

## **Iraq in Transition**

A Brookings Saban Center for Middle East Policy Statesman's Forum

*September 13, 2006*

### **Summary**

The Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, Barham Salih, delivered an address to a Saban Center for Middle East Policy Statesman's Forum on September 13, 2006. In his speech, Salih laid out a strategy for stabilizing Iraq based upon two compacts: one national, the other international.

According to Salih, the pillars of the national compact are national reconciliation, democratic federalism, political inclusion, and an oil policy that is a unifying factor. To implement this compact, the Iraqi Policy Council has recently agreed to a rigorous legislative timetable that will serve as a political tool for ending violence in Iraq. In Salih's view, successful implementation of the national compact would enable Iraq to achieve political balance between its main communities.

Salih noted that from its inception, the modern state of Iraq had been politically unbalanced: power was concentrated in the hands of the Sunni Arab minority, while other communities were denied access to the state resources and political power. Although the liberation of Iraq undid this previous imbalance, it created a new one by enfranchising Kurds and Shi'ah Arabs and because many Sunni Arabs did not enter the political process. Underscoring the diverse nature of the Iraqi state, the Deputy Prime Minister urged the establishment of a voluntary federal, democratic state that would strike a political balance among the various Iraqi communities. Complementing the national compact is an international compact, at the core of which Salih envisioned a roadmap that would guarantee Iraq financial self-sufficiency within four to five years. An important element of the international compact is that Iraq's neighbors will provide assistance in return for Iraq committing itself to a program of economic reform.

While Salih emphasized the urgency of implementing this strategy, he cautioned against surrendering to panic. Salih criticized those who only viewed Iraq from the perspective of the last three and a half years, and he reminded the audience that the United States had a history of involvement in Iraq that preceded the 2003 invasion of the country. In his view, the welcome liberation of the Iraqi people from a "racist tyranny" had been followed by a protracted and difficult transition. The recent difficulties, he argued, had to be seen in context and it would be wrong to focus on failures and give up hope for stabilizing Iraq. Salih acknowledged that mistakes have been made both by the Iraqis and the Coalition. He argued, however, that it was not unusual for countries in transition to err. No failure, he said, should be allowed to impede progress, which in many ways had been significant, including two national parliamentary elections, national constitutional referendum, and provincial elections.

The current grave state of Iraq, in his view, is a result of intertwined historical processes—the legacy of the tyrannical regime and the mistakes made during the

transition to democracy. Security problems, sectarian polarization, corruption, and inability of the Iraqi government to deliver services to its people severely undermine positive developments in Iraq and steadily wear out the patience of Iraqis and Americans alike. To overcome these challenges, Salih called for a speedy implementation of the national and international compacts. The international angle is important, he argued, as failure in Iraq will not be confined to Iraq only. Rather, he said, a failed Iraq will destabilize the entire Middle East and will have profound implications for the rest of the world. Failure, Deputy Prime Minister concluded is not an option.

Following his address, Salih took questions from the audience. One participant asked if the political process reinforced by legislation, as laid out in Salih's strategy, would stop the violence. Salih replied that a political process was a critical component of stabilizing Iraq, but it was alone not sufficient. Political engagement is an important foundation for other measures, including the implementation of security and economic strategies.

Another question tackled Iran-Iraq relations. Salih stressed that Iran was an important neighbor and certainly had influence in Iraq. However, Salih pointed out, good neighborly relations ought to be based on the principle of non-interference in Iraq's domestic affairs and mutual respect for sovereignty. Salih emphasized that stability in Iraq was in the interests of Iran and other neighbors. Iraq is an important state in the Middle East. Those who support Iraq's security and prosperity will be rewarded with a stable and friendly neighbor, he said.

Commenting on the attitude of Iraq's other neighbors, Salih noted that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a major element of instability in the region—with the invasion of Kuwait just one example. By contrast, today's Iraq seeks good relations with its neighbors. Salih expressed some concern about the infiltration of terrorists into Iraq from Syria, but seemed hopeful that Syrian officials were taking seriously Iraqi government concerns about this issue.

A question was posed about the constitutional review process and its likely outcome should a review occur. Salih argued that although the August 2005 Iraqi constitution was, in his view, a good compromise, it contained some controversial provisions that required changes. Moreover, the promise of a constitutional review process had to be implemented because, Salih reminded the audience, the promise of a review had been an important element that had encouraged the Sunni Arab minority to compromise on the adoption of the constitution in 2005. The constitutional review commission, Salih elaborated, is expected to be formed by the Iraqi parliament in September 2006 and should propose its recommendations to by January or February 2007. If parliament endorses the amendments proposed by the commission, then they will be put to a national referendum in March 2007. Salih did not anticipate that fundamental amendments to the constitution would be made because he felt that the August 2005 constitution was fairly balanced. However, he emphasized the importance of adopting legislation that would enable an accurate interpretation of constitutional provisions.