

Transcript: President Bush and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani

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PRESIDENT BUSH AND PRESIDENT TALABANI HOLD A NEWS CONFERENCE

SPEAKERS: GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

JALAL TALABANI, PRESIDENT OF IRAQ

BUSH: Thank you all.

It's an honor to welcome the first democratically president of Iraq to the White House.

TALABANI: Thank you.

BUSH: I'm proud to stand with a brave leader of the Iraqi people, a friend of the United States and a testament to the power of human freedom.

Mr. President, thank you for your leadership. Thank you for your courage.

President Talabani has dedicated his life to the cause of liberty in Iraq. As a lawyer, journalist and a political leader in northern Iraq, he stood up to a brutal dictator, because he believes that every Iraqi deserves to be free.

The dictator destroyed Kurdish villages, ordered poison gas attacks on a Kurdish city, and violently repressed other religious and ethnic groups.

For President Talabani and his fellow citizens, the day Saddam was removed from power was a day of deliverance. And America will always be proud that we led the armies of liberation.

The past two years, the Iraqi people have made their vision of their future clear. This past January, more than 8 million Iraqis defied the car bombers and the assassins and voted in free elections. It was an inspiring act of unity when 80 percent of the elected national assembly chose the president, a member of Iraq's Kurdish minority, to lead the free nation.

BUSH: In our meeting today, I congratulated the president on his election and I thanked him on his leadership on Iraq's draft constitution.

The draft constitution is a historic milestone. It protects fundamental freedoms, including religion, assembly, conscience and expression.

It calls for a federal system of government, which is essential to preserving the unity of the diverse nation like Iraq.

It declares that all Iraqis are equal before the law without regard to gender, ethnicity and religion.

Iraqi people can be proud of the draft constitution. And when an election to ratify the constitution is held next month, they will have a chance to vote their conscience at the polls.

As the Iraqi people continue on the path to democracy, the enemies of freedom remain brutal and determined. The killers in Iraq are the followers of the same ideology as those who attacked America four years ago.

Their vision is for an Iraq that looks like Afghanistan under the Taliban: a society where freedom is crushed, girls are denied schooling and terrorists have a safe haven to plot attacks on America and other free people.

To impose their hateful vision, our enemies know they must drive America out of Iraq before the Iraqi people can secure their own freedom. They believe we will retreat in the face of violence, so they're committing acts of staggering brutality: murdering Iraqi children receiving candy or hospital workers treating the wounded.

We have no doubt that our enemies will continue to kill. Yet we also know they cannot achieve their aims unless we lose our resolve.

Today, Mr. President, I pledge that we will not waver. And I appreciate your same pledge.

Iraq will take its place among the world's democracies. The enemies of freedom will be defeated.

BUSH: President Talabani and I discussed our strategy for the months ahead: America will stand with the Iraqi people as they move forward with the democratic process.

We're seeing hopeful developments in places like Fallujah and Ramadi and Mosul, where Iraqis are registering to vote, many for the first time -- well, obviously for the first time.

At the same time, American troops will stay on the offensive, alongside Iraqi security forces, to hunt down our common enemies. At this hour, American and Iraqi forces are conducting joint operations to root out terrorists and insurgents in Tal Afar.

Our objective is to defeat the enemies of a free Iraq. And we're working to prepare more Iraqi forces to join the fight.

As Iraqis stand up, Americans will stand down. And when the mission is completed, our troops will come home with the honor they have earned.

Tomorrow, President Talabani and I will take our seats at the United Nations in New York. The session will mark the first time in a half century that Iraq is represented by a freely elected government.

Securing freedom in Iraq has required great sacrifice, Mr. President. You know that better than anybody. And there's going to be difficult days ahead. Yet I have no doubt about the impact of a democratic Iraq on the rest of the world.

If Iraq becomes a federal, unified democracy, people throughout the broader Middle East will demand their own liberty, the Middle East will become more peaceful, and America and the world will become more secure.

We're proud to call you friend, Mr. President. We're proud to have you as an ally in the war on terror.

On behalf of the American people, I want to thank you for Iraq's generous pledge of aid to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Welcome to the United States.

TALABANI: Thank you, Mr. President, for your kind remarks. It is an honor for me to stand here today as the representative of free Iraq.

TALABANI: It is an honor to represent the world's youngest democracy.

In the name of the Iraqi people, I say to you, Mr. President, and to the glorious American people, thank you, thank you.

Thank you because you have liberated us from the worst kind of dictatorship. Our people suffered too much from this worst kind of dictatorship. The signal is mass graves with hundred thousand of Iraqi innocent children and women, young and old men. Thank you.

And thanks to the United States, there are now 50 million Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq liberated by your courageous leadership and decision to liberate us, Mr. President.

We agree with Mr. President Bush that democracy is the solution to the problems of the Middle East.

Mr. President, you are a visionary, great statesman. We salute you. We are grateful to you. We will never forget what you have done for our people.

BUSH: Thank you, sir.

TALABANI: We have had a good discussion with Mr. President. We are partners. We are proud to say openly and to repeat it, that we are partners of the United States of America in fighting against tyranny, terrorism and for democracy. That's something we are not shy to say, and we'll repeat it everywhere, here and in Iraq and the United Nations and everywhere.

Iraqis and Americans alike in the war against terrorism. Our soldiers now fighting side by side with your brave soldiers, now and every day.

TALABANI: We have captured many senior elements of Al Qaida. We killed many of them. And we had also many of them in our prisons.

With your support, we could create a society enjoying democracy for the first time of the history. Now Iraq is a free country. We have all kind of democracy, all kind of freedom of expression, of parties, groups, civil society organizations, that we can say that our democracy is unique in the Middle East.

Our strategy is sound: We build democracy and defend democracy. We talk about how we could improve our tactics.

There is progress in security in our country. The number of the bomb cars reduced. The places which were under the full control of the terrorists are now liberated. And they're now registering their names for the new election.

In the areas which was known that there was area of Al Qaida, now it became the area of Iraq. And two important signals appeared in that area: that people started to hate and to fight terrorism.

Now we have Iraqi Arab tribes, Sunni tribes, fighting terrorism in Al Qaim. We have also people who are in Tal Afar who have cooperated with Iraqi forces, with American forces against terrorism.

It is a good signal that our people start to understand that terrorism is the enemy of Iraqi people before become the enemy of Americans. They are killing our civilians, our innocent children, bomb students. They are destroying our mosques (inaudible) churches, everywhere, regardless what happen to the people.

And we are now progressing gradually. Last year, for example, Fallujah was their capital. Now it is an Iraqi free city. A year ago, Najaf was a battlefield. Najaf is a holy city of Shiites, it is the Vatican of the Shiites. Now Najaf is being rebuilt, is free, and ruled by the elected committee, elected governor.

TALABANI: There are still important security challenges. We are not neglecting, but we are fighting Al Qaida. Now our fight in Iraq will prove that the enemy is going to be weak and lose morale.

The fighting in Tal Afar was easy to defeat the terrorists and to liberate the town from (inaudible).

The so-called jihadists want to impose oppression and dictatorship and worst kind of society on our people. For that, so they are not only the enemy of Iraq but they are the enemy of humanity, the enemy of real Islam and the enemy of all Middle East peoples.

Together with our Americans friends and partners, we will defeat them.

Today, American and international presence in Iraq is vital. American and international presence in Iraq is vital for democracy in Iraq and in the Middle East, and also for prevent foreign interference in the internal affairs of Iraq.

We will set no timetable for withdrawal, Mr. President. A timetable will help the terrorists, will encourage them that they could defeat the superpower of the world and the Iraqi people.

We hope that by the end of 2006, our security forces are up to the level of taking responsibility from many Americans troops with complete agreement with Americans. We don't want to do anything without the agreement with Americans, because we don't want to give any signal to the terrorists that our will to defeat them is weakened or they can defeat us.

TALABANI: We are proud that one day will come -- as soon as possible, of course, we hope -- that American troops can proudly return home and we tell them, "Thank you, dear friends."

As to our faithful to friendship, of course, we are sorry for the sacrifices of American people in Iraq.

But I think a great people like America has a mission in history. They have sacrificed hundreds of thousands of his sons in the First World War, Second World War, and in liberating people in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, Kurdistan.

And the great leader, Mr. George W. Bush, is continuing the same mission of the American people. We are grateful. We are grateful for American generosity, and we honor sacrifices of America in Iraq and everywhere, not only in Iraq.

We also need our neighbors, at least some of them, to stop attacking Iraqi democracy. We want them to join us in fighting against terrorism. We want our brothers stopping the media -- at least the official media -- to support terrorism.

We want them to stand with us against terrorism, because terrorism is the enemy of all Arab and Muslim countries in the world.

But we will proceed and we will remember those who helped us in our struggles to

establish a democratic Iraq.

TALABANI: And you are first of those people who supported us for this noble wish.

There is in Iraq political progress. We are taking the gun out of Iraqi politics. For the first time, Iraqis are speaking to each other in peaceful dialogue, not with arms.

The majority of Iraqis are committed to the political process. Iraq is a diverse country. They are mostly settling their differences peacefully.

We have agreed a draft constitution. Of course, it is not a perfect document. But I think it is one of the best constitutions in the Middle East.

Of course, we didn't solve all problems. We have some problems. We are still suffering from many problems. But we are achieving progress on all fields -- economic, trade, education, political life. And we hope that we will remain having the support of the United States and, Your Excellency, Mr. President, and other friends in the Arab world and in Europe.

It is clear that we are a young democracy, but our draft constitution has a bill of rights, ensures the equality of all Iraqis before the law, regardless of their gender, creed, religion or ethnicity.

It enshrines separation of powers and involves many checks and balances on the exercise of power. It is the best constitution in the entire region, as we (inaudible). We hope it will be correct.

We are reaching out to some other Iraqi citizens who were not able to participate in the election; I mean our Arab Sunni brothers. We tried and we involved them in the process.

TALABANI: When the results of election was announced, the two main lists of Kurdistan Alliance and United Front of Iraq Alliance, we got 238 votes in an assembly with 275. But nevertheless, we tried to bring our Sunni Arabs to the government to participate.

We elected a vice president, an Arab Sunni, two deputy prime ministers, the speaker of the house is Sunni. And six ministers, among them two main posts, the minister of defense and minister of industry.

It means that we are anxious to have all Iraqis united and to solve all our problems through dialogue. We are calling all Iraqis to come to participate in the democratic process and to say what they want. And they are free to criticize the government, criticize the president of Iraq, the prime minister, the ministers. And they are able to say what they want through democratic process. They can say their slogans and demands.

This, of course, constitution is not perfect, but it can be amended in the future if the Iraqi

people and the representatives of the Iraq people want this.

But nowadays, compared with others, we are proud to have such a kind of constitution.

Some of our brothers, Sunni Arabs, are under the threat of terrorism. We will try our best to liberate them from terrorism and from the violence.

To those in America and other countries still ask if war of liberation in Iraq it was the right decision. I say, "Please, please come to Iraq to visit the mass graves, to see what happened to Iraqi people, and to see what's now going on in Iraq."

To those who talk of stability, I say, "Saddam imposed the stability of the mass graves."

To the terrorists, I say, "You'll win freedom in Iraq."

Thank you, Mr. President.

BUSH: Good job. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

A couple of questions.

QUESTION: Mr. President, given what happened with Katrina, shouldn't Americans be concerned that their government isn't prepared to respond to another disaster or even a terrorist attack?

BUSH: Katrina exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government. And to the extent that the federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility.

I want to know what went right and what went wrong. I want to know how to better cooperate with state and local government, to be able to answer that very question that you asked: Are we capable of dealing with a severe attack or another severe storm?

And that's a very important question, and it's in our national interest that we find out exactly what went on so that we can better respond.

One thing's for certain: Having been down there three times and have seen how hard people are working, I'm not going to defend the process going in, but I am going to defend the people who are on the front line of saving lives.

Those Coast Guard kids pulling people out of the floods did heroic work. The first responders on the ground, whether they be state folks or local folks, did everything they could. There's a lot of people that have done a lot of hard work to save lives.

And so I want to know what went right and what went wrong, to address those, but I also want people in America to understand how hard people are working to save lives down there in not only New Orleans, but surrounding parishes and along the Gulf Coast.

Mr. President, you want to call on somebody?

QUESTION: (SPEAKING IN ARABIC)

If I may, Mr. President, there's been a scathing attack from top officials of your administration on Syria yesterday for allowing foreign fighters to cross the border. We heard yesterday from Ambassador Khalilzad.

Is this an escalation on the pressure that you're putting on Syria? And what more can you do when you say that all options are open?

TALABANI: May I answer?

BUSH: Please, yes. You might want to try it in English.

(LAUGHTER)

TALABANI: I will say it in Arabic, because the question was in Arabic.

(SPEAKING IN ARABIC)

BUSH: I'm not sure if I agree or not, but...

(LAUGHTER)

... the ambassador did speak strongly about Syria, because he understands that the Syrian government can do a lot more to prevent the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq.

These people are coming from Syria into Iraq and killing a lot of innocent people. They're killing -- they're trying to kill our folks as well.

BUSH: And so, of course, he's speaking strongly about that.

And the Syrian leader must understand we take his lack of action seriously. And the government is going to become more and more isolated as a result of two things: one, not being cooperative with the Iraqi government in terms of securing Iraq; and two, not being fully transparent about what they did in Lebanon.

And so we are going to work with our friends. And this is a subject of conversation, of course, I'll have with allies in places like New York and on the other times I communicate with our allies: that Syria must be a focus of getting them to change their behavior, particularly as it regards to democracy and trying to prevent democracies from

emerging.

QUESTION: Do you believe at this point that Iran will be referred to the U.N. Security Council to face possible sanctions over its nuclear program? And how will you convince reluctant members like China that this is the way forward?

BUSH: There is still an IAEA process to go forward. And we will work with our ambassador at the IAEA, Ambassador Schulte, to continue to press forward with a full disclosure about Iranian intentions, so that then the Security Council can determine the right policy to go forward.

I will bring the subject up with leaders whom I'll be meeting with today and tomorrow and later on this week. I will be speaking candidly about Iran with Hu Jintao, as well as with President Putin, for example. I just had a conversation with Tony Blair, and this subject came up.

It is very important for the world to understand that Iran with a nuclear weapon will be incredibly destabilizing. And therefore we must work together to prevent them from having the wherewithal to develop a nuclear weapon.

It should be a warning to all of us that they have -- in the past didn't fully disclose their programs, their programs aimed at helping them develop a weapon.

BUSH: They have insisted that they have a civilian nuclear program. And I thought a rational approach to that would be to allow them to receive enriched uranium from a third party under the guise of international inspections that will enable them to have civilian nuclear power without learning how to make a bomb.

Some of us are wondering why they need civilian nuclear power anyway. They are awash with hydrocarbons.

Nevertheless, it's a right of a government to want to have a civilian nuclear program. But there ought to be guidelines in which they would be allowed to have that civilian nuclear program. And one such guideline would be in such a way that they don't gain the expertise necessary to be able to enrich.

This is a subject of grave concern, and it's something that we're spending a lot of time on in this administration.

I want to applaud the Germans and the French and the British for sticking together in developing a common message to the Iranians. And now we'll see how the Iranians respond here on their visit to the United States.

Final question, Mr. President.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President, I hope you'll excuse me, since you've never had

spoken Kurdish, I'll put my question in Kurdish.

(SPEAKING IN KURDISH)

TALABANI: With your permission, Mr. President, he is from American Voice, the Kurdish section. I must answer in Kurdish.

BUSH: Answer in Kurdish; perfect.

TALABANI: (SPEAKING IN KURDISH)

BUSH: On that cheery note, the press conference is over.

(LAUGHTER)

Thank you, Mr. President. Good job.

END

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