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“Only a Dentist”

An incisive look at Iraq.

By Donna M. Hughes

Recently, I had the opportunity to have lunch with Khalid Bashir Mirza, the first elected chair of the Baghdad Advisory Council, a 37-member body established in July 2003 to give a representative voice to the citizens of Baghdad.

Mirza is an open, engaging man, bursting with things to say. I was eager to hear his firsthand account of what is happening in Iraq and his assessment of the future. Moments after we met, we launched into an intense discussion.

The first thing he said was: "The best thing is that Saddam is gone. It was a good thing that the U.S. military came to overthrow him. The Iraqi people could never have gotten rid of him themselves. He would have been there forever."

What he prizes the most in post-Saddam Iraq is freedom. "Now, we have freedom. We have free speech. Now, you can say anything or write anything in Iraq. People demonstrate all the time."

Mirza, a Christian, never joined the Baathist party, although he was pressured to do so. As a professor of dentistry at the University of Baghdad, who is fluent in English and Spanish, he maintained professional contacts outside of Iraq, which gave him some protection from the Baathists. There was also the fact that he trained the dentists in Iraq. If the Baathists wanted their teeth fixed, they had to leave him alone.

As we talked, he spoke freely on every topic we covered. He had so much to say that eating lunch stole time away from speaking. He was in a constant battle between eating and speaking. This man is so alive; it is hard to imagine him silenced. He seemed so irrepressible, how did he avoid going mad under Baathist rule from simply being unable to speak?

IRAQ, NOW

Not surprisingly, he said the biggest problem in Iraq was lack of security. He thought most of the trouble was coming from Islamic fundamentalists, particularly from Iran. He said: "It only takes a few people to cause a lot of trouble." He thought the violence would continue until the handover of power to the Iraqis and maybe for a time beyond that. But in the end, he does not think that Iran will succeed in destabilizing Iraq. There are not enough Iraqis who are Islamists, and the majority of the Shias do not want an Iranian-style theocracy.

He said that the U.S. military was still needed in Iraq to suppress the Islamists, particularly Moqtada al-Sadr and his militant followers. However, his hope for a better future was placed in the Iraqi people. He has a steady faith in their desire for a free country and their good sense to reject extremists and violence.

In our rapid-fire conversation, Mirza paused at only one of my questions. Towards the end of our lunch, I asked him if Ahmed Chalabi was working for the Americans or the Iranians. (This was before the raid on Chalabi's office and subsequent news releases claiming he gave intelligence to the Iranians.) He looked at me closely and slowly said he thought he was

working for the Americans.

Of course, the photographs of sexual abuse and humiliation from Abu Ghraib were a topic we discussed. He was appalled and said that President Bush needed to apologize to the Iraqi people. He was not worried that the photographs would inflame the Islamic fundamentalists; he said: "They are opportunists." Any excuse, or none at all, is enough for them to bomb or behead people. He said the U.S. needed to be concerned about the opinion of the Iraqi middle class and the large majority of Iraqis that we never hear from. Their opinions were the ones that mattered. In a culture where people keep their bodies well covered, the nakedness and sexual humiliation of the detainees were a great shock to them. We agreed that the only way to respond to the abuses at Abu Ghraib was a transparent application of the rule of law, so that the Iraqi people can see that the U.S. knows these acts are wrong, holds the perpetrators accountable, and punishes them for wrong doing.

ON WOMEN

Mirza is a supporter of women's rights. As he believes in the Iraqi people, he believes in the potential of Iraqi women. They are more highly educated than many women in the Middle East, but the Baathists oppressed them too. There was no individual freedom and opportunity for personal development.

Mirza's attitude towards women was immediately apparent when we met. He quickly put out his hand for a handshake to greet me. Since many Muslim men will not touch a woman, even to shake hands, I always hesitate at introductions, letting them give an indication of whether they will shake my hand. Mirza showed no hesitation, whether because he is a Christian or because of his modern attitude towards women, I do not know. I was quite surprised at his ease of talking about the abuses and photographs from Abu Ghraib. Few men can easily discuss topics such as sexual humiliation and abuse with a woman they met only a few minutes earlier.

I cannot help but contrast Mirza's comfort in speaking with me to my experience with several Iraqi sheiks I met in London last year. Coincidentally, on the same day that Saddam Hussein was captured, I had dinner with several Iraqi tribal leaders. I was the only woman at the table. They were very polite, but answered my questions with more caution. I was told that among them there were new thinkers on the rights of women that put them far in front of most of their peers. Although they were willing to talk with me in an attentive manner, I could not help but notice out of the corner of my eye that they were curiously assessing me as a new specimen — the American woman who asks political questions.

FAITH, FREEDOM, FUTURE

In the U.S. and Europe, there are many people who did not support the war effort to remove Saddam, and a number of others who did, but now think it is a lost cause. They should speak with Mirza. He is cautiously optimistic now that Saddam is gone. He has a great deal of faith in the Iraqi people. He is convinced that eventually the Islamists will give up and leave. Maybe the many years he lived under the Baathists have given him the wisdom and patience to know that removing tyrants and rebuilding a nation take time.

His focus is on Iraq, the Iraqi people, and the future. He is not interested in the internal politics of the U.S. where political parties try to use success or failure in Iraq to their political advantage. Although I suspect his innate optimism may be dented if he knew how many political players are predicting, even hoping for, failure in Iraq.

Mirza knows this is a historic opportunity for the Iraqi people. At the end of the lunch, I wished him and all Iraqis success in rebuilding their country. He demurred and said: "I am only a dentist."

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