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U.S. Envoy Outlines Political Blueprint for Iraq

Khalilzad cites need for "national unity" government, compact for progress

The following op-ed by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. ambassador to Iraq, was published February 12 in the *Los Angeles Times* and is in the public domain. There are no republication restrictions.

A Political Blueprint for Iraq
 By Zalmay Khalilzad

From the moment the U.S. decided to remove the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein and help Iraqis establish a representative government, one of our key challenges has been enabling the leaders of Iraq's major communities to overcome their mistrust and fear of each other. This has not been easy.

Hussein was skilled at pitting one group against another to strengthen his position. The insurgency and sectarian violence that have plagued Iraq since his downfall have only deepened these divisions. This was reflected in the recent election, in which Iraqis voted largely along ethnic and religious lines.

But now a process is underway to bridge these differences. On Feb. 4, I hosted the leaders of the victorious parties for lunch. The group included Shiite Arab leaders such as Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari; Kurdish leaders such as Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan regional government; and Sunni Arab leaders such as National Assembly Speaker Hachim Hassani and Adnan Dulaimi of the Iraqi Accordance Front. The goal was to start the process of forming a national unity government.

The discussions were often highly emotional. The leaders of each of Iraq's communities strongly feel and express the pain suffered by their people during Iraq's difficult post-Hussein transition. Shiite Arabs expressed bitterness about the hundreds of bombings and suicide attacks that have killed thousands of innocent Iraqis. Sunni Arabs complained about what they see as persecution by the new Iraqi government's security forces. Overcoming these grievances will not be easy, and the bargaining over specific roles in the new government will be tough and often contentious.

Yet this is a moment of opportunity. Thanks in part to systematic outreach efforts by the United States, Sunnis have undergone a sea change in attitude about participating in post-Hussein governance, culminating in their massive turnout in the December elections. They have come to understand that the U.S. is not seeking to occupy their country permanently, and many have been convinced that protracted violence would destroy their country's future.

To build on this progress, Iraq's leaders now need to agree on a process to unite the country.

First, they need to form a government of national unity. This is not a matter of dividing up ministries, with each used to favor the parochial interests of the minister's ethnic or sectarian community or political faction. Rather, it means selecting ministers from all communities who will build political bridges, who are committed to a unified Iraq and who have demonstrated professional competence. Getting the next government right is far more important than getting it formed fast.

Iraqi leaders also must agree to a decision-making process that gives political minorities confidence that the majority will share power and take their legitimate concerns into account. Iraqi leaders believe that this could be accomplished by forming a council composed of key Iraqi leaders to focus on issues of national importance.

Elected leaders need to govern from the center, not the ideological extremes. This is particularly true in the security area, where the new government must continue increasing the capability of Iraqi security forces while ensuring that Defense and Interior Ministry officials are chosen on the basis of competence, not ethnic or sectarian background. In addition, the government must begin the process of demobilizing the factional militias across the country.

Next, Iraq's leaders need to agree on a true national compact for their country -- a vision and set of political rules that will produce stability and progress. The new constitution gave responsibility to the new national assembly to address several key unresolved questions, including drawing up guidelines for federalizing non-Kurdish regions and dividing responsibilities among various levels of government. In these negotiations, Iraqi leaders must strike agreements that will win greater Sunni Arab support and create a near-consensus in favor of the constitution.

Then, Iraq's leaders must forge an understanding with those insurgents who are willing to lay down their arms, join the political process and, perhaps, even enlist in the fight against the terrorists. Many are willing to do so, as evidenced by the clashes between insurgents and terrorists in western Iraq.

As the insurgents shift away from armed struggle, they are seeking assurances that regional powers will not be allowed to dominate Iraq and that Iraqi leaders will limit de-Baathification to high-ranking officials, integrating all those who did not commit crimes into mainstream society.

Sunni Arab rejectionists are joining the process of building a new and democratic Iraq. This not only opens the door for insurgents to permanently renounce violence and join the political process in order to stabilize Iraq, it also isolates the terrorists who are the enemy of all Iraqis, while setting the stage for the emergence of a strong and independent Iraq.

(Zalmay Khalilzad is the U.S. ambassador to Iraq.)

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