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Women In The New Iraq

As published in the Washington Post by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Sunday, February 1, 2004.

My second trip to Iraq since the liberation of Baghdad grabbed some headlines because of a rocket attack on our hotel. But a visit to a new women's center in the city of Hillah said more about Iraq's future than did that act of violence.

A predominantly Shiite town known as the site of one of Iraq's largest mass graves, where as many as 15,000 may have been killed, Hillah is also the location of something very hopeful, the Al Hillah Women's Center -- a center to advance the cause of women's rights.

The women I met with were proud of their center. One young woman wearing a conservative Muslim head covering pressed me forcefully about what the United States was doing to support women's rights. In return, I asked if she saw any contradiction between her conservative dress and her advocacy of women's rights. With evident conviction, she said, "There is no inconsistency between my practice of my religion and human rights and rights for women."

In such words we find the hope of a new Iraq.

And in people like Rajaa Khuzai, a 57-year-old mother of seven and one of three women on the Iraq Governing Council. In 1991, when Saddam Hussein sent Republican Guards to put down a rebellion in her town of Diwaniya, Khuzai was the only doctor left functioning in her hospital. An obstetrician, she remembers performing more than 20 Caesareans working alone by candlelight.

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Today Khuzai remains undaunted by the challenges of helping give birth to freedom in a country that was abused for more than three decades by a regime of murderers and torturers. A few weeks ago a delegation of Iraqi women, led by Khuzai, visited the Pentagon -- there were doctors, engineers and teachers, Sunnis, Shiites and Chaldean/Assyrians, Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds. Khuzai has described her group as symbolic of the new "one-nation" Iraq. Some spoke about problems, others about the progress already made. What they had in common is that they are all working for a free and peaceful Iraq where they will have an equal voice.

The delegation told us that if Iraq is to become a democracy, women must have an equal role and more women should be included in Iraqi governing bodies and ministries. They pointed out that only three of the 25 members of the Iraqi Governing Council are women. They expressed the need to have women more directly involved in drafting the Iraqi constitution. They are concerned that if women are not involved, women will not be guaranteed equality under the law. They wanted Americans to know that Iraqis are grateful to be liberated from Hussein. And they also pointed out that we are now engaged with Iraqis in seeking a far greater prize: a chance for lasting change in the region that will help make our country and the world safer.

History offers many examples of democratic principles at work in nations once dismissed by skeptics as unfit for democracy. Representative government, once thought impossible in Eastern Europe, is taking hold, though slowly in some places. In a country where only a few years ago women were brutalized and shunted from public view, Afghans recently adopted a constitution that establishes equal rights for men and women.

Democracy, they once said, was impossible in most of East Asia. Only 20 years ago, when I became assistant secretary of state for East Asia, people said that Koreans had no experience of democracy and would be incapable of it. Or that the Philippines could never do better than the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. The Confucian culture of East Asia was said to be antithetical to democracy. Yet, in the past 20 years, not only South Korea and the Philippines but Taiwan, Thailand and Indonesia have joined the democratic ranks. While each of these Asian democracies still faces challenges, each has made substantial progress.

In the end, it will be up to Iraqis to fashion a democracy that suits their circumstances. One of the critical tests of an Iraqi democracy will be whether it empowers women to enjoy the benefits of freedom and prosperity without sacrificing their religious faith. This is an issue that concerns everyone, not only women. A government that does not respect the rights of half its citizens cannot be trusted to safeguard the rights of any.

For that reason, the United States is giving special emphasis to helping Iraqi women achieve greater equality and has allocated \$27 million for women's programs. Education for women is one of the

highest priorities, and the United States has committed more than \$86.8 million to education projects, with special emphasis on ensuring that girls are registered and attending school. Another effort is focused on legal reform. Substantial funding is also going to help women's groups throughout the country, including the center in Hillah. There are now 10 women's centers throughout the country and eight more are in the works. And with U.S. support, Iraqi women are being trained for the first time to serve as police officers, prison guards and security officers.

These efforts are strongly supported by the legislative branch. Reps. Jennifer Dunn (R-Wash.) and Tom Osborne (R-Neb.), who recently visited Iraq, have begun to organize a congressional caucus for Iraqi women to maintain effort and focus in this critical area. And these efforts are strongly supported by President Bush, who has said our aim is "a peace founded upon the dignity and rights of every man and woman."

It was clear that day in Hillah that the women were eager to be full participants in Iraq's democratic process. I gave them this challenge: I said that some people in this world say that Arabs can't build democracy. As I looked at the brave people of Hillah, men and women who'd already begun to find their voice, I added that I believe that is nonsense. "You have a chance," I said, "to prove them wrong. So please do it."

And we should do everything we can to help them.



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