Iraqis Take Charge

A Congressional Progress Report on the June 30 Transfer of Sovereignty

"It's our country, and we now need to make it work." -- Statement by an Iraqi Leader

From left to right: Congressmen Joe Wilson of South Carolina, Mike Rogers of Michigan, Jon Porter of Nevada, Peter Hoekstra of Michigan and Adam Putnam of Florida meet with interim Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawer.

Congressmen Peter Hoekstra, Mike Rogers (MI), Joe Wilson, Jon Porter and Adam Putnam participated in a Congressional delegation to Baghdad over Father's Day weekend to meet with the Iraqi officials who will accept control for the new Iraq on June 30. The following are the results and findings of their oversight mission:

Progress in Iraq needs to be measured against the conditions left by Saddam Hussein's regime. He destroyed Iraq's infrastructure and looted its treasury. Judicial systems, effective and honest law enforcement, transparent government agencies and a free press did not exist when Hussein was in power. Major decision-making was centralized in Baghdad. Personal and local initiative was smothered. This is the environment coalition forces uncovered in the aftermath of Iraq's liberation.

As is the case in Afghanistan, the base from which Iraq is beginning to rebuild is very low. It possessed very few elements of a free society, and most Iraqis have never experienced life in any other such environment. They lived under a brutal and corrupt regime for more than 30 years.

Creating a civil society from this starting point is difficult, and the ability to transfer authority to a new sovereign nation only 14 months after liberation is a major step forward.

Sovereignty on June 30 is Real

Iraq's movement toward sovereignty on June 30 is significant and real. As we met with various individual Iraqis, they all indicated a desire to accept responsibility for control of their country's future. Police trainees wanted to take ownership of their local communities' security. Military trainees were anxious to tackle insurgents attacking Iraqi civilians. The leadership of the interim Iraqi government was eager to take the reigns of government. Coalition forces arrived as liberators 14 months ago, and on June 30 Iraqis will finally take ownership of their future. The Coalition Provisional Authority will be disbanded, and Iraqis will formally assume responsibility for all government functions. On July 1, CPA Administrator Paul Bremer will return to the United States, Ambassador John Negroponte will present his credentials to the Iraqi government and the U.S. embassy will open. This is remarkable progress.

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Moving from 'Us and Them' to 'We'

The transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi people will change the dynamics of building a new Iraq. It has always been expected that the summer of 2004 would be very difficult for whomever was in control of Iraq. Saddam loyalists, religious extremists, criminals Saddam released from prison just prior to Iraq's liberation and outside terrorists have always intended to make Iraq their battleground this summer. These groups are not just against the United States. They are against the success of a new Iraqi government for various reasons. Some want a Muslim theocracy. Criminals would rather have no functioning government so that they can thrive. Others desire Saddam's return to power so that loyalists can regain their former stature.

Now the effort to fight and neutralize these groups will be led by those who will be most affected by the outcome: the Iraqi people themselves. Nobody believes that this will be easy or that the transfer of sovereignty will mark the end of coalition efforts in Iraq. It is another step toward a free and stable country, just as transitioning the ministries to Iraqi control were steps toward a solution and not the solution itself. However, putting an Iraqi face on the government is a powerful signal and an essential change in substance.

Iraqis are willingly and knowingly accepting responsibility for their future. Members of our delegation who had been to Iraq previously have noticed a distinct change in the language

The Congressional delegation meets with Iraqi police recruits.

of the Iraqis with whom we spoke on this visit. No longer did they refer to "us" and "them" and what we were doing in Iraq that might be positive or negative. They now talk about "we."

The signs of sovereign ownership are real and tangible. We met with a Baghdad councilman in a hospital. In the last few months his son lost his hand because of an explosive device planted by insurgents at his home, his brother had been killed and now he had been attacked and injured. He was concerned about his son's future, but he was still committed to the new Iraq despite these dangers.

Likewise military and police cadets are signing up knowing full well that they will be targets when they enter service. Just this week a councilman in Tikrit was killed for helping to rebuild his country.

We all know it will be difficult, and nobody underestimates the job ahead, but there are many examples of Iraqis stepping up and willing to carry responsibility. They recognize that their actions on behalf of a new Iraq may well cost them their lives. In a country in which individual freedom and initiative have been suppressed for more than 30 years, these are powerful statements of individual and collective commitment that should not be ignored.

A New Iraq, a Dynamic New Relationship

A new Iraq will also mean a new relationship with the United States and the international community. The new Iraqi leadership has already become a powerful voice to the Iraqi people and the rest of the world in defining the relationship between Iraq and the United States.

While our delegation saw the anecdotal signs of Iraqi support by their waving as we passed by, a front page story in the *Jordan Times* highlighting interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's support for the coalition attack on an Al Qaeda site in Fallujah was significantly important. It was no longer a coalition military strike against insurgents; it was a coalition effort that was supported by the Iraqi government as part of the process of building a secure country. Prime Minister Allawi has also formally requested NATO assistance. NATO must now consider a request from a sovereign Iraq for assistance, not a request from the United States or the coalition. This is real change.

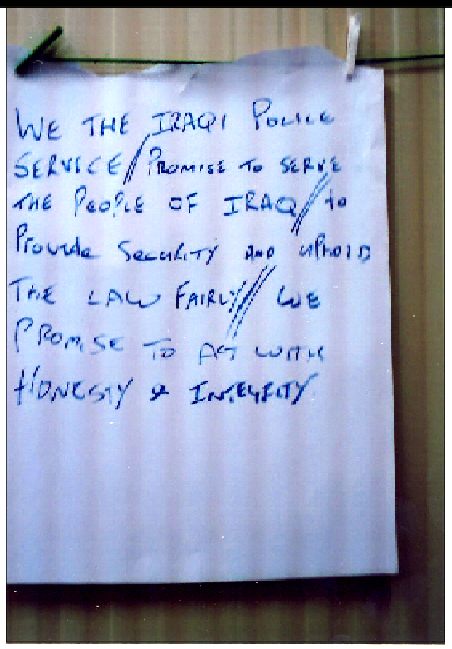
The genuine expression of thanks from the new government leaders for the liberation of Iraq from the tyranny of Saddam also sends a message to the people of Iraq and the United States. Their statements followed on the heels of the recent address from Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai to a joint session of Congress. The 50 million people of Iraq and Afghanistan appreciate the leadership and sacrifices made by coalition troops and citizens.

Congressman Jon Porter of Nevada delivered a statement from House Speaker Hastert to interim Iraqi President Sheik Ghazi al-Yawer highlighting the sacrifices both countries have made in the quest for a new Iraq. The shared sacrifices create a strong bond between our countries.

Committed to Finishing the Mission

The United States is leading a global war on terror. Young men and women in the Armed Services are at the tip of the spear. We met those who are fighting and those who have been wounded. They recognize the success they are having and the significant work that still needs to be accomplished. The reality of Iraqi sovereignty is a major step forward in this effort. However, it is not the last step. The Iraqi people know that and so should we.

Coalition countries and their forces must be committed to finishing the job in Iraq. Either it will evolve into a new and free country or devolve into anarchy and a haven for terrorist organizations. The international community needs to invest in ensuring the success of the new government. The Iraqi leaders we met consistently expressed their desire for the United States to remain in Iraq and support their efforts to rebuild their country. They need U.S. assistance and the assistance from the world community. They are willing to do their part and to lead the effort, but they need the help of others.



This banner hangs from a wall of the Iraqi police academy in Baghdad.

Of significant importance, the Arab press has taken a much more supportive position on the war on terror and the need to fight it. Successes are now highlighted. For example, the *Jordan Times* front page headlines and stories on June 21 included:

- Allawi defends U.S. strike
- Algeria – Army kills Salafist group leader (Salafist is the Algerian branch of Al Qaeda)
- Al Qaeda – Repent or die (story about Saudi efforts to combat terrorism and Al Qaeda)

However, there is still much that needs to be accomplished before this transition is complete.

The battles will continue to be fought across the globe. Today the focus is on Iraq and Afghanistan -- where we are continuing to make progress -- but it is a worldwide war with many faces on many different fronts.

Recently terrorists brutally murdered a U.S. citizen in Saudi Arabia, planned attacks intended to kill tens of thousands in Jordan, exploded car bombs in Iraq and began the development of tactical chemical weapons for use in Iraq.

Their intentions to attack the United States and its allies remain clear today. We have experienced their brutal attacks for nearly 14 years. We must continue to demonstrate our commitment and resolve to eliminate their threats to civil societies throughout the world.

Members of the delegation meet with interim Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and Paul Bremer, Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority.

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