



The Rebirth of Iraq

Remarks of Howar Ziad, Ambassador of Iraq to Canada, to the Fraser Institute, Montreal, Quebec, Thursday, September 18, 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen, please allow me to begin my remarks by first thanking the Fraser Institute for the kind invitation again and giving me the opportunity to meet with you all tonight. In particular, I express my deep gratitude to Ms. Tasha Kheiriddin, Director for Quebec and Mr. Sébastien Côté, Manager for Events and Development for organizing this event.

I have become very fond of Canada and Canadians since I had the privilege to be the first official envoy of the first democratically elected government in Iraq's history to this flourishing Canadian federation, which is a model of pluralist democracy and cultural accommodation. I am following your election campaign with keen interest and admiration. Though you might not see it in such elevated terms, for a visitor from the Middle East it is a considerable privilege to see a real democracy in action. In our nascent democracy in Iraq, we cannot claim that we have reached your level of democratic governance, but we have taken some serious steps and crossed critical milestones in our quest toward a democratic and accountable system of governance. One novelty, we have introduced is that in Iraq we do not know the results of elections before actually conducting them, which has been the norm in the Islamic Middle East!

Foreign policy is often described as an activity similar to gardening or gliding. Formulating foreign policy and implementing it by the Iraq government in the aftermath of the toppling of the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 has been tough, complex and critical. To carry the metaphor further, carrying out the new diplomacy has been conducted in an environment where the garden was full of mines and the gliding was done often under tornado conditions.

Before talking about the priorities of Iraq's new foreign policy, it's worth reminding ourselves of the nature of the regime prior to 2003. Iraq was a failed state, a country occupied by a foreign ideology, the fascist idea of Ba'athism, a country in which the regime was at war with the people, a regime that was at war with its neighbours and the world, a regime that had isolated Iraq and brought on itself international sanctions, a regime guilty of aggression, genocide and terrorism, a regime in flagrant non-compliance with its international obligations. Iraq was governed by a genocidal dictatorship. It was, as has been remarked, a cemetery below ground and a concentration camp above. Hundreds of mass graves have been discovered as have numerous appalling places of torture and abuse.

Nobody in Iraq doubts the depth of the challenge ahead of us as we emerge from this bloody and failed past. The stakes are high. The remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime, accompanied by al-Qaeda foreign terrorists, are fighting hard to prevent the emergence of a new Iraq. They are a minority, the disgruntled remains of an odious regime that practiced genocide and internal colonization with shocking casualness. They must not win. At best, they would return Iraq to the "stability" of the mass grave; more likely, they would usher in a return to the dark ages of dictatorship, made worse by their lust for vengeance and their crazed belief in the value of terrorism.

It is no surprise, therefore, that within such a context that the road to a rights-based democracy has been daunting. The first task of the democratically-elected government has been, to use Michael Oakshott's phrase, of 'attending to arrangement of society' in the new Iraq. Despite the challenges, and the relentless terrorist attacks, progress that has been made is remarkable. Governments have changed peacefully. Dozens of political parties have been formed. Governments have been created on the basis of democratic election, governments that can legitimately claim to represent the vast majority of Iraqis. Negotiation, compromise and deliberation, not coups and conspiracies, are the characteristics of contemporary Iraqi politics. Iraq has a constitution agreed by a process of negotiation and adopted through a democratic referendum.

The 2005 constitution seeks to establish a rights-based democratic federation, based on the twin principles of shared-rule and self-rule. It aims at a federal government that is inclusive of Iraq's diversity.

The gradual reconstruction and rehabilitation of Iraq is moving forward. Building links with members of the international community, such as Canada, a country with an exceptional record of contributing to international peace, is a vital part of the foreign policy of the new Iraq as it seeks to throw off the legacy of decades of oppression and totalitarian rule.

Iraq's fiscal position has improved considerably. The IMF estimates that the economy will expand significantly from the previous year's lows as long as the security situation allows for higher oil production and investment. It forecasts higher oil production, higher gross domestic product growth of over 7 percent (from 1.3 per cent in 2007), enabling Iraq to fulfill its major investment plan in the oil and non-oil sectors. Meanwhile, annual consumer price inflation is targeted to decline to 12 percent this year. Rising oil export prices has boosted international reserves to over \$40 billion and this year's budget is estimated to be more than \$80 billion. We are now paying most of our reconstruction and security costs.

The renewal of Iraq as a state is more often than not seen in economic and political terms, but it is also diplomatic. For decades, thanks to the Ba'athist regime, Iraq was an international pariah, regarded as a lucrative market and an occasionally useful tool in the cynical *realpolitik* games of other powers. Iraq's vast oil resources certainly created wealth, for arms dealers and the corrupt minority that held sway over the rest of the country.

A new Iraq, therefore, requires a new diplomacy, one based on the same principles of international law, peace and simple human decency that have always been the hallmark of an ethical and constructive foreign policy. As our foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, has repeatedly said, Iraq will no longer be a haven for, or a sponsor of, terrorism. Iraq will not resort to force to settle international disputes, and its embassies will no longer hunt down Iraqi dissidents. Today, Iraq is fighting both domestic and global terrorism, and is talking to its neighbours as a sovereign equal.

The new Iraq seeks genuine partners, friends that can provide advice as much as assistance. We need to build a civil society based on peaceful compromise and the ability of citizens to make free choices within a democratic and federal state. Our constitution includes the charter of rights that incorporates essential elements of human rights, peaceful development, tolerance for differences in religion, and gender equality.

Our foreign policy aims to promote the emergence of an independent, stable, federal and democratic Iraq, at peace with its neighbours, and participating fully in regional and international affairs, including the global economy. We now have extensive diplomatic representation abroad and over 55 foreign missions in Baghdad. Foreign companies are showing serious interest in the Iraqi economy, and many international firms, including Canadian enterprises, are doing business in Iraq.

Our main foreign policy priority is defending our democracy against terrorists and armed extremists. This is part of the broader global international struggle against terrorism that is a UN Security Council obligation on all states thanks to UNSCR 1373/2001.

Our key partner in this effort is the United States. There are some who seek to create divisions between Iraqis and Americans, to claim that somehow Iraqis are ungrateful for all that the Americans have done. This is nonsense. Ours is an open alliance, in which we agree and debate. Iraqis and Americans have fought together and died together for over five years. Our alliance has grown through that joint sacrifice that has spawned thousands of bonds of friendship between our two peoples.

The decision of the United States to “surge” additional troops into Iraq in 2007 just when the situation was being deemed hopeless by many supposed “experts” has proven to be a critical element in our current success. Without this American willingness to stand with Iraq in its most difficult moments, it is doubtful that we would be enjoying the current security gains. It was the terrorist bombings and destruction of the Askaria shrine in Samarra in 2006, which led to a downward spiral as violence spread.

The surge under the command of General Petraeus managed to reverse this dangerous trend. The focus was to help Iraqi citizens cope with terrorist threats and intimidations. The growing competence and capacity of Iraq security forces, the decision of many ordinary Iraqi citizens to join the fight against Al Qaeda and the splintering of extremist illegal armed elements were critical factors in making Iraq a remarkably safer place than it was a year ago. We need the tangible results of the surge to be durable and self-sustaining in order to safely shepherd Iraq into viability.

Complementary to this policy, and as part of a broader effort to improve regional stability, we seek to end the predatory policies of some of our neighbours and end their interference in Iraq’s domestic affairs. The regional landscape is hostile to us. Many would like to see Iraq fail, even if it means more trouble on their own doorstep. There are those who seek to keep Iraq weak enough for their own purposes, but not so weak that it affects them, a dangerous game in which the arsonist seeks to calibrate the inferno. There are states that denounce terrorism at home, but export suicide bombers to Iraq with the same gusto that they pump oil out of the ground.

Our foreign policy seeks not only to encourage our neighbours to take a more rational and humane approach, it also seeks to foster improved intercommunal relations, for these cut across borders. Our government is supported by members of both major strands of Islam and the best Iraqi leaders are those who shun sectarian hatred. Contrast the moderate stance of such men as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani with some of the clerics that you see elsewhere in the Middle East. Iraq leads by example.

As part of our regional policy we have been, with UN assistance, promoting an international compact that will provide economic and security support for Iraq over the medium-term. Some of our creditors, such as the United States, Canada, France, Russia, United Arab Emirates and Japan have been immensely generous. Others are lagging in their attitude, but we are convinced that we can reach a satisfactory arrangement with them.

During the first annual review of the International Compact with Iraq in May this year at UPPLANDS VASBY, Sweden, a five-year plan that outlined help for Iraq — including debt relief. At the conference, Prime Minister Maliki called on neighboring countries to forgive debt and compensation payments, saying they were hindering Iraq's recovery, despite a reduction in violence. Iraq's position is that it should not be obligated to repay obligations incurred under the odious Baathist dictatorship, which denied basic rights to its citizens, including any say over government policy.

The UN role in this process is important, for both Iraq and the UN. Iraqis are understandably wary of the UN given the shameful corruption of the UN Oil for Food program and the UN's failure to support even the most basic human rights of the Iraqi people. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is making a genuine effort to move his institution towards being a friend of Iraq. His efforts, and his visits to Baghdad, are greatly appreciated. He is a friend of democracy and freedom. I wish him well in his efforts to clean up the United Nations bureaucracy.

How then should Canadian companies react to the important changes in Iraq? My view is that Iraq is an important opportunity that you should not miss. I fully understand continuing concerns about security and some of the continuing logistical difficulties involved in doing business in Iraq. Nonetheless, it would be a shame if Canadian firms were to miss out on this important market and all that it promises. The best strategy is for foreign companies to enter the safe, quiet zones of Iraq that have been largely untouched by recent conflict. After establishing their presence there, these companies can then start to expand their operations in other parts of Iraq.

Thank you for your kind attention.