



The Future of Iraq: Cause for Cautious Optimism

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The story of Iraq is dramatic, turbulent, and very important. It's very important for people in this great country, to understand what is really going and understand what's at stake. But it is very hard to transport people who are, if I may say so, well fed, well nourished, comfortable, secure, who switch on the light and it comes on, and turn on a tap and it flows to an environment where none of these things can be taken for granted. So, I see it as my job to try to bring a sense of reality from my troubled country to this distinguished gathering so that you go home understanding better how we feel and understanding better why it is important for you that certain things should happen and certain outcomes should be guaranteed in Iraq.

Let me start by going back. People say that Iraq is the cradle of civilization, this has become a cliché, but it's not an empty cliché. Iraq is really where civilization started, where the first state was established, where writing was invented, which since that time has acted a reservoir of knowledge which is cumulative from generation to generation. It is a country in which so many of the things that we take for granted in our everyday lives, were invented first were practiced first. The first set of written laws were written in Iraq. Indeed, the very units of time were invented in Iraq. Think about the concept of a week as a unit of time—it was first used in Iraq. A week is an arbitrary measure but the Sumerians decided that human life can be improved if there was not work all the time, but there was a pattern that allows for work but also allows for recreation and rest. So, the week was established by the Sumerians and then taken on board by all the regions which came later. Beer, for those who like beer, was first brewed in Iraq. And I can go on. Iraq has made tremendous contributions to civilization not the least of which is the decimal system of arithmetic, of numbers. Now, we believe that we are owed back some support and some understanding. We want to go back to a role in which we can be contributors to modern civilization, not a burden on modern humanity.

Now, what happened from those years of glory that Iraq descended into very difficult state? Let me tell you about my own experience. I was born in Baghdad. I was brought up in a middle-class family in an environment which was secure. Our neighborhood and most neighborhoods didn't know much about violence, parents looked after their kids, their kids' education, tended their gardens, corruption was rare, the country was building itself up quite nicely. The GDP of Iraq after the discovery of oil and construction of that infrastructure was equivalent to that of Spain in the '50s. The value of the Iraq dinar was equal to 3.3 American dollars. Iraq had foreign reserves equal to \$35 billion at that time, around 1958. So Iraq was doing very well and also Iraq was a pioneer in this region in the field of education. It had the best medical school in the region, and in art we're pioneers. In practically every field of creative and industrial endeavor in our region, we were pioneers. We were pioneers in our treatment of women. The first Iraqi woman graduate came out of law school in 1935. Our first woman minister was appointed in

1959. That was at the time when some of our neighbors did not even permit primary education for their girls.

So, what went wrong? Iraq took a wrong turn. It was a military coup which started a chain of dictatorships which culminated in Saddam Hussein taking absolute power in the '70s and launching wars on its neighbors and bringing ruin to the country at every single level. By the time he was done and the Americans intervened instead of having \$35 billion of reserves we were in debt to the tune of about \$350 billion. Instead of the Iraqi dinar being equal to 3.3 American dollars, a single American dollar was equal to more than 3,000 Iraqi dinars. The country had collapsed. This collapse was accelerated by the years of the sanctions and let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that the sanctions were not a good idea. The country was collapsing socially and culturally as well as economically. Corruption took root in those years and life became hell for the average citizen. Education went backwards, health services went backwards and every aspect of life became near impossible. An average engineer or doctor was paid 10 dollars a month, if he or she was lucky. So, nobody could survive and people who refused to be corrupt had to sell their belongings and even the doors and windows of their own homes and ultimately their homes. So, that's how Iraq was at the end of Saddam's rule.

Enter the Americans. I'm sure historians will argue for a long time about whether the intervention in Iraq was right, whether it was justified, whether it was done well. These arguments will continue. The fact is they did intervene. From the Iraqi perspective let me tell you we were grateful because Iraqis had lost hope, we tried again and again and again and every time we tried hundreds and sometimes thousands lost their lives. When Iraq was driven out of Kuwait in 1991, President Bush, the father, called upon the Iraqis to rise. They did and they were left to be massacred by Saddam. There was no hope; we could not see any prospect of ourselves throwing off the yoke of Saddam's rule. We envisioned a future to be ruled after Saddam by his sons and then even his grandsons and the prospects were really bleak. With the intervention of the Americans the potential of progress became a reality and we all rejoiced and celebrated and people were happy.

Unfortunately, and I will be very frank with you because that's the only way friends should talk to each other, it was not done very well. There were not enough troops to maintain law and order, looting started in Iraq, and things went out of control. Saddam had already released thousands upon thousands of hardened criminals just before he fell, he also cleaned out all the cash in the vault of the Central Bank to the tune of about \$2 billion. And, he did a number of other things. Iraq was an arsenal, a huge arsenal, of weapons. Those weapons were not secured; they were looted. Our dear possessions, possessions of humanity—our treasures in the Iraq museum were looted.

We suffered every imaginable tragedy but Iraqis, if anything, are very resilient, very resilient indeed. I think Iraqis are the most resilient people I know. They kept fighting back but against odds that are very daunting. On top of the problems they inherited [internally] they had to endure the interference of their neighbors, the onslaught of international terrorism—al Qaeda, found a golden opportunity to fight the Americans on Iraqi soil—and I can continue to add the other negative factors which added to the worries of Iraqis. The initial two or three years were marked by confusion, by lack of direction and money spent without sufficient return. But despite all that Iraqis were making progress. I, as a member of the governing council, had the honor to work with my colleagues to negotiate a transitional constitution. Later, a permanent constitution was drafted. People defied the terrorists and went to cast their votes in elections, in national elections.

You all remember the purple fingers. Iraqis did not bow to the terrorists and at the end they turned against their tormentors.

A combination of things took place. First, after learning from our collective mistakes, certainly our American friends decided on the right course, and then in January 2007, President Bush announced the surge. The surge is really not just an increase in the number of soldiers but a change in strategy. The Americans started at last to understand what it needed to succeed in Iraq. In this respect I always remember a quote from Winston Churchill who once said “Americans always end up doing the right thing, after exhausting the alternatives.” My great friend, General Petraeus, with whom I had the honor to work when I was Minister of the Interior in 2004, went out with a totally different approach. His strategy was based on counterinsurgency principles. Secure the communities and they will be on your side. Before then the doctrine was forced protection. I sometimes call it “false protection.” Forced protection means taking a defensive position. The military are barracked in bases and they dodge from base to base. They get hit on the way and they cede territory to the terrorists who torment and intimidate local communities. Anybody who gives information about who they are and what they are doing is eliminated and executed publicly. So, people immediately turn inward into their families and homes. When General Petraeus went out he went out with the idea of making the American military work with the Iraqi security forces in neighborhoods which they secured but they live in giving sufficient assurance to the people who then feel emboldened enough to come forward with information or even actions in order to fight the terrorists. In that environment the first part of an anti-al Qaeda movement was initiated in Anbar province. Since that time the situation has been turned around completely. Fifteen months ago, al Qaeda was parading down the high street of Ar Ramadi which is the capital of Anbar. They they’re nowhere to be seen. American soldiers can be seen shopping in the local markets without any problem.

A huge change has come about. With this change many other things have started to fall into place and give us hope to remedy the other outstanding issues. Zarqawi, the infamous leader to al Qaeda wrote a letter which was intercepted that said “the best strategy for success for al Qaeda was to instigate a civil war in Iraq.” They did very cleverly, allied with the ex-Saddamists and the Ba’athists. They selected their targets with great care. In August 2003 they bombed the United Nations’ headquarters in Iraq and late de Mello was lost. He was a great friend of Iraq, I worked with him at that time. They then assassinated Mohammed Baqir al-Makim, a great Shiite leader, clergyman, from a highly respected family. They assassinated him and many of his associates in Najaf after prayer, and later committed a series of similar atrocities. This culminated in February 2006 with the destruction of one of Shia’s most holy shrines. This naturally created a reaction and the country was, at that point, spinning out of control.

But what most people don’t understand is how cohesive Iraqi society really is. Extremists always create problems and they encourage opposite extremists; so they feed on each other. But Iraqi society at its most fundamental is really a cohesive society for a simple reason for centuries Iraqi society has always been a pluralistic society. We’ve always had different people living next to each other, inter-marrying. I was just asked whether I was Sunni or Shiite and I replied “I’m Iraqi. That’s enough.” I don’t want to be labeled. There is a tendency here in this country where everything has to be simplified and reduced to short sentences, [such as] “Iraq is very simple to understand, it’s made up of Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites and they are forever at each other’s throats. If you understand that, you understand Iraq.” Nothing is further from the truth. There are open communities in Iraq, certainly the Arab side. Thirty percent of them are of mixed marriages. I don’t know any Iraqi who does not have in his extended family somebody from another sect. Iraqis react negatively to people who try to pigeonhole them or label them.

We had a cultural event in Washington, D.C. we opened the doors of the embassy to the public and we had Iraqi music, Iraqi food, some cultural relics, photographs about Iraq and we had people dancing in the backyard of the embassy, Kurdish dancers, Arab dancers, and one of the guests came to me and said, "Excuse me, Ambassador, could I ask you whether this dance is Sunni or Shiite?" I didn't know how to answer him. I said, "Listen, my friend. If I came and found a group of American people dancing would I ask whether this is a Catholic dance or a Protestant dance?"

We should not simplify Iraq. There are ideas at the highest level, in Congress even, about solving the Iraqi problem by subdividing us into Sunnistan, Shiitistan, Kurdistan. Well, we as a country, have willingly accepted the principle of federalism as a democratic improvement on our highly centralized past. The idea of centralism is a good idea for Iraq. Our brother, the Kurds, who suffered for many many years under Saddam, wanted to be secure and wanted to run their own affairs. They were running their affairs, by the way, since they were given a protective zone in 1991 until Saddam was removed. So, we accepted it as a model but we don't like the idea of segregation. We don't like the idea of ethnic cleansing. That's not where the future of Iraq lies. The future of Iraq lies in a modern society where everybody is respected; everybody is fit to live wherever he or she chooses, with an administrative structure that allows a good measure of decentralization. We don't like it when people try to engineer our future by imposing solutions based on principles which are suspect.

During the darkest days of 2006, people kept asking me here about the civil war in Iraq. I kept saying there is no civil war; there is a war on civilians. Shiite extremists attacking ordinary, innocent, Sunni civilians; and extremist Sunnis attacking ordinary, innocent, Shiite civilians in order to create in order to create disintegration but they failed. At that time I said they would fail and now I feel vindicated. They have failed. I believe we have turned the corner. I believe that with a combination of factors, including the surge and the change of approach by the military, the coming of age, to some extent, of our new security forces, the gaining of confidence and momentum and the maturing of our leaders, we have come a long way under fire, in circumstances that would have made this impossible probably in any other situation.

I believe the future is hopeful, I believe the future could be dramatically better than anybody in this room could expect. If things settle down, which I believe they can, and there is a high probability that they will, there will be a positive feedback loop which will accelerate great improvement. We still are not out of the woods, we still have a lot of challenges; our neighbors are still interfering in our affairs, but we're beginning to get it right. We're beginning to have the ability to stand up even to our neighbors. The internal challenges that we have we will deal with. The violence I believe will subside. More and more American troops can come back home, gradually, as we get stronger, and we are getting stronger. And they are beginning to pull back and come home. Next year the emphasis will be on the economy. The economy will get people working and when people get working they are less likely to make trouble.

So, we are very optimistic but cautiously so. We understand how difficult it is to deal with these challenges. Like corruption which became entrenched in the country. These ills which we inherited, these burdens, this negative legacy which we inherited, cannot just be wished away or removed in a week or a month or a year or two. It will take a long time. In 2006 we were on a downward spiral; now we are definitely on an upward spiral. We believe we will make it. We appreciate the sacrifices that Americans have made to make this possible. We grieve with every family who lost a loved one. We know about loss. We have lost a lot more. We understand what



it means. We are grateful. I say this from the bottom of my heart but I believe the struggle is worth it, for us and for you, and a healthy stable Iraq which is an ally of the United States. A free and democratic Iraq which is an ally of the United States is infinitely better, by the way, for the oil prices than a disintegrated Iraq.

So, on this positive note I'd like to say thank you again for bearing with me.

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