Interview by Michael Hirsch of Newsweek

Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq

Washington, DC
October 28, 2005

QUESTION: Well, let's start out with the obvious, which is the vote on the constitution. I guess the results are now in, are they not? What's your reading of them?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: The constitution won by a landslide in terms of popular vote, 78 percent.

QUESTION: Right.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: 63 percent of the people registered to vote voted. And in terms of what would be similar to our electoral vote, it was close because according to the TAL, the law of the land for the constitution, it ratified for the constitution to be rejected -- three provinces had to vote it down by two-thirds. Two did, and so it was therefore close in electoral terms.

The constitution made progress in terms of the changes that the draft went through to become a national compact, which Iraq needs. The three principal communities need to get an agreement on a common roadmap to the future. It made progress with the changes, but I think there is additional opportunities for amendments to be made.

QUESTION: As you know, Mr. Ambassador, observers -- some observers were concerned that the vote might be just like this, that it would pass but pass narrowly, particularly, you know, with a large Sunni vote against, and that would only exacerbate the sectarian tendencies. How much are you concerned about that yourself and what do you plan to do about it?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, of course, it did pass with a significant Sunni vote against it. I think the majority of the Sunnis voted against the constitution; that’s a fact. But I am hopeful that it will not lead to exasperation of sectarian eyes because of the last-minute agreement that we made before the vote on ratification, which is that it allows for a one-time set of amendments, a package of amendments, to be made during the first six months of the next assembly. And I think that will ‘incentivize’ Sunnis to participate in the assembly and that will be a good thing in itself, but I think also there will have to be additional changes made that from (inaudible) to make the document more appealing to more Sunnis.

I think the last-minute changes that we made perhaps didn't -- there was not enough time that -- for all the people in the Sunni areas to get the information. So my view is that yes, the majority of Sunnis voted against. There is a potential for the problem that you alluded to, but I am hopeful that because of this amendment that not only the normal amendment procedure but this particular amendment procedure, we will have broader support. Remember, our own Constitution, I think, is relevant here that, you know, the Constitutional Conventional came with a draft, then it took the Bill of Rights to make it broadly acceptable. So I am hoping that out of the assembly will come a bill, a set of bill of assurances that will make the draft more appealing.

QUESTION: Is that what you're calling it? Is that actually --

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: No, I just made it up. (Laughter.) Because there is -- the Sunnis have been -- you will take this in pieces of this, so that you understand my thinking, is that the Sunnis, some of them are driven by nostalgia, which is to go back to what they would regard as the good old days.

QUESTION: Right.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: And a lot of them are driven by fear that they will be marginalized and they will be discriminated against. I think everything reasonable needs to be done to deal with their fears, but the Sunnis, in turn, have to adjust that the old system is dead; it's not coming back.

QUESTION: Nonetheless, there are very powerful sectarian tendencies at play, and particularly the electoral politics leading up to December, I mean, this latest report, the three Shiite religious parties are going to form an alliance.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Yes.

QUESTION: This goes right to some of the deepest fears of secularists and Sunnis that, you know, what you're going to have is a Shiite-dominated religious-type state. You know, is there any way you can deal with that, deal with those concerns?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: There is no question that a, if not the, principal fault line in Iraqi politics or Iraqi society is this sectarian divide and the polarization along sectarian lines. And some of the key parties are purely from one sect, and that's not a good thing. And we have encouraged cross-sectarian bridge-building, meetings of leaders across sectarian lines, encouraging leaders of parties to reach out beyond their own sect in terms of the membership. And there are cross-sectarian political parties, too, that are moderate and secular as well.

And the reasons for it, as to why I think it turned out this way is clear. It had to do with the policies of the previous regime. It had to do with the opposition politics during the Saddam period because the opposition was largely Kurdish and Shia. But this needs to

be mended for Iraq to work, and it will take time, in my view, to do it but it must be done if -- otherwise, I think achieving the goal of a united Iraq that works for all communities will become a bigger challenge.

QUESTION: Could you draw on your experience a little bit in Afghanistan or comment on this because I'm sure you're doing -- practically in dealing with it, I mean. In Afghanistan, obviously you -- one was able to find a unifying leader in Hamid Karzai. He had the prestige and the presence.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Sure.

QUESTION: It seems as if it's been impossible to find someone similar. And I know many U.S. officials have said it's critical that in December there be a stronger leader produced, a more, let's say, universally accepted leader than the current prime minister. Could you talk about that challenge a little bit (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: I think that the fact that Afghanistan had a charismatic leader broadly accepted in Hamid Karzai was a huge asset for Afghanistan, and the fact that Iraq did not have such a figure or such a figure was not identified has been a problem. But I'm not looking back because one could raise questions about various things that were done or were not done. I think a Hamid Karzai-type figure could have been identified early on, could have been identified, because, you know, when there is a role, you can find -- usually a person can be found to fill it. But that was, you know -- in Afghanistan we immediately went to an Afghan Interim Government formation. Here we had a period of CPA and --

QUESTION: So you think that was done wrong?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that just the history is different. And I don't want to get into what was done or not done because I wasn't responsible for Iraq at that time, so -- and the complexity of the situation may not be entirely clear to me.

But going forward, I believe that Iraqi -- the constitution called for a presidency and a government led by a prime minister. Iraq will need an effective prime minister. Iraq will need effective ministers to deal with the serious problems that Iraq faces, and the capacity of the ministries have to increase. The capacity of the local government has to increase. We face this challenge in Afghanistan, too, and we worked at it by recruiting capable ministers even from Afghan-Americans or Afghan-Europeans, bringing advisors, training. And but in Iraq, there are lots more educated people than was the case in Afghanistan. The pool of talent is broader. Iraq has more resources than Afghanistan did. So it has a better prospect to make a huge leap in the short term if the country can get its act together politically and follow good, helpful policies, and of course, also to deal with the security situation.

QUESTION: I mean, on this topic we can deal both with the past and the future --

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Right.

QUESTION: Because, obviously, one of the people that some in the Pentagon thought should have been head of the government very quickly was Ahmed Chalabi. Interestingly enough, Mr. Chalabi is now one of the leading contenders as we head into the December elections. Is he -- you know, when you've talked about the possibility of finding a Hamid Karzai-like figure, was he what you had in mind? And you think, you know, he has a chance to be prime minister?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, Mr. Chalabi is one of several candidates that -- who are running for office and there is Mr. Allawi as well, and then there is Mr. Mahdi (ph), Adel Mahdi (ph). There's the current prime minister, Jaafari. So there are quite a few candidates.

QUESTION: The first few you mentioned, are they considered to be the leading contenders for prime ministership?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Some would characterize them as one or the other as to be more leading, or two or three to be more leading, or other. I think they're all in the run for prime minister and there may be some others that we, you know, will learn about after the election. So we want to make sure that there is a transparent, credible election process and every -- a level playing field and that, you know, whoever campaigns well, whoever offers a good message, whoever can -- whose record and his program can be credible would win and form the next government.

QUESTION: I don't mean to harp on this, but I'm just curious about when you said that a Hamid Karzai-figure could have been found early on because many of us can't even imagine who that would be. Did you have Chalabi in mind? Is there a particular person that you had in mind?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: No, I was talking philosophically rather than specifically. Because I believe if we look back to Bonn -- and I was there representing the United States when we put the Afghan Government together, interim government with the UN -- the UN was there -- I wonder how many people would have known who Hamid Karzai was.

QUESTION: Right.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: And you know, I don't think very many people in the United States, or in the world, or perhaps even in parts of Afghanistan did not know who he was. So I think that --

QUESTION: Given the, you know, very tough history with Chalabi, I mean, if he did become the prime minister, you know, would we -- would the United States be able to work with him? How would that relationship be? I mean, there was a very rocky road behind this.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, of course, there has been a rocky road behind this. That's a fact. But the decision for Chalabi to be -- or anyone else to be prime minister will be -- is an Iraqi decision. The Iraqis will decide that. And we will work with whomever the Iraqis decide to be their leader. We have a lot at stake in Iraq. A lot of American blood and treasure has been expended. The outcome of the struggle for Iraq is extremely important. It's not only Iraq; it's, in fact, for the entire region. So we have to -- we will work with whoever is elected.

QUESTION: I just want to talk about the Sunni insurgency, because you have really focused on this. You've made a lot of comments on this. It seemed that the strategy of trying to split the Iraqi Sunnis who might be someone we -- people we can negotiate from the extremists, particularly the Zarqawi types, has been central to --

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Right. Absolutely.

QUESTION: You're (inaudible), right? I mean, you've made -- can you talk a little bit about how that's going? What specific Sunni insurgent groups are you hopeful about (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: My philosophy is that we need to isolate two groups from the rest, and the two groups that need to be isolated is the Zarqawi and the jihadists -- some foreign, some Iraqi -- that have come to the (inaudible). And the second is the Saddamists and those who want Saddam and Saddamism to come back. And as far as the rest is concerned, we would like of the Sunni population and groups is concerned, our effort has been aimed at winning them over to participate in the political process, dealing with their concerns. And because only by this approach can we make significant progress against the insurgency in addition to using the right military tactics and approach. And I have been very active with the Sunni Arabs reaching out to them.

QUESTION: On the tribal level?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Across the board. Tribes, yes. Political leaders and the non-tribal political leaders, yes. Academics, professionals, yes. Some former government officials, yes, who were not criminals. You name it. And I would also try to get the help of (inaudible) some of the regional governments who have contacts with the Iraqis.

QUESTION: What particular successes might you point to now in terms of recent (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, we can point out to several things. One is that you got some key Sunnis supporting the constitution. Second, many more than even those who advocated support for a constitution supporting political participation, because my strategy to win them over to politics, that the way to get what you want is through political process, not military. The military thing is a dead end street that's going to work against your community. In fact, I argue with them that a protracted insurgency will have a devastating effect on the Sunni community, because it takes place in their area. Your educated people run away. Your wealthy people run away. Education becomes difficult in your area. The construction doesn't take place. And you know, your rivals benefit from your absence of participation and that there is a better way, and we are willing to work with you to deal with the (inaudible) -- and so and more political (inaudible).

Three, we have some tribes coming forward like Abu Mahal, and I could name more, that are now saying they will fight against Zarqawi.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) are the other tribes?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: I'm giving you Abu Mahal is one, but there is the (inaudible), and so on. I could, you know, I --

QUESTION: How many?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: We are making -- you know, there is lots of contacts. Some of them may not want me to even name them because we don't want -- and then we have even some of the former Baathists now standing up supporting the constitution and, as you saw, there was an element of a change in the last version -- a package that said being a member of Baath was not a crime in itself, which was the way to open with them. So there is a real -- what is happening for the first time maybe since liberation of Iraq, a real struggle going on for the Sunni community between those who want to participate in the process, and we are working with those, and those who want to have a protracted insurgency.

QUESTION: Interestingly, you know, some people, some observers say that your strategy is exactly right. The only problem is that you're at least a year too late in coming in, that you were brought in a year too late because you had to reverse the policies of Mr. Bremer and others who did not indeed work on the tribal and other levels of -- is that an accurate --

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, I don't want to look back. I told you, I don't want to comment on Mr. Bremer and what he did or what he didn't do. That's not a fruitful exercise.

But it's very important in my view that -- two things. One, it's important to engage politically and to communicate to people our goals. Our goal is not to rule Iraq. Our goal is not to have permanent bases in Iraq. Our goal is not to take over Iraqi oil or rather,

Iraqi patrimony, no. Our goal is an Iraq that works for -- that Iraq can only work if all communities are there and to be empathetic to people's concerns and fears and to deal with them, to work with them.

And second, it's very important that there is a balance between our various instruments because we have military, political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, but particularly military and political. And that if the only instrument you have is a hammer, soon everything looks like a nail. And I believe, if I could say one thing, and that is that we are rebalancing a bit the instruments, or the orchestration, or the bringing together of our instruments, increasing political and hopefully, if we make progress, decreasing the military and shifting the relative balance between those.

QUESTION: Do we have time for two more questions?

STAFF: Yes.

QUESTION: You have a very interesting and, I would say, an understated history with the American government. You were one of the principal drafters - if not the principal drafter - of the 1992 defense policy guidance, which was really, as Paul Wolfowitz and others have said, you know, kind of the opening shot fired in this whole concept of the post Cold War American power and how it should be used.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Right.

QUESTION: Here you are, you know, 13 years later, dealing really down in the weeds with the limits of American power, with a political process that we really don't have a lot of control over. Could you just reflect on that a little bit? I mean, have you learned anything about American power during that period when, you know, you were sort of the grand Olympian phase to now?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: During that phase, of course, what we were doing -- my task as the head of the policy planning shop at the Pentagon was that we had an architecture, a grand strategy, for the Cold War period and the Cold War period was gone, of course, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. And what was going to be our grand strategy for this new era, you know? And the concept that we came up with was that our aim in this new era should be to preclude a return to a situation of bipolarity, another Cold War, or multi-polarity which preceded the bipolar world of -- you know, in the 19th century. You had a multi-polar system, several powers competing with each other, but -- and then two powers competing. And now our goal was to avoid the domination of critical regions by hostile powers and the first instance that that would lead then to a bipolar or multi-polar arrangement, so that we needed to focus much more on stabilizing regions working with partners, and to maintain a consolidated new order that emerged, and that, you know, one needs to expand the zone of democracy, peace, and prosperity, because what we have done in the course of the Cold War was not only defeat the Soviet Union but we had also transformed Europe and Asia by making them

part of what North America was -- prosperous, democratic, and peaceful -- and that we needed to expand that selectively that zone using our resources in a careful way because from the absence of this order will arise new security challenges.

In the case of Iraq, what I think you are seeing can be linked to one of the key concepts of that era, of that strategy, which was that to preclude the domination of critical regions by a hostile power. WMD was a critical thing, terrorism was a critical thing, and what we're doing is that in the current situation, which we could not have anticipated entirely but was consistent with the concept that the Middle East has emerged as the region to stabilize and focus on, and that happened because of the September 11th [2001] attack. And we are now being tested in a very frontal way whether we can do this -- the stabilization of a critical region that's facing significant challenges. Could American, not only military power, but American diplomacy, American, you know, economic approaches, can it be helpful to the transformation of this area?

QUESTION: That’s what's interesting -- you are, are you not, running up against the limits of American power in some ways? I mean, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, with all the difficulties you yourself have had to deal with, you know --

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: There is no question that there is a limit to American power. One needs to use that power selectively, not over-extend oneself, and not to also believe that we can do everything ourselves and without assistance from others and the local -- or the local --

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Absolutely.

QUESTION: Have you found this sobering, yourself? (Inaudible) changing your views?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: I've always believed, you know, in Afghanistan, for example, that you needed to work with the local leaders. You need to identify in the local community after liberation the local population what is it that drives them, what is it that drives them, what is their aspiration, what is it that they want, and to align the United States with those aspirations. And I believe very strongly to my core that fundamentally people want the same things; that they want to be able to look after their kids. They want to have security; that they want to be able to select their own leaders and they want to be not ruled by somebody else, including the Americans. They don't want to be ruled by a foreigner.

And the question is how do we find credible leaders that work for those goals, which is what ordinary people want, and then align ourselves with them, and also make sure that the neighbors and the broader international community cooperates with you to the maximum extent possible. And I worked very well with the UN, for example, when I was in Afghanistan. I worked with the UN people and I worked very well with the neighbors.

But at the same time you have to be clear pointing out neighbors that misbehave, and how they are.

QUESTION: Okay, final question. What do you say to a mother and father of a soldier, an American soldier, who died in Iraq or Afghanistan, but particularly Iraq, about what -- you know, why their child was sacrificed?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, I feel very bad about the loss of the soldiers, you know, because as Ambassador to a country, perhaps more than if you were in Washington and, you know, those in the White House and the State Department, and Pentagon (inaudible). You feel a specific responsibility for Americans who are there because you have a responsibility for their welfare and well-being. So I feel that and I -- you know, I participate in a lot of ceremonies for dead Americans that (inaudible). And so it's just the price has been extremely high for the United States. I believe that given that we need to be extremely careful about the use of our military forces, that it has to be use of force even in the context of state building has to be very tailored, very selective, a last resort not only in an international context but in the domestic or internal state and nation building that we're doing; and that we have to rely on other instruments as much as we can and so that the American people would know that, you know, every effort that is being made to make sure our people's lives are not being put at risk.

But in a broader context -- that's sort of at the local level -- I believe that the challenge of global terror right now is the defining challenge of our time, as Cold War was for the previous era, as you know, dealing with fascism and so on for an earlier era. And we didn't go looking for this problem. This problem had come looking for us. And we need to have a -- do what we did in Europe, help not necessarily only by military means, certainly not only by military means. But in the longer-term transformation of the broader Middle East, that success in Afghanistan and Iraq are important -- vital, in fact -- steps in this necessary transformation challenge that is confronting us right now.

And you know, whatever you think of the circumstances that led us to Iraq -- but now that we are there the struggle has been kind of -- has been joined, and it is a struggle that's not only for Iraq but it's for the entire region. You can see the involvement of Iran, the involvement of Syria, and the al-Qaida network, other forces at work have -- failure is not an option in Iraq.

QUESTION: No, no. Are you concerned at all? I know you've got to go. Are you concerned at all about the whole history of the Iraq War being replayed in this Fitzgerald Investigation?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: I am concerned about the crisis of confidence that I see when I come here about whether we know what we're doing there, will we succeed, and people who are struggling against us in Iraq or hoping that there will be a change in the public opinion and they see this is a center of gravity. And I see my responsibility as well as military leaders, General Casey and others, to make sure we have a plan that we

have confidence in that we can explain to the American people and that we know what we're doing and that we have a roadmap that can produce results. And because I do believe that not only there is, of course, a struggle going on for Iraq and for the region, but also there is a struggle going on for the American public opinion, and the two things are very much alike.

QUESTION: I know you have to go.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you.

2005/1000

Released on October 31, 2005