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By ZALMAY KHALILZAD

BAGHDAD -- This will be a year of decision in Iraq. Full participation in the December national elections by all communities has created the opportunity to significantly advance our strategy for success as recently outlined by President Bush. Building on this momentum is up to the Iraqi people. However, the United States will work intensively with Iraq's leaders to make progress on all three tracks of our strategy: developing democracy, providing security and reviving the economy.

In implementing the president's strategy, we are working to support the creation of the institutions of a unified and lasting democracy, particularly the formation of a national government and an amended constitution that can obtain broader acceptance. We are continuing to transfer control of more territory to Iraqi security forces and are seeking to exploit fissures in the insurgency. We are adjusting our military posture to emphasize focused operations on terrorists and we are making a concerted effort to improve Iraqi police, fight corruption and disband militias. We are also moving forward with our reconstruction plan and encouraging economic reform to stimulate private-sector growth.

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A unified and lasting democracy. The process of forming a government that can unify all Iraqi communities has already begun. It will move in earnest once the results of the elections are finalized in the coming weeks.

The Iraqis voted mostly along ethnic and sectarian lines, which is not surprising given that Saddam for decades purposely fostered a lack of trust among communities. However, for Iraq to succeed there must be cross-ethnic and cross-sectarian cooperation that will lead to a national compact on three key issues dividing Iraq's communities and factions.

- First, as leaders from all communities have agreed, there has to be a government of national unity, which includes all major players -- including Sunni Arabs. A repeat of the current Shiite-Kurdish alliance government will not solve Iraq's problems, whereas a partnership with the Sunnis will undermine the insurgency and isolate the terrorists and Saddamists. No enemies of democracy in Iraq can claim "legitimacy" when they are fighting a government freely elected by almost 11 million Iraqis and representative of all communities.

The U.S. has reached out extensively to leaders of the Sunni Arab community to persuade them to join negotiations as constructive players and to embrace the pursuit of their aspirations through political means. We have stressed to them that the U.S. will support efforts to address their legitimate concerns; that the political process will best serve the interests of their community; that violence only weakens Iraq and makes it vulnerable to outside influences; that the U.S. does not seek permanent military bases; and that we do not believe that the problems of Iraq can be solved by military means alone.

The Sunnis now have a clearer understanding that protracted violence will make their region poor and backward. Talent and capital will flee. Reconstruction will stall. Education will suffer. Extremist ideologies will become dominant. Discrimination against women will increase. Other regions will begin to pass them by. However, if Sunni Arabs choose to

invest in the political process, they will share the opportunity to shape the future of Iraq, participate in Iraq's future prosperity, and benefit from Iraq's progress.

- Second, the constitution will likely need to be amended in the coming year to broaden support. Iraqi leaders have begun discussing technical adjustments to make the political system resulting from the constitution more workable; compromises on some substantive issues such as federalization in Arab regions of Iraq; and a bill of assurances emphasizing national unity and individual rights. In addition, the outside world is waiting to see how welcoming Iraq will be to much-needed investment that can bring jobs and technology to Iraq.

- Third, Iraq's leaders will need to work together to reform security institutions and eliminate a number of militias and other armed groups. They are a threat to Iraqi security and could produce future civil conflict and warlordism. The Iraqi constitution prohibits the formation of militias outside the "framework of the armed forces." As Iraqi security forces develop and as the political process moves forward, the Iraqi government with support from the international community needs to implement a comprehensive Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration plan. Such a plan has been developed since the fall of Saddam. It is time for it to be implemented.

As we support the Iraqis in dealing with these three core concerns, we must also remember that the new government will be judged on whether it can deliver results to the people in terms of good governance, the rule of law and delivery of basic services. The U.S. will engage intensively with Iraq's new leaders to develop systematic plans in all of these areas.

To improve the capacity of government ministries, the U.S. will use ministerial assistance teams -- groups of embedded advisers and trainers who will help new ministers and their staffs grow the capabilities of their institutions. We will focus attention on upgrading provincial governments -- which will have greater powers under the new constitution. We will help Iraqis deliver basic services through small, local efforts utilizing resources such as those of the Commanders Emergency Response Program and larger projects supported through the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund.

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Building security. As we move forward, our coalition will remain on the offensive. Fourteen of Iraq's 18 provinces are largely secure from insurgent attacks. We now are concentrating on extending security into the remaining four provinces through a combination of political means and counterinsurgency operations.

The foundation of our efforts on this track is the progress underway in transferring responsibility to the Iraqi forces. During the past year, the number of Iraqi army and police battalions in the fight against the insurgents increased from a mere handful to 128, with 75 fighting side-by-side with coalition forces and 53 taking the lead in the fight. More than 30 battalions have assumed control of their own areas of responsibility, including about 60% of Baghdad and significant zones in other parts of the country.

Our military efforts are augmented by our political outreach to Sunni Arabs and the good offices of neighboring states. Friends in the UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have given us valuable advice and contacts in our outreach campaign to Sunni Arabs in Iraq. They have helped urge Sunnis to participate in the political process, and they can help encourage them to move from a combination of violence and politics to political approaches alone. We are now engaging regional leaders to take actions that will help delegitimize the idea of resistance.

At the same time, we will press those who oppose the advance of freedom in Iraq to live up to their international obligations. Syria must take actions to prevent Saddamists and terrorists from operating on its territory. In coordination with Iraqi leaders, particularly those with good ties to Tehran, the U.S. will seek to encourage Iranian leaders to see that Iran's interests lie in a stable Iraq in which all political factions and communities have a role. To counter extremists, the U.S. will need to increase engagement in other areas, such as education and the development of civil society in ways that counteract the appeal of extremism and sectarianism and strengthen the allure of moderation and national unity.

Taken together, these actions will affect the attitudes of rejectionists in the insurgency, causing groups either to give up violence or at least to shift to the pursuit of a "talk and fight" strategy. Ultimately, these changes could result in a hollowed out insurgency, leaving only the hard-core Saddamists

and terrorists to be defeated by military means. We hope that Sunni Arab leaders who are participating in the new government will aid this process by calling on insurgents to abandon violence. These leaders cannot have a foot in the insurgency and a foot in the government. They cannot hide behind the slogan of resistance or tolerate a violent movement against the legitimate government.

As the insurgency is neutralized, the police will be the key instrument to deal with terrorists and criminals. For that reason we are calling 2006 the year of the police. Police operating under the rule of law are also vital to the continued stability of the 14 provinces that are not grappling with an insurgency day to day and to preserving an environment conducive to international investment. We are putting more resources into helping Iraq have effective police forces by reviewing the vetting process to avoid infiltration by militias, investing additional resources into the training and equipping program, bringing more than 100 additional trainers and putting more U.S. military advisors to work side-by-side with them.

These new forces -- with their maturing capabilities -- will allow the coalition and the Iraqi government to transfer even more security responsibility to the Iraqis and place new emphasis on population security. At the same time, the coalition and the Iraqi government will continue operations to disrupt concentrations of enemy fighters and the ratline of foreign fighters seeking to infiltrate from neighboring countries.

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A revived economy and infrastructure. After a number of setbacks our reconstruction efforts are moving forward and the economy is growing. Seven in 10 Iraqis say their lives are going well and nearly two-thirds expect things to improve even more in the coming years. We will continue to support Iraq's reconstruction and we also encourage countries of the region to do more to assist the new Iraq economically by forgiving debt and investing in reconstruction. We also expect the international community to live up to its pledges of aid and debt forgiveness to Iraq.

Nonetheless, Iraqis face the difficult challenges of transitioning from a state-dominated economy under Saddam, curbing consumer subsidies that swallow the bulk of Iraq's available capital and ending excessive dependence on the energy sector by reviving other areas such as agriculture. And all of this must be done under difficult security conditions.

Though Iraq's economy is growing, insufficient progress has been made to date in stimulating private-sector economic activity. The U.S. will work with the new Iraqi government, as well as other donors and international financial institutions, to develop a plan to put Iraq's economy on a more positive trajectory.

This will require tough decisions by the Iraqi government to phase out current, ruinous subsidies and create conditions for local entrepreneurs to succeed financially and for foreign investors to invest in Iraq's future. It will also require Iraq's partners to provide some resources -- not just aid but also loans or matching grants -- to make productive capital available through micro-loans, small- and medium-enterprise grants and other vehicles. The measure of success will not be the amount of aid disbursed, but the scale of formation of productive firms that provide sustained employment for Iraqis.

If we can achieve progress in all these areas, 2006 could be a turning point toward fulfilling the president's strategy. With sufficient advances in the democracy, security and reconstruction tracks, the U.S. can start transitioning from a leading to a supporting role in Iraq. This transfer of responsibilities and transition to a secure and capable Iraqi government managing Iraq's affairs is the heart of our strategy for success. Success in Iraq is important for the future of the world. The path for success is clear. Working together with the Iraqis and the international community we can succeed.

Mr. Khalilzad is the U.S. ambassador to Iraq.

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