

Interview on CNN

Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq

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QUESTION: Last night's failure to complete a draft of the constitution has serious consequences, not only for Iraq but for U.S. forces as well. U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, is live from Baghdad now.

Good morning, sir.

AMBASSADOR KHALIZAD: Good morning. How are you?

QUESTION: I'm fine. In your estimation, how big of a setback was this?

AMBASSADOR KHALIZAD: I didn't quite hear it. Can you repeat that, please?

QUESTION: How big of a setback was this?

AMBASSADOR KHALIZAD: Oh, it's a disappointment, not a significant setback. Look, Iraqis are in the middle of a conflict, disagreement among people about the future of the constitution is supposed to bring them together. They set themselves the target of August 15th to produce a draft. They are very close. They run out of time last night and they give themselves an additional week. That was allowed in the law.

You know, we should remember that it took us many years to put our own constitution together and they're in a much more difficult circumstance than we were.

QUESTION: I understand that. But it was just back on August 9th that the Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was telling the American people how very, very important it was to meet this August 15th deadline. Listen:

"It's important that they stay with their timetable. This would be a critical step in persuading the majority of the Iraqis that the new Iraq is worth fighting for, that they have a stake in it."

All right, so how are Iraqis reacting to this in light of what Donald Rumsfeld said?

AMBASSADOR KHALIZAD: Well, you know the Iraqis reacted very positively to it. You

saw and the representatives of the Iraqi people unanimously voted to give the committee one more week. So I don't think the Iraqis --

QUESTION: I mean the Iraqi citizens.

AMBASSADOR KHALIZAD: -- have a problem with what's happened.

QUESTION: I mean the Iraqi citizens.

AMBASSADOR KHALIZAD: Well, the Iraqi citizens are represented by the assembly. We have not done a survey, yet, of the attitude of the Iraqi people. But I suspect they will understand. They will be supportive of the fact that they needed a few more days to work out the difficult, difficult issues that the country is facing and facing with in order to put a constitution together.

QUESTION: But aren't they already a little aggravated with the general assembly?

AMBASSADOR KHALIZAD: Well, I don't know whether they're aggravated with the general assembly or not. I don't know -- the understanding of our own Congress with the American people is also not very -- I don't know whether that's any different than -- in terms of the understanding of the assembly with the people.

But I think people anywhere can understand that, look, when you're putting a constitution together, you're dealing with very big issues, difficult issues. People need to make compromises, come into an agreement with each other, and you have to take the time necessary to make sure.

QUESTION: I totally understand that. I'm just going back to how important that the Bush Administration made this August 15th deadline. And now it seems everybody is sort of downplaying it. Like, oh, this is just democracy at work. Let's listen to Condoleezza Rice:

"We are witnessing democracy at work in Iraq. The new constitution will be the most important document in the history of the new Iraq. We are confident that they will complete this process and continue on the path toward elections for a permanent government at the end of the year."

So there is a certain amount of backtracking here. I mean, isn't everyone, including you, lowering expectations now?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, no. What I have told the American people when I spoke last week to several news outlet is that this is a very important thing to get it right and to get it within the timeframe and that the Iraqis have agreed to produce it. I said they were very close last night, that they needed a few more days. The Iraqi law allows for that and the general assembly approved it. We shouldn't exaggerate its importance

that they need a few more days. It's important that they get it right, that there is as broad a buy-in as possible and that this is right not only in terms of the broad principles but also that it's right in details.

And part of the problem last night was that the draft needed to be looked at very closely in terms of wording, in terms of making sure that things that people wanted included were, in fact, included. The things that were excluded from the various texts were, in fact, excluded. I don't think this is a big deal.

QUESTION: All right. We'll keep following it. Of course, they have seven more days. Thanks so much for joining us this morning. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.

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