

Judy Van Rest
Executive Vice President
International Republican Institute
Testimony before the House Government Reform Committee
Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations
Tuesday, October 18, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss recent developments in Iraq and the progress in Iraq's struggle for a sustainable democracy.

Immediately following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, I spent more than a year in Iraq working for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and for the past year have been involved in the work of the International Republican Institute in Iraq. Over this period of time, I learned to never be surprised by the resiliency of Iraq's people, or by the depth and strength of their desire to live in peace, without fear, and by a rule of law that is just and fair.

I come before the Subcommittee today with continued optimism and a strong belief that the people of Iraq, with the help and support of the United States and its allies, will succeed in accomplishing the democratic transformation of their country. Saturday's constitutional referendum is proof of Iraqis' desire and dedication to democracy, as was the January 30 election this year, which brought millions of Iraqis to the polls despite incredible danger to their lives. Whatever the final outcome of the constitutional referendum, I believe we will continue to see the majority of Iraqi citizens participating in the political process of their country.

Unfortunately, events of the past several months have provided no shortage of material to sustain the pessimistic views that many have expressed regarding Iraq's future. Terrorist attacks on civilians, Iraqi police and National Guard forces, government officials, and members of the Multinational Forces in Iraq have continued to claim a tragic human toll. The insurgency has hindered efforts to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure, energize its economy


and improve living standards. As long as the violence continues, the risk of further escalation and of spreading inter or intra communal conflict remain. These are matters of the gravest concern. They constitute a dangerous and persistent threat to everything that we, our partners, and Iraqi leaders are trying to achieve. Moreover, they present a threat to the broader goals of democratic political reform, economic development, stability and peace throughout the Middle East.

But these issues do not represent the whole story and should not be allowed to overshadow or diminish the magnitude of what the Iraqi people have accomplished in this historic year. The story of the past year has been one of extraordinary, frequently heroic, public and private perseverance in the face of a ruthless enemy. Much has been accomplished.

- Prior to the January 30, 2005, election, hundreds of Iraqi candidates stepped forward to run for the Iraqi National Assembly (INA), and multiple political parties and dozens of civil society groups conducted a wide range of voter education activities. On January 30, more than 60 percent of Iraq's eligible voters came to the polls despite the violence leading up to Election Day.
- The Iraqi Independent Election Commission conducted an election that produced a national assembly that Iraqis feel legitimately represent their interests. According to IRI's poll released on September 27, about 65 percent of Iraqis strongly approve or somewhat approve of the work of the INA.
- Even though it took several frustrating months of negotiations, by April 2005, Iraqi leaders established a sovereign government that turned its attention to the drafting of a constitution.
- Iraqi civil society organizations across the country provided input into the constitutional process by conducting hundreds of workshops on the constitution, and communicating the results of these workshops to the constitutional drafting committee and members of the INA.


- The constitutional committee and leaders of the INA grappled with politically difficult problems and realities including:
 - How to insure that the Sunni community was appropriately represented in the Iraqi National Assembly and in the constitution drafting process following an ill-advised Sunni boycott of the January elections;
 - How to reconcile the Islamic history and character of the Iraqi people with their desire to develop legal structures and institutions that would insure equal rights for women and for minorities and provide the foundations for a successful economy; and
 - How to respect the ethnic and sectarian diversity of the population without undermining its long-term viability as a unified state. De-ba'athification policy and the constitutionally defined ethnic identity of the country were other particularly difficult points of contention.
- While Iraqis continued to negotiate almost to the day of the referendum itself to resolve differences on these and other issues, the fact that they arrived at a final document that gained support of some major Sunni leaders should be seen as an accomplishment. Iraq's second electoral event was successfully held on October 15 with an estimated 60 percent turnout.
- The process remains appropriately flexible. While the compromises contained in the draft constitution put before the Iraqi people October 15 were hardly satisfactory to everyone, and many Iraqi citizens were not fully informed of the last minutes changes, there will be ample opportunity for issues to be addressed in the near future. If adopted, the new constitution will allow amendments to be presented to the Iraqi voters in a referendum within six months after a new national assembly is seated. In addition, many other critically important matters such as the composition of the Iraqi Supreme Federal Court and laws governing division of natural resources and decentralization, for example, have been left for the future consideration of the INA.

Whether the constitution adopted will ultimately provide the foundation for a law-based society in which internationally recognized civil rights and personal liberties are



safeguarded is going to depend in large measure on the character of Iraq's future legislatures and governments. And it will depend on the future choices that Iraqi citizens make at the ballot box.


One of the most notable developments of these past months has been the beginning of political maturation of Iraqis by their participation in political dialogue, negotiation, compromise and voting. Largely unnoticed, the sea change taking place in Iraq's political culture has unfortunately been overshadowed by the terrorism and violence that have dominated headlines around the world. The emergence of an organized and vocal Iraqi civil society, for example, has been one of the truly great, but largely unheralded, stories.




The International Republican Institute (IRI) has supported the development of four major Iraqi civil society organizations. Between them they have reached every corner of Iraq and thousands of Iraqi homes with educational materials - print, TV and radio – that have given Iraqis the chance to be part of the national political debate surrounding the January 30 elections and the October 15 referendum. IRI's partners, with the financial support of American taxpayers, aired more than 300 hours of political process related television programming. These partners have printed and distributed more than two million booklets, flyers and posters to inform the public about voting procedures and constitutionalism. Prior to the referendum, they conducted 1,400 constitutional workshops throughout the country, reaching more than 57,000 Iraqis. They have risked their lives in public rallies to advocate for human rights and gender equality.

To illustrate:


- In the province of Salahaddin, one community leader held a series of public workshops in schools and mosques to explain the basic principles of Iraq's new constitutional structure. His efforts did not come without tremendous personal cost. He was threatened repeatedly, but he was not deterred. Because of his courage and efforts, more Iraqis have a better understanding of the distribution of powers and responsibilities in the proposed political system.

- 
- A few weeks ago, a group of women advocating gender equality decided to hold a rally in a downtown Baghdad square. They were confronted by another, more conservative women's group who strongly disagreed with their agenda. After spending the day rallying against each other, the two groups sat down and discussed the issue. While they didn't reach a consensus, they did gain greater understanding and appreciation of differing perspectives.
 - In a television ad, a Sunni cleric urged viewers to participate in the constitutional referendum. The spot, taped in the cleric's mosque, aired both nationwide and on satellite channels. Given the cleric's religious affiliation, his willingness to support the referendum process in a high-profile manner constituted an act of remarkable courage.




These extraordinary individuals and organizations, which have benefited from partnerships with international non-governmental organizations such as IRI and the National Democratic Institute, will continue to grow in strength and influence and become powerful and sustaining voices for democracy and rule of law in Iraq. They will, however, need continued help and support.

IRI intends to be fully engaged in helping Iraqis prepare for the next milestone, the December national assembly elections. In the weeks leading up to that date, IRI will engage in a broad range of activities designed to encourage political party outreach as well as continue to support the election-related activities of Iraq's emerging civil society groups. The Institute will place special emphasis on programs intended to draw greater numbers of women and youth into Iraqi politics. IRI will continue to measure public opinion by conducting national surveys and focus groups, in part to help political parties better understand the views of their constituents. IRI will provide consultations for a national reconciliation effort to foster consensus among different ethnic and religious groups on the issue of possible constitutional amendments. Finally, IRI will continue to encourage peaceful resolution of conflict by expanding ongoing efforts to draw disaffected Sunnis into the political process.



Likewise, it will be imperative that we remain engaged with the new National Assembly and the ministries of the next government. Though some institutional development has taken place, it will take years, and not months, for Iraqis to repair the damage to their governing institutions that resulted from 30 years of Ba'athist dictatorship and corruption. We have seen repeatedly in the course of post authoritarian political transitions in other parts of the world that democratizing processes can be delayed or derailed as a result of ineffective or failed post authoritarian governments. Technical training and assistance in the areas of policy analysis and design, project management and communications, among other things, will be essential for at least the next several years.



American taxpayer supported programs are making and will continue to make a critical difference. IRI, for example, is working with Iraqi partners to create an arm of the Iraqi National Assembly similar in concept to our own Congressional Research Service. It will provide Iraqi legislators, members of government and their staffs with access to unbiased sources of information and analysis on public policy issues, and with connectivity to the worldwide information network. This and many other initiatives aimed at strengthening Iraqi governing institutions and the capacity of its new bureaucracy are critical investments in Iraq's democratic future.

The story behind the past year's headlines in Iraq has been a story of building and of accomplishment and of determination in the face of a deadly enemy. This past Saturday's national referendum, and the likely adoption of a new constitution by the people of Iraq, represents another chapter in that story. I am optimistic that others will follow, and that with the continued help and support of the United States and the broader international community, Iraq's will successfully transition into a democracy that will serve as an inspiration for the rest of the Middle East.

Thank you.