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Civil Society in Iraq at Work Amid the War

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's a great honor and privilege to be here at the Heritage Foundation. Our subject today is entrepreneurship and the building of civil society in Iraq, in contrast to the ongoing political issues in the country and in particular, the instability that has been caused by the raging insurgency.

The political process, so far, has held up. The main milestones that were mapped out to track the Iraqi progress toward constitutional arrangements have been, to a large extent, met faithfully. So, if you go back to November 15, 2003, when the first political deal was struck between the Iraqi political class and the Coalition Provisional Authority, which subsequently led to the adoption of the Transition Administrative Law, the milestones that were set in that document by and large have been met. To me, the political process has in fact met a lot of the expectations that were made of it. It's not the way in which it has been portrayed—as an unmitigated series of conflicts and confrontations between power-hungry politicians.

To a large extent, the way in which the issues have been handled shows a high degree of responsibility within an environment that is extremely unstable and fraught with public and personal danger. All of those who talk about the inability of the Iraqi political class to reach an acceptable working accommodation ignore the progress that has been achieved in bringing the constitutional state of the country to quite a high level of participative democracy. So, I take issue with

Talking Points

- The political restructuring of Iraq has made good progress in an environment that is extremely unstable and fraught with public and personal danger.
- Age-old structures of civil society that smoothed the edges between Arab and Kurd, Shiite and Sunni were damaged by the long Saddam Hussein dictatorship. It is essential that they be reconfigured so that Iraq can face the challenges ahead.
- The U.S. engagement in Iraq is a noble cause, though not without problems. Iraqis will produce a much better country and a much better society if that engagement is done with clarity, with consistency, and with sensitivity.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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those who focus on the struggles and take them out of context.

Confronting the Problems

Nevertheless, there have been a series of major, major problems that needed to be confronted and resolved. We're talking about the restructuring of an entire state. And it's not being restructured in a vacuum; it's being restructured in a very unstable and very violent environment where historical cross-currents have come together and need to be resolved in relatively short order.

The panoply of issues that have been raised as a result of the overthrow of the regime are truly of historical dimensions. The United States is not just involved in a peripheral military occupation or in so-called nation building. It's not so much building a nation here as much as resolving a series of issues at the heart of the distribution of power in the country. All of those who complain that this thing has been delayed or that it took four months before the caretaker government could hand over authority to the new Prime Minister-designate don't recognize the fault lines that existed in Iraq and that were covered up by the debris of centuries of neglect and oppression and lack of resolution of key issues.

The United States entered into the arena and in the process opened up all of these fissures. But they were fissures; they were not cracks that were created as a result of the United States' engagement with Iraq. They were there, and they have to be recognized. No society can continue, I believe, where there are fundamental issues that are unresolved. The issue of slavery in this country went for nearly 80 years before it was confronted and it had to be resolved. There is no way that you hide these fault lines.

The challenge is whether these issues are going to be resolved and resolved in ways that are, by and large, to the benefit and advantage of all constituent members of this country. The challenge is whether you can look at this huge array of issues and problems and resolve them in ways that maximize—or at least optimize—pub-

lic welfare and the welfare and the advantage of all of the component parts of the country.

Re-weaving the Fabric of Society

In this area, civil society, I believe, is critical. But civil society should not necessarily be seen as it is seen in the West. It is not a series of non-governmental organizations or special-interest entities, not regionally-oriented or ethnic communitarian. Civil society in Iraq, I believe, is a question of re-configuring the age-old structures that kept society intact. There is no doubt that there are problems in Iraq. There are problems between various communities. There are deep divisions that are of an identity nature, but they were resolved. They were resolved in history by smoothing out the edges that allowed for a large common space between Arabs and Kurds, between Shiites and Sunnis, between various minorities and the majoritarian perspective of Islam. This process was fundamentally halted by the dictatorship.

Despite all the problems, if Iraq had been allowed to develop in an organic way, say from the 1950s onwards, without these disruptive breaks that we've had, the kind of civil society that would have emerged would have been, basically, an organic one, one that would have been linked to the historical experience of the country. It is this that we have to re-create.

We have to re-create a common space whereby the shared values of the Sunnis and the Shiites and the shared values between Arabs and Kurds, and the shared values between a predominant Islamic identity and other groups in the country are wide enough and big enough to accommodate all differences and variations. And I believe this is where the real challenge is.

It's not a question of creating a third identity, a citizenship that is not based on a common set of experiences that are commonly agreed upon and accepted and that people are proud of. If you ask an Iraqi now which individual figure they think of in national terms, they are very hard put to name one. They have to go far back into history to come up with a figure that has the respect and the support of all the population. This, to me, is a real marker of what common identity means. An arti-

ficial citizenship that is not anchored in civil institutions is bound to be brittle and will be exploited by people who want to break the unity of the state, irrespective of whether it's federal, con-federal, or a unity state. And here I think the challenge is, to some extent, civilization.

The great divide in Iraq is between Arab and Kurd and the other great divide is between Shiites and Sunnis. The accommodation that has happened over a long period of time has to be re-woven so that society can function within a common geography. Without this common geography, I think we are not heading for the right outcome, or the correct outcome. And to do that we have to tackle our extremes. There are problems in the discourse now of the Islamists, there are problems in the discourse of the Nationalists, and at the edges there are exclusivists. The rejection of the Shiite identity by the substantial Salafi/Wahhabi community is a problem. The sense of constant victimization and a sense of being constantly separate from the main body of Islam is also a problem for the Shiites. If we do not create a ground that combines the more tolerant, the more accepting, the more accommodating, the more ecumenical history and the ecumenical discourse that we had in Iraq, we cannot avoid these problems.

I can give you all kinds of economic policies that we have been pursuing. I can tell you that we have been pursuing highly orthodox monetary policies. I can tell you that we have balanced budgets, that we have passed investor-friendly laws, that we have controlled state expenditures, or at least try to control state expenditures. We are fighting corruption, which is a terrible, terrible disease in our society. But if there are not enough people who are going to insist on the re-weaving of society along traditional, historically acknowledged lines, I think that we are heading for a serious problem.

So, this is the political and social landscape in which the United States became involved. The question is, has this engagement reached an end? Should it be changed, should it be altered? My answer is "No," that you can't really undo the events of the last 30 years in Iraq. The former regime destroyed a lot of the underpinnings of Iraqi

society, and it is our job and our duty to try to re-weave them at all levels. At the level of the individual, at the level of neighborhood, families.

I was born and raised in a place called Habbaniyah, which is now known in the press as the "Heartland of Sunni Insurgents." I happen to be a Shiite. At no point in my youth was there any issue that a certain part of Habbaniyah was associated with a different sect. In fact, we took pride in our neighborhoods. We took pride that we were a strongly knit neighborhood community. We took pride in the city, and the city took pride vis-à-vis other towns and areas, and the other areas took pride vis-à-vis the country and the country as a whole took pride in itself vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

New Model

It is this sense of belonging that must be instilled in all Iraqis and this will not come through pious statements or through specific central policies. It will come, I believe, from a constant building up of the basic building blocks, as it were, of society once again. The involvement of the U.S. is important, not only as an outside agent, but in some cases as an arbiter and referee. That requires a great deal of sensitivity and understanding of the society in which the U.S. is now engaged. For better or worse—and I think for better—the U.S. engagement is going to be to the advantage of our country. It will produce a much better country and a much better society if that engagement is done with clarity, with consistency, and with sensitivity. We need more people who are able to engage with society on its own terms, maintain and respect the traditions of the country, nudge where necessary, pull back where necessary, cajole, guide, and stay out when necessary. This, I hope, is the new model.

I'm encouraged by Ambassador Khalilzad's extremely adept performance to date. I sense also a change in the mood here in Washington towards a much more nuanced approach in a complex environment. I'm sure that the United States' engagement in Iraq, seen from the prism of history, will be seen to be what it is: a noble cause. It may have been badly managed, but there's still the opportunity to rectify these errors, and we look forward to

more and more engagement of the United States of a qualitatively different nature.

Of course, the insurgency is a big 800-pound gorilla in the room. It has been justified on religious-ideological grounds, and that's very hard to change. This is the result of the neglect of nearly 70 years, of an attempt to re-write the history of Islam

and its sects by a narrow group of people who have perverted the idea of modernism and have perverted the ideal of the identity of Islam. You suffered from it on 9/11; we've been suffering from it for decades.

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