

Building a Democratic Iraq

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Ladies and Gentleman,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at the Saban Center. In particular, I want to thank my friends, Haim Saban, Martin Indyk and the sadly absent Ken Pollack, for this wonderful event and for our dear Andrew Apostolou for organizing this.

Friends, in recent weeks our two nations have been touched by tragedy. The people of the United States have suffered because of Hurricane Katrina. In Iraq, the fear created by terrorists was behind an awful stampede on a bridge in Baghdad that killed close to a thousand Iraqis—honest, pious people who sought only to celebrate their long repressed Shi'a faith. For all the talk of sectarian tensions in Iraq, a hero of that terrible event on the bridge was 19 year old Othman al-Obaidi, from the Sunni Arab community, who drowned after saving three persons from the river. Through his courage and sacrifice, Othman demonstrated the fundamental humanity of the Iraqi majority that refuses to allow terrorists and fascists to speak in their name.

After these two tragedies, the reactions of Americans and Iraqis were the same: we mourn and we rebuild. We look to the future.

For Iraqis, the future cannot but be one of promise and hope, for the past has been one of tragedy and pain.

This year, with the assistance of your great country and your allies in the Coalition from Britain, Poland, Australia and many other lands, we sought to change the tragic course of the history of modern Iraqi state – from a past characterized by violence, brutality and instability into what we hope to be a democratic future. Like the citizens of the United States 220 years ago, Iraqis work to “form a more perfect union”, not based on force and fear, but on mutual respect and understanding and common interest in our future.

Dictatorship in Iraq is at an end—for today Iraq is an emerging democracy. Moreover, Iraq will soon vote on a draft constitution that is supported by the democratically elected representatives of the majority of its people.

How is it possible that just over two years after the fall of one of the worst tyrannies of recent years, that Iraq is so remarkably different and has made such substantial progress in its painful march away from the hell of Ba'athism?

The answer is that most Iraqis understand that democracy is the best therapy with which to cure the horrors of being ruled by a criminal state.

Iraqis are aware that the challenge ahead of them is an unprecedented one. Ba'athist Iraq was the longest lived fascist state in history. Saddam's regime was guilty of multiple acts of aggression and genocide, a substantial bill of indictment. The effect of this vile administration upon Iraqi society has been profound and damaging.

In Saddam's Iraq, infants were surrounded as much by fear as by their mothers' arms. When I say those words, I wish in my heart that they were rhetorical exaggeration. But the tragedy that I know is that the mass graves contain many remains of children who paid the ultimate price for the imaginary crimes of their parents.

The horrific image that George Orwell thought up of the future of humanity under totalitarianism was of "a boot stamping on a human face--for ever." Saddam managed an improvement on that bleak view of humanity degraded. In the mind of every Iraqi, Saddam tried to install a torturer. Saddam wanted Iraqis to fear even thinking freely, to not dare forming words to express their desire for freedom.

To build a democratic Iraq, therefore, we have mobilized the principles of democracy and the arms of democracy. Because of the continued virulence of Ba'athist fascism, we must defend our democracy while we build it, we must fight even as we vote.

We have fostered dialogue, compromise and equality.

Democracy is a dialogue. In democracy, we seek to change opinions through persuasion, not through violence. The majority of Iraqis demonstrated that they accept that principle when eight million of them voted on January 30, 2005. The election was an important milestone in the history of the Middle East and of the world, as much an achievement as the election in South Africa in April 1994. In Iraq, as in South Africa, the majority, long denied their rights, took power through the ballot box. In South Africa, as in Iraq, the minority supremacists, the racists who believe that they have the right to rule, were decisively rejected. Unusually for an election in the Middle East, the result in Iraq was not known in advance.

The talks over the constitution were part of our fundamental national dialogue. The discussions and negotiations over the constitution have been constructive and healthy because they form an integral element in the process of national reconciliation. They are essential to rebuilding Iraq on solid foundations.

Principled compromise is a key element of democratic life. In a compromise, nobody is perfectly happy and nobody is perfectly unhappy, but we learn to live with each other. That principle is vital for the survival of a diverse country such as Iraq.

Again, the vast majority of Iraqis, through their democratically elected representatives, have shown that they are willing to make principled compromises. Indeed, the good news from

Iraq is that the new Iraqi constitution is not a perfect document. The equally good news is that nobody is wildly enthusiastic about the new Iraqi constitution and that no blood was spilled in the writing of the constitution. We talked, we sometimes disagreed, but we were, at least most of us, always committed to settling our differences through dialogue and compromise.

I can see some of you saying to yourselves, if that is the goods news, spare us the bad news!

But think about it for a moment.

If anybody was completely happy with the new Iraqi constitution, then there would by necessity be others who were completely unhappy, and that is a failure. A document that the few cannot hold up as a banner of victory is a success for the many.

Compromise takes time. While it is true that it took us many weeks time to form a government, that was not a bad thing. Quite the contrary, we should be pleased that it takes longer to form a government in the new Iraq than it did in the old Iraq. The old Iraq formed governments very quickly—in roughly the time needed for the tanks to travel from the barracks to the presidential palace.

In the new Iraq, unlike under the old regime, the state is based on the principle of inclusion, not exclusion. Iraq will be for all Iraqis who share the vision of a democratic, pluralist, federated country. We will extend our hand to all those who are willing to join us in achieving this vision, because in the new Iraq, there must be no victors and no vanquished.

We will make any reasonable concession and use every waking hour to bring all, particularly the Sunni Arabs, into the fold, but we cannot bend so far that we break apart Iraqi democracy. We will always seek compromises, but they must not be compromises on the principles of a federal democracy in which all are equal.

Those who want to come into the political process, and we want them in, must choose between the gun and the ballot box. As President Bush said on August 23 of the violent minority in Iraq, they “have got to make a choice -- do they want to live in a society that's free, or do they want to live in violence.” With those few words, President Bush elegantly summed up the choice facing the whole Middle East, between violence and freedom.

Friends,

The principle of equality is vital in a country that for most of the last century was ruled by supremacists, by nationalists who felt that their minority was better than other Iraqis and who believed in a divine right to rule. The new constitution provides equality before the law and equality of opportunity for all Iraqis, regardless of race, creed, or gender. It respects the sanctity of life and the dignity of the individual. It acknowledges and respects ethnic, religious, political, and intellectual pluralism. It provides freedoms that are rare in our part of the world: freedom of worship, speech, and association; the right to form parties, unions, and other civic associations; the right of women to pass on their nationality to their children.

We will ensure that these rights will be respected, and that the state will never again be used as an instrument of coercion and terrorism.

Democracy needs to be defended, which is why we are working closely with the United States to create capable Iraqi security forces. You are giving us the tools with which to finish off the home-grown fascists and traveling terrorists who afflict the Middle East.

I know that today there are people in this audience who have family members and friends serving in Iraq. I say to you, thank you, thank you for their courage, thank you for your fortitude. Your fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbours serving in Iraq today are fighting fascism with the same dignity and courage as the Great Generation of Americans who fought in World War Two. They fight inspired by the ideals of American democracy and with the practical aim of defending your, and our, interests. You, the American people, are our partners in our liberation from tyranny. In 2003, we fought together to end a civil war, the civil war of Saddam Hussein against the people of Iraq. Now, we continue to struggle side by side to uproot the Iraqi fascism that had long threatened us all.

By treating the Iraqi people as partners, the United States has courageously made the final and most important alteration to its policy towards the Middle East. That change began when President George H. Bush helped up to set up the safe haven in Iraqi Kurdistan. It continued when President Clinton sustained the safe haven and attempted to contain Saddam Hussein. Now, the change is complete. No longer is the United States seen to be on the side of the oppressive few. No longer is the United States seen to buy an illusory stability with the suffering of millions of Middle Easterners.

Many say that the myth of stability in the Middle East was shattered by the September 11 terrorist attacks. In a sense it was, but in another sense, that myth was broken by Saddam Hussein many years before. Time and again, and in the best faith and with the best of intentions, the United States attempted to engage with Saddam. He betrayed those hopes as all fascists always will. He attacked Iran, committed genocide in Kurdistan, the notorious *Anfal* campaign; he invaded Kuwait and then launched genocide against the Marsh Arabs.

By liberating Iraq, however, the United States has engaged with the Iraqi people and has gained an important new partner in the battle against terrorism. Nobody should dare question our commitment to the war against terrorism. From a state that exported terrorism and that sought to prevent Middle East peace, Iraq is now a key member of the counterterrorism coalition. We have captured and killed senior Al Qaeda commanders.

So, with all due respect for those who call for an immediate pull out of American troops, we say that we honor the sacrifices the United States has made, and thank American citizens for their kindness and generosity. But a withdrawal of American and multinational forces in the near future could lead to the victory of the terrorists in Iraq, and create grave threats to the region, the United States and the civilized world. We, and you, cannot afford to cede Iraq to the evil forces of terrorism and religious fanaticism.

We are the heart of the Middle East. Win in Iraq, and the region will change for the better just as Iraq has advanced away from its appalling legacy. Lose in Iraq, and then all of the gains that democrats and dissidents have made across a vast swathe of the Islamic world, not just the Middle East, will be lost. Lose in Iraq, and a more perverted new dictatorship will emerge in the rump of that country, vengeful and uncompromising.

Yes, progress has not been steady, or easy. But Iraq today is undeniably a better place than when ruled by Saddam's regime, by a state that was rogue and failed, that was criminal and genocidal. Reconstruction has been uneven, but the economy is growing rapidly and oil wealth is more fairly distributed. Indeed, the new constitution will ensure equity in the future by demanding that the federal and regional governments jointly develop new oil fields. The "Oil for Palaces" programme is now at an end and the global system of corruption and diversion of funds has been replaced by a scheme under which all oil revenues are paid into the internationally supervised Development Fund for Iraq. Let us note in passing that it was the Iraqi Kurds who were the first to alert the world to the scandal of the UN Oil-for-Food programme.

There have been mistakes—awful, saddening mistakes. Abu Ghreib was such a mistake. But let us put the criminal acts there by a tiny minority of American soldiers, who have been rapidly brought to justice, into perspective. Abu Ghreib under the Ba'ath Party was not a prison, but an execution site, where the torturers and killers were not prosecuted but rewarded. Iraqis know of the many thousands whom the Ba'ath butchered at Abu Ghreib. We remember that it was at Abu Ghreib in 1974 that Laila Qassim, a Kurdish student activist, was the first woman to be executed in modern Iraqi history.

Friends, we will talk to all, but we will not sell out democracy to the few who threaten violence if their demands are not met. We will not betray the democratically expressed wishes of Iraq's two constituent peoples, the Arabs and the Kurds, and the other communities of Turkmen and Assyrians, to the unrepentant Ba'athists who seek a new centralized, repressive state. We will never surrender to the terrorists who despise democracy and distort religion. Never!

[speech ends]