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Baghdad, Iraq

August 9, 2005



Director General Mohammed Al-Asadi and Ambassador Khalilzad sign a document transferring the International Press Center in Baghdad, August 9. (©AP/WWP)

U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad today attended the handover ceremony of the International Press Center (IPC) to the Iraqi Government Communications Directorate (GCD). During his remarks, Ambassador Khalilzad reaffirmed the United States' commitment to supporting Iraq's transition to a free and democratic society.

To mark the handover, USAID/Iraq is providing a grant to the IPC for technical and office equipment that includes 20 desktop computers, 30 laptop computers, licensed software, printers, a scanner, a copy machine, CD writers, desks, chairs and other necessary office equipment. The 30 laptop computers were given yesterday to a

group of Iraqi journalists who have utilized the IPC since its opening in February 2004.

During the event, USAID/Iraq Mission Director Dawn Liberi emphasized the role USAID is playing to assist Iraqi media in securing the necessary equipment and expertise needed to become part of the international media establishment. "This donation comes at a time when Iraqi journalists are taking the steps needed to become important contributors to the international media scene. This is a major milestone for free press throughout the region," he said.

Before 2003, all Iraqi media and public-information mechanisms were under the full control and censorship of the former regime, and the concept of a free press was nonexistent. Today, Iraqi journalists are building an institutional environment in which the media has access to international sources, and is able to report freely to the Iraqi people and the rest of the world. The IPC is a hub of activity for Iraqi and International journalists during press conferences, National Assembly sessions, and other media events.

Full Statement by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad To Mark to the Handover of the International Press Center

I am pleased to be here today with Mohammed Al-Asadi, the Director General of the Government Communications Directorate, to hand over the International Press Center to the Iraqi government.

It has been the nerve center for the operations of the media in Iraq – and particularly for Iraqi journalists who use the computers and internet to do their work and connect to the region and the world.

As the United States hands over the center to Iraq, we have provided through USAID computers, scanners, and other equipment that will more than triple the center's capacity.

This center will enable Iraqis to project an Iraqi viewpoint to the world. It will also enable Iraqi journalists to have improved access to the wider world

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in order to inform the Iraqi people on events elsewhere that affect their lives.

The transfer of this center is important, not only for the work it enables Iraqi journalists to do, but also for what it means, and what it symbolizes for the new Iraq.

First, it symbolizes the fact that Iraq is taking another step toward building the institutions of a free and democratic society.

In the United States and other democracies, the news media plays a vital role.

People in a democracy make decisions about the future of their country through elections and their elected representatives. The wisdom of their decisions depends on having accurate information about the events, issues, and debates that are central to the country's future.

The role of information – objective facts, impartial analysis, fair presentation of competing views – is at the heart of the deliberations of democratic politics.

This is so important that, in the United States, the news media are sometimes referred to as the "fourth estate." The first three "estates" are the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. By calling the news media the "fourth estate," we are saying that the news media are just as important to the proper functioning of our democracy as the three branches of government.

As Iraq's democratic system takes shape, the news media must play this vital role – but it can only do so if the right conditions exist.

A legal framework protecting the right of freedom of speech and press must exist in the constitution.

In the United States Constitution, the First Amendment states that Congress may make no law abridging the freedom of speech – this is a pillar of our freedoms.

Iraqi leaders who are drafting the new constitution should make this a pillar of Iraq's new democratic order as well. Democracy cannot succeed without it.

The Iraqi press must develop an ethic of responsibility, fairness, accuracy, and vigilance. If Iraq's press becomes a captive of political parties – disseminating propaganda in place of objective information – it will have failed in its vital mission.

At the same time, if Iraq's press does not embrace the role of the people's watchdog – shining a bright light on the country's problems and investigating whether the government is addressing them properly – it will have not met a key test for the media in a free society.

We recognize that this is a difficult challenge, a difficult test. Iraqi journalists face the danger of threats and attacks by those who want to keep the people from reading or hearing the truth about their country. We remember – and honor – those Iraqi journalists who have been killed in the pursuit of the truth.

To the courageous journalists of Iraq, I want to emphasize that the United States stands with you. In handing over this center, we seek to give the journalists of the new Iraq important elements of the infrastructure needed so they can succeed in their vital work.

Second, the handover of the International Press Center also symbolizes the fact that a democratic Iraq will play an important role in the development of the wider region.

The days of an Iraqi press that served the narrow interests of a dictator are over – but in the wider region some countries have a press that is still subservient to undemocratic regimes.

If Iraqi journalists use their freedom responsibly – if they meet the tests of providing fair coverage of events and serving as the society's watchdog – others will look to you. You will become a model to follow as freedom and democracy spread to other countries.

This is an opportunity Iraqi journalists should seize.

Mr. Al-Asadi, I will now formally handover the International Press Center to Iraq. As Iraq builds its democracy, it is the Iraqis who work here who will

play a key role in telling Iraq's story to the world.

May God bless the people of Iraq.

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