



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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The UNDP Washington Roundtable

“Iraq’s Development Challenges”

University of California Washington Center Washington, DC

Tuesday, November 02, 2010

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) held a roundtable discussion Tuesday titled “Iraq’s Development Challenges.” The discussants were **Christine McNab**, Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General & UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, **John Desrocher**, Director, Office of Iraq Affairs, US Department of State, and **Leslie Campbell**, Regional Director for the Middle East & North Africa, National Democratic Institute (NDI). The discussion was moderated by **Frederick Tipson**, Director of UNDP/Washington.

McNab began the discussion by addressing the development and humanitarian challenges facing Iraqis today. **She described the current situation as “incredibly complex,” with “many facets” and not just one overarching problem.** Using the UN’s Millennium Development Goals as a starting point, McNab pointed to some positive developments, including a lowering of the childhood and maternal mortality rates and the relative “shallowness” of poverty in Iraq. Malnutrition, employment, security, and water infrastructure all remain areas of concern however. **Education is an area of particular concern. Primary school attendance has dropped from above 90% to only 80% today. Even more worrying, only 20% of Iraqi young people attend senior high school according to McNab.** The issue of internally displaced persons (approximately 1.5 million in Iraq), the role of women in society, and the insecurity of minority groups were also cited as areas in need of improvement. McNab recommended a focus on rebuilding the Iraqi civil service and creating a dynamic private sector as ways to positively change the situation. **McNab acknowledged the difficulty and high price of addressing these issues, but insisted that a failed state in the heart of the Middle East would ultimately be more costly to the international community.**

Desrocher agreed with McNab’s assessment, and presented what he called the “US government angle” on some of the same issues. Billions of dollars have been spent on reconstruction since 2003, and just because Iraq has oil does not mean there is not poverty, Desrocher explained. Creating jobs within a diversified economy is one of the main goals in Iraq today. In order to achieve this goal, the commercial, banking, and communications sectors all need to be revamped. **Iraqi legal structures must be improved and the Rule of Law more firmly established in order to attract international investment, Desrocher said.** The regulatory environment is questionable; if a contract is signed, will it be enforced? If land is purchased, will the title be legal and recognized? These questions must be answered, and it will take time. The agricultural sector, which is still operating under a statist approach, needs to be reformed in order to maximize its employment capacity. **There is a “gap of expertise,” Desrocher said, so much so that even when Iraqis want to work with international actors, they often do not know how.** He ended by recalling Iraq’s central role in the Arab world and the very real opportunities that exist in the future.

Campbell focused on political development in Iraq. He described the current lack of interest in Iraq as “tragic,” and said that just because mistakes were made does not mean the international community is absolved of its responsibilities. The “good news” in Iraq, according to Campbell, is that Iraq has a competitive political system with hundreds of parties, a surprising degree of freedom of expression, and about 25% of Iraqi members of parliament are women. This last fact is especially important, according to Campbell, because female participation in political life leads to “good things.” In Morocco, the presence of women MP’s led to a changing of the family code and, eventually, thousands of women were elected to local positions in government. **Iraq’s parliament is no more dysfunctional than other parliaments in the region, Campbell said, with one important difference: the Iraqi parliament has actual power to pass laws and ratify treaties. In short, “it matters.”** While the elections in March of this year were not perfect, they were fair, and showed that Iraqis are beginning to care more about local issues. The tribal and sectarian concerns are beginning to fade as the violence has receded.

The “bad,” as Campbell described it, is that the election results were not the determining factor of who will become prime minister. If the incumbent, Nouri al-Maliki, had stepped down it would have been a historical peaceful transfer of power. But that was not what happened. **Campbell said that the current “all-inclusive government” formula reminded him of Bosnia and Lebanon, and that once a country chooses to go down the path toward sectarian government, it is hard to turn back.** Campbell also shared recent polling data from September that showed the frustration of the Iraqi people towards politicians. A majority of Iraqis polled said that politicians are looking to gain personally from government service. On a positive note, 98% of non-Kurdish Iraqis identify as Iraqi first, and not as Sunni, Shiite, or other group. Even among the Kurds, 30% identified as Iraqis first. Campbell finished by saying that the invasion was “not a great idea,” but that once it had occurred the US had a responsibility to help make Iraq into a “decent” country, and that there is reason to be “heartened.”

Tipson began the questioning, and at one point asked Campbell his opinion on the effect outside powers were having on the process of government formation. Campbell responded that in June of this year, Iraqi political leaders were traveling across the region meeting with leaders in Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The question was why. He explained that Iraq has no real head of state. The president is only a ceremonial position, and the current president, Jalal Talabani, is seen primarily as a representative of the Kurds. **Iraqi politicians seek legitimacy by associating themselves with leaders in the region outside of Iraq.** These leaders become de facto “heads of state.” **This is “incredibly damaging” in the long run, according to Campbell.**

An audience member asked why government formation was taking so long, and what it would take to complete the process. **Campbell replied that the current situation is a “complex negotiation to carve up the pie.”** Politicians see it as showing their “relative” strength by demanding certain amounts of oil revenues or ministries. There are “about 100 points of negotiation” that the parties need to work through, according to Campbell.

Tipson asked Campbell why people in the region should be persuaded to believe that democracy is worthwhile after seeing how the process has unfolded in Iraq. **Campbell answered by pointing out that the “vast majority” of both Iraqis and Arabs generally believe that democracy is the best way to govern their countries.** Some do look at Iraq and see chaos that they do not want in their country. Campbell shared that he is going to Jordan to oversee their elections next week, and said that the Jordanians he has spoken with have expressed a certain amount of envy for Iraqis saying that “they

have more choice than we do.” This is in spite of their proximity to the violence and the presence of Iraqi refugees in their country. **Ultimately, good governance and development have to go together if Iraq is to succeed, Campbell said, adding “democracy is good governance.”**