

Testimony of

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Congress at such a critical moment with respect to the current situation in Iraq and our attempts to build a lasting peace in the country. My remarks reflect more than 10 years of work in post conflict societies including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosova, Afghanistan and elsewhere, with a particular focus on women. In the case of Iraq, my remarks are informed by my own national origin, as I was born and raised in Iraq, and by two fact finding trips I have recently taken to Iraq on behalf of Women for Women International - one trip took place in January of this year to get a sense of the conditions and attitudes in pre-war Iraq. A more recent trip took place in May of this year as I prepared an assessment report on the current situation in Iraq as we work to open an office to help the women of Iraq through Women for Women International. In both trips, I interviewed women and men from different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic groups and religious tendencies in both central and southern Iraq. Since then, I have maintained almost daily contacts with Iraqis, primarily in Baghdad. My ultimate goal for the report that follows is to convey an accurate image of what is going on in the hearts and minds of Iraqis, and particularly women. Only by having a clear understanding of what the actual conditions on the ground are can we work on our common goal of building a lasting peace, economic prosperity and a sustainable democracy in Iraq.

I will conclude by making recommendations that address the concerns of the Iraqis with whom I have met and who must be the new constituency as we move forward - the new constituency for American and international non-governmental organizations, international organizations such as the United Nations, and the Coalition Provisional Authority.

Regardless of how Iraqis felt about the war, one can safely argue that the vast majority of Iraqis welcomed the opportunity to get rid of Saddam Hussain's regime and are thankful for the Coalition's role and America's leadership in freeing Iraq. However, while Iraqis may have different visions for the future of Iraq, everyone with whom I spoke, without exception, is surprised at what is perceived to be the lack of any organization or preparation for post war Iraq. This was most evidenced by the chaos and anarchy that spread across Iraq in the days and weeks after the war, and in the continuing inability of Coalition forces to fully restore basic services or provide physical security for the overwhelming majority of Iraqis.

The looting and burning of ministries, universities and other public properties, the limited electricity, lack of phone systems, extensive delay in resuming food delivery, the mass possession of guns and machine guns - among even children - all are contributing to a high level of frustration among the public as their daily lives and practices have been stalled without a clear idea about the future. A driver is vulnerable at any moment to a gunman forcing him or her out of the car. People are witnessing killings in public streets and in the middle of the day. Women are afraid to leave their houses for fear of rape and kidnapping. Mothers are afraid to let their kids walk to school on their own.

Impact on the economy:

Ambassador L. Paul Bremer's III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, recent policy decree reinstating the distribution of salaries, including a great proportion of the former military's, is warmly welcomed by many Iraqis. Such steps are helpful to calm the immediate economic needs by those who were employed by the former government.

The question now needs to extend to the private sector, including micro, small and medium size enterprises. Such businesses have not been able to operate for more than 4 months now due to the lack of electricity and security. Small and micro businesses have been hardest hit, along with their employees who represent the most marginalized sectors of the population including women and single heads of households and others who are 100% dependent on these enterprises for their daily wages. Medium size business losses are also impacting the business elite whose public support for Coalition forces is decreasing daily as their economic wellbeing is further threatened.

The economy in general is veering from reliance on local production, particularly in areas related to food production, to an economy dependent more on processed and imported food. Addressing the revitalization of the local economy and local production is of the utmost importance in creating long term economic sustainability in Iraq. Lastly, most Iraqis, especially those who are poor and dependant on aid rations, constantly emphasized to me the need for economic security. A man who lives in a poor and old neighborhood of the Al Najef province, reflected to me on the current situation by saying: "We need food and security before democracy. When you save someone from death, his first wish is not a car but basic needs to regain his energy. The Americans, God bless them, are more concerned with democracy then they are addressing our basic needs." He continued, "We are a hungry population. Our need for food is more important than democracy at this point in our lives. That does not mean we don't want democracy. Rather, we need economic liberty as a prerequisite for democracy."

#### Impact on Women

Iraqi women are falling prey to the chaos and anarchy in Iraq. Women and girls are now targeted for kidnapping, with some women kidnapped from their own homes. Rumor, confirmed by coverage in The Economist, has it that there is now a market to sell women and girls in Baghdad. Women single heads of households are particularly vulnerable as movement outside of the home is becoming a risk for women because of the lack of security in the streets.

Politically, women's participation in discussions related to the national political agenda has been limited at best. Most local political parties do not actively encourage womens' participation. When this issue is addressed to local politicians, there seems to be no clear political agenda to exclude women as much as a lack of attention for the importance of women's participation in the political process.

Iraqi women, on the other hand, have been adamant about the importance of their political participation in the reconstruction of Iraq. Regardless of their socioeconomic class, ethnic background, or religious or secular tendencies, all Iraqi women I met exhibited strong opinions on what is going on in today's Iraq and the need to incorporate them in the political process. Isma, a 40-year-old, woman who wears the traditional headscarf expressed her views on women to me by insisting that "I want Iraqi women to be part of every process of rebuilding the country...in the army, in sport, in every single sector. Women need to have 50% representation in the country. I wish this could happen. We deserve that and we have the credibility to do that as well."

Addressing gender issues in the process of policy making, from the delivery of services to the establishment of a transitional governing body, is critical at this stage. Discussions related to promoting women's participation should not, however, be limited to one sector or channeled through one ministry. Rather, gender issues must be at the core of all reconstruction plans in Iraq. That includes but is not limited to strategies related to food distribution, police retraining, women's membership in political parties, and women's security in the public sphere. Otherwise, women will once again be marginalized in both the short and long term in Iraqi society. Women are also at risk from religious extremists. Some women who work with the UN have been threatened with death if they don't wear the traditional headscarf or quit working with "foreigners."

#### Political Parties

Local political parties, especially those who were based in exile, are showing no concrete efforts to address the concerns of the average citizen. "We have plenty of political parties but we don't have rule of law and we don't have work. So what is the use?" commented Ahmed who lives in Sadr City, a poor neighborhood in Baghdad.

There is a growing sense of a new political monopoly with economic overtones that is controlled by some of the parties that were based in exile and came in with the coalition forces and even those who were based in Iraqi Kurdistan. "Before we had one Saddam but now we have many mini Saddams who use power in similar ways as Saddam Hussein did," commented Ali, a businessman who describes himself as peace loving and a frustrated Iraqi.

Now Iraqis feel that they must have an inside connection to those parties in order to gain access to information or services.

Most of these political parties, as well as the Coalition Provisional Authority, risk losing and alienating the average citizen by their lack of communication, transparency and clear political strategy. In commenting on this issue, Nashwan, a pharmacist who works in a public clinic in a poor neighborhood of Baghdad said: "we want a leader with ethics, not a Ph.D." The Ph.D. is not the question here as much as a perceived lack of ethical and viable leadership from many of the political parties.

#### Lack of Information:

Despite serious progress in addressing particular frustrations among Iraqis, including re-instating the distribution of salaries and food deliveries among others, there is a growing sense of anxiety regarding the future of Iraq. "We need to know what is going on. We need a public relations campaign that can speak to the concerns of the average Iraqi," comments Ahmed, a local Iraqi businessman who has not been able to run his business for four months now due to the lack of electricity.

The lack of information regarding not only the reinstallation of basic services but also the future of Iraq is creating a gap that is being filled by former Baathist officials on the one hand and religious extremists on the other. Former Baathist officials are taking advantage of the lack of information and services by spreading rumors that America doesn't care about Iraqis and the lack of services are intentional to keep Iraqis from contributing to the reformation process. There is a sense that former Baathist officials are regaining their ability to mobilize the public and spread anti-American sentiments. This can be seen in many ways including comments made by at least some in the police force about the greatness of the former regime in their daily communications with the public.

Religious extremists, on the other hand, are claiming that the lack of services is due to an imperial/Zionist conspiracy designed to destroy Iraq. The danger of these rumors is that they are speaking to the average Iraqi, especially male youth who have military training, are now unemployed, and are feeling a great level of frustration at the lack of stability in the country.

There are many ways to combat these rumors that are impacting the peace process in Iraq. Iraqis want to know what is happening in their country. A strong and consistent public relations campaign can keep Iraqis informed of future plans and engage them in the rebuilding process. "Iraqi public opinion is very very important.... Give us time lines so we know what is happening. Tell us what is the expected date for the complete reinstallation of the electricity and phone systems, when will there be a transitional Iraqi government, and how long the troops will stay here. We need information so at least we are not manipulated and frustrated by rumors," comments Dafir, a former government employee.

Ahmed, a businessman, reiterates the hunger for information by saying: "We need to know what is going on. We don't want to see soldiers killing two people every day or American soldiers being killed either. America needs to focus its communication to the average Iraqi... the real Iraqi... by helping them resume their daily work and daily life to a normal stage. Real people need to get a sense that America is communicating with them and addressing their concerns. If you lose the average person, you will lose the peace.

#### Conclusion:

Iraqis are not only dealing with today's frustration, but also with the trauma caused by the oppression they have faced for 35 years during Baathist rule and particularly Saddam Hussein's regime. There is an outpouring of emotions in Iraq now which veer between frustration at the current chaos on the one hand and confronting the trauma and misery of the past for the first time in a public way - even within families on the other. These emotions can be summarized by what one woman told me as she described her life: "Every minute that passes, I die over and over again. I have already suffered a lot. I can't endure more suffering again." Iraqis are grateful to America for liberating them from Saddam Hussain, frustrated at America for not dealing with running the country the day after Saddam Hussain's collapse, and are now angry, tired, grateful, happy, and sad all at the same time. In other countries transitioning from a brutal period of civil strife, totalitarianism, or apartheid, truth and reconciliation commissions have gone a long way in acknowledging the pain and suffering caused to so many and allowed blame for crimes to be placed squarely on

individuals and not ethnic groups, classes, or sects. There may be an opportunity here to not only allow Iraqis to heal many wounds but understand recent history including the role played by organized violence against women.

One can also say that Iraqis have tremendous expectations from America, some that may be unrealistic in the time frame Iraqis are expecting. Many expect a Marshall Plan which will have an immediate impact within a few short months. Many are shocked at what is perceived to be limited preparation on how to manage a free Iraq. One Iraqi complained to me questioning "How could the two most powerful countries in the world (the United States and United Kingdom) who were able to win the war in one month not have been prepared to deal with the day after the fall of Saddam Hussain's regime?". Others are now talking about starting think tanks to give advice to the Coalition Provisional Authority on how to run the country.

The frustrations that Iraqis are feeling today have many roots. Some stems from the perception that Iraqis are not being consulted in the process of policy formation on how to govern a free Iraq. Others feel that the lack of communication by coalition forces has left them vulnerable to rumors that only serve to increase their sense of anxiety about the future. And others feel that formerly exiled political parties are monopolizing all communication with the Coalition forces, reminding Iraqis of the former political structure known for its lack of transparency and corruption.

There are many ways in which Coalition forces under America's leadership can address frustrations at a grassroots level, building upon Amb. Bremer's accomplishments since his arrival in Iraq. First and most important, there is a need for a massive public relations and communication campaign that goes beyond the two hours of Iraqi public TV that is running at the moment. Average Iraqis need to have their current challenges acknowledged, not whitewashed, and know that there is a public plan for dealing with these challenges. This will be the best way to directly combat the rumors being spread by forces opposed to the Coalition's role.

There is also a need to address the issue of expectations. Providing a time line regarding the reinstallation of basic services, transitional government and even economic plans can help in calming the situation down. There is a strong need to reach out to the hearts and minds of the average Iraqi by addressing real and immediate concerns he/she are facing and their anxiety about the future. Last but not least, we can win the peace in the Middle East in general, by adopting a policy of "Shock and Awe" for economic development in Iraq to match the overwhelming military superiority we brought to bear on the former regime. Such a policy will not only win the hearts and minds of the average Iraqi, it can also build credibility and support in neighboring countries and in the Middle East at large. I can not conclude this testimony without emphasizing the importance of incorporating women throughout all governmental and non-governmental sectors and not limit their participation to a single ministry or a single sector. Women are core participants in not only making peace but also in sustaining it.