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Who Won in Iraq: The Iraqi People

By *Jalal Talabani*

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The past four years have been a roller-coaster for the Iraqi people. We've been liberated from our oppressive tyrant, only to be thrust into deadly sectarian warfare. But the fight for Iraq is not just the fight of the Iraqi people; the entire civilized world has a stake in what happens here. And simply abandoning the country to the terrorists would be everyone's shame.

The news coming out of Iraq is not promising. Daily headlines declare death and destruction that reverberate far beyond the country's borders. But you cannot understand the situation of the new Iraq simply by following the news. By their nature, media outlets concentrate on the negative. They are in the business of selling newspapers and attracting viewers. And news of a car bomb that kills a person makes for more compelling television than the construction of a university in a stable region of the country.

Iraq's current situation is much more nuanced—and positive—than the one you'll likely see on the evening news. Since April 9, 2003, Iraqis have wrestled with more than just regime change. They have been living a revolution that has marked a new era in the country's history. They have seen justice brought to their murderous tyrant. They have won. The good people of Iraq are trying desperately to transform their country from one ruled by fear, repression, and tyranny into a democracy that upholds the values of equality, tolerance, human rights, and the rule of law. In doing so, we must rely on the will of the majority of Iraqis who have benefited from liberation and have a sense of ownership of the new Iraq. They know that their country is no longer the property of the bloodthirsty authority of Saddam Hussein. Iraq today has an elected and representative government that came about after a landmark election in which 12 million out of 15 million eligible voters from all segments of society participated.

As we are rebuilding what Iraq's bloody past destroyed, we have had to redefine the political and economic foundations upon which the country was built. For the first time in Iraq's history, its citizens have a constitution that enshrines many of the democratic values of human rights, equality, rule of law, and good governance. We are working to build independent commissions that regulate political and economic life, a new concept for the people of Iraq. Despite the unsettled security situation, we are taking the first steps in creating a vibrant private sector. And, as is the key to development in so many countries, we're seeing signs that our middle class is growing. A university professor today receives around \$1,000 a month. Under Saddam, the same professor would have received about \$17.

For the Iraqi people, this process is historic and monumental. History tells us that changes so significant are almost

always followed by a period of unrest, uncertainty, and even chaos. Iraq proves that's never been more true. As we Iraqis are trying to rebuild our country, an unholy alliance of international terrorists, Baathists, and fundamentalists are aiming to divide Iraq and send it back to the dark ages. To some extent, they have succeeded. They have managed to provoke violent sectarian reactions from extremist elements in Iraqi society against their fellow Iraqis. Their dark deeds threaten to undo much of the progress Iraqis have made in the four years since liberation.

With this bitter reality in mind and with a clear understanding of the dangers of the situation, Iraqis must be—and we are—determined to defeat the terrorists and prevent further acts of sectarian violence. To do so, we must adopt a two-track approach: A political track, through the process of national reconciliation and the inclusion of all elements of the Iraqi political spectrum that condemn terror and violence, and a security track, through a tough security plan that deals equally with all those who conduct violence.

To rid Iraq, especially Baghdad, of the constant threat of violence, we must exercise zero tolerance against anyone who perpetrates violence. We realize that ending sectarian violence is an Iraqi responsibility. But ending terrorism is a responsibility for Iraq, its neighbors, and the international community.

Hence, security and stability in our country should be a point of concern for every democratic country of the world and for our neighbors who want to live in peace and security. After all, the people of Iraq are not the only beneficiaries of the new Iraq. A democratic and stable country in the heart of a strategically vital region could serve as a powerful ally to all freedom-loving nations, as well as to corporations and nongovernmental organizations who crave access to the Middle Eastern market.

On the fourth anniversary of Iraq's liberation, we remind the world and ourselves: Security and stability in Iraq is the security and stability of the world. Abandoning Iraq would only unleash the terrorists, and the prospect of a safe Iraq and Middle East would be completely lost. The battle raging in Iraq is the war of everyone in the civilized world. Losing it is not an option.

Jalal Talabani is president of Iraq.
