



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ 1820 Jefferson Place NW ♦ Washington, DC 20036

“Iraq's Elections--and Iraq's Future”

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC
February 18, 2010; 12:30-2 p.m.

The United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq **Ad Melkert** gave a lecture at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace assessing the conditions in Iraq ahead of its March elections, and what that can mean for its future.

Melkert, who was very optimistic for a successful Iraqi election, said that it is important that development in Iraq is known and to understand what the role of international community should be. He outlined three major points for his lecture: first, that **it is necessary to acknowledge the need for ongoing engagement in Iraq**; second, that **this engagement should be respectful and with Iraqis “in the lead;”** and third, that **it is time to draw a line and understand the divisions that have marked so much of the debate on Iraq.**

Melkert argued that next month's elections have “immediate urgency” for all the other issues that are important to and define future developments in Iraq. **“The elections are really crucial for the purpose of consolidating the gains that have been achieved in many ways in recent years.”** He believes what is particularly crucial is how the different institutions in Iraq should interact with each other. “Iraqis have developed considerable skills in order to organize elections.”

One of the major positive advancements that Melkert focused on was the decrease in violence. On average, he noted that violence has gone down in nearly every part of the country— especially when compared with 2006 and 2007. Iraqi security forces are playing an important role in controlling the violence, and are supported by U.S. troops—not the other way around.

Melkert also pointed to **a much more open Iraqi press than the country has seen in the past.** He said it is “quite remarkable” to see the variety of opinions expressed in Iraqi newspapers, calling it an “unprecedented phenomenon” considering Iraq's turbulent history.

He emphasized the importance of the upcoming elections, which he referred to as a “major step” toward stability, along with “strengthening the basis for reconciliation” within the country and its many political factions. Regarding the recent problems with candidates being banned from participating in the election, Melkert expressed his concern, stating that the UN has strongly advised against such bans.

Melkert made it a point to emphasize the regional context in which the elections take place. “The regional context remains of crucial importance to understand the future of Iraq,” he said. Melkert argued that all of Iraq's neighbors have a stake in the elections and that while engagement with

neighboring countries can be positive and constructive, there can also be “engagement of the wrong kinds.” “That’s been a constant feature of Iraq’s history.” He believes this will be a huge strategic issue for many countries, including the United States. **“That’s why the point of long-term engagement is so essential.”** He did make sure to emphasize that this relationship must be built on respect. “The respectful engagement is crucial because the Iraqis are not going to accept the kind of prescriptions that they had to accept in recent years.”

When asked about how Iraq will deal with the challenge of having Iraqis outside of Iraq vote in the upcoming election, Melkert replied that there are 16 other countries where Iraqis can vote (including the U.S.). He described the process as a complicated matter and observed that monitoring how voters vote outside of the country “has its own requirements, which is in some place easier than in others.”

When asked if there can truly be a fair election when so many parties are armed, and what it really means about the underlying issues in Iraq that so many parties and candidates are participating in the election, Melkert responded that it’s not quite as confusing as it looks because **many parties have come together in a coalition, making it look much more like the parliamentary system in some European countries.** Second, he argued that in fact historically, most countries have experienced an initial surge in parties and candidates when democracy was first introduced, followed by a period where these parties began to consolidate. He suspects this will also be the case in Iraq.