

A SUMMIT OF IRAQI AND AMERICAN  
WOMEN

CREATING OUR COMMON  
FUTURE

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A PROGRAM OF THE GLOBAL PEACE INITIATIVE OF WOMEN

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## OVERVIEW

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The situation for women in Iraq is fragile. Women now form a majority of Iraq's population. A surprising large number, over half, of those women who have been married are widows or wives of missing men. This is the result of years of repression, murder and war, and the most recent conflict. In Iraq there has been a tremendous increase in the number of widows and female-headed households post conflict, which has further torn the social fabric of the society. An estimated 60% of children and 70% of the elderly depend on these women for their sustenance. There are no social security programs for individuals and families in the country.

Whatever rights women have gained thus far are threatened by the uncertain direction of the country's future. Their access to education, professional and personal opportunities, already limited, will be further diminished if the new government in Iraq does not take strong positive measures to defend and promote women's rights. Increased violence and lack of security present special dangers for women, so that women who were once gainfully employed and girls who once attended schools are now forced to stay home. It is critical for the international community to promote security conditions and support the advancement of women in Iraq. Religious issues are a deciding factor and must be addressed in an open and inclusive forum by the women themselves. Shiite-Sunni relations are fundamental to the peaceful development of the nation, and women have a yet unrecognized role to play in bridging these two branches of Islam.

If Iraq can demonstrate a peaceful cooperation between the Shiite and Sunni communities, it will have tremendous ramifications. While this must take place at the governmental level, it is also critical to manifest at the grassroots. No other Muslim country provides such an opportunity. Iraq is uniquely situated to lead such an effort, and women have an important part to play.

To advance the situation for women and provide a platform for the Sunni and Shiite women to come together, the Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) is organizing a Forum for both an Iraqi-US women's dialogue and an internal dialogue among Iraqi women. Our goal is to demonstrate to Iraqi women that they have the support of women in the West, who are willing to share their time and resources to advance their cause.

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**Thus, this Forum has been designed with the following objectives in mind:**

- 1) To hear first-hand accounts of the situation on the ground, and assess the impact on women and children of Iraq;**
  - 2) To explore the opportunities and challenges facing women as a result of the ongoing conflict in Iraq – addressing different religious perspectives;**
  - 3) To explore how women can lead efforts to build goodwill between the Shiite and Sunni communities;**
  - 4) To establish channels of communications for maintaining people-to-people exchange of ideas and information;**
  - 5) To learn from Iraqi women their expectations from the international community and their need for its support in these critical times;**
  - 6) To explore the development of relevant joint projects.**
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This gathering *Creating Our Common Future* is meant to begin a dialogue between the women of Iraq and the United States. It will provide them with the opportunity to interact in a spirit of goodwill and compassion, leading to renewal and healing. Participants will include leading women from government, business, religion, media, education and the non-governmental sector, who wish to explore the role Iraqi women can play in rebuilding their communities with the support and assistance from their American counterparts.

This gathering will create an open environment where women can exchange views, share information, hear first hand narratives and develop partnerships to support one another towards a common vision of a peaceful and a better future for all.

This encounter will provide the Iraqi women an opportunity to share their experiences with others outside of Iraq and it will present to the concerned American women a first-hand account of the issues facing Iraqi women, exposing their needs and challenges. It will also provide the opportunity to American women to explore how they can support through effective partnerships the efforts of Iraqi women for peace, security and the reconstruction of their communities.

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## RATIONALE

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*“At this moment, Iraq needs the help of the international community”*

*—Zakia Hakki, First Female Judge in Iraq*

The Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) is an international, multi-faith network of women leaders who come together to stimulate peace-building and reconciliation efforts in areas of conflict and post-conflict. The organization was founded on the premise that women have a special contribution to make in finding alternatives to violence; negotiating for peace and rebuilding societies. Indeed women can be important catalysts for positive change.

In June 2003, the GPIW launched the *Women’s Partnership for Peace in the Middle East* bringing together a group of Israeli and Palestinian women who met in Oslo, Norway to discuss the role of women in peace building in the region. They were joined by women religious leaders, who facilitated the dialogue sessions and helped to create a neutral ground with compassion that enabled many of the women to move beyond seeing the “other” as an enemy. Important friendships between Israeli and Palestinian were seeded at this initial meeting. It was the beginning of trust building.

After the Oslo gathering, the group followed up with a number of community dialogues and forums in Ramallah and in Jerusalem to garner support and share their experiences with their communities. As a result, the number of participants more than tripled for the next international meeting held in the Dead Sea in Amman, Jordan, in December 2004, and it attracted additional support from prominent local women leaders.

The outcomes of these Israeli/Palestinian dialogues have been very positive and have led to the creation of partnerships, joint business projects, peace education and the building of an on-going reconciliation forum for Israeli and Palestinian women. Many of the women who participated in these dialogue sessions also reported that these interactions made a significant impact on their views and understanding of the “other community”.

A meaningful dialogue between Iraqi women and American women would facilitate similar forms of peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts that would promote understanding, trust, goodwill, and mutual acknowledgement of the pain and suffering of the other - thus laying the foundation for harmonious relationships for the future.

This gathering will also aim to strengthen the women's voices in the development of Iraq and help support the mobilization of Iraqi women, who have traditionally been marginalized and excluded from decision-making in their society. Using examples from the *Women's Partnership for Peace in the Middle East* initiatives, this Forum would provide a unique opportunity for women from the different sides to meet and forge partnerships that can lead to better relations in the future.

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#### METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

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*An Iraq Summit: Creating Our Common Future* will take place in January, 2006 in New York City. The three-day *Iraq Summit* will be an intensive exchange, consisting of round table discussions with approximately 75-100 participants. The Summit will engage women in positions of leadership in government, business, education, communications and religion as well as women at the grassroots level, who are community leaders, role models, parents and individuals interested in promoting peace through stability and social development. From within Iraq it will bring together women from the Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish communities as well as representatives of the Iraqi Christian community, and there will be a special focus on strengthening ties between the Sunni and Shiite communities.

The meetings will be moderated by an international group of women leaders, who have experience in mediation and facilitation across religious and cultural differences to promote effective interaction and to aid women in becoming agents of change and goodwill. There will also be youth participation in the Summit involving young women from Iraq and the U.S.

The Program will include discussions on the following topics:

- On-the-ground realities for the Iraqi people – as a result of the ongoing conflict;
- Forging ways for the American and Iraqi people to communicate;
- Addressing ways to heal Sunni-Shiite divisions in Iraq, and globally;
- Assessing the needs of Iraqi women in the areas of health, education, economic and social participation.
- Understanding the internal challenges for women in Iraq.
- Receiving the messages from Iraqi women that American women need to hear.
- Setting up a network of American and Iraq women to foster greater communication.

The Summit will also have one session devoted to an Islamic-Christian Dialogue from the women's perspective, in the hope of providing some groundwork for women's participation in the World Summit on Christian-Islamic Dialogue that will take place in Senegal in 2007.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of this Forum organized by GPIW are to increase understanding between the two communities and explore ways in which:

- American women can assist the women of Iraq.
- Women's role and leadership in peacebuilding in Iraq can be promoted.
- Supportive relationships and a sense of goodwill could be developed between Iraqi and American women.
- Communications strategies for enhancing relationships between these groups can be formulated.
- Opportunities to cultivate effective partnerships can be identified.

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### **PROJECTED OUTCOMES**

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There are three projected outcomes to this summit:

- The creation of an online community of Iraqi and American women who wish to exchange ideas and disseminate information through the medium of a website. This website can facilitate communication and provide opportunities for women from the United States and Europe to support their counterparts in Iraq with their resources and their expertise.
- The establishment of a Women's Faith Forum in Iraq to discuss women's issues from different religious perspectives – with the aim of garnering greater acceptance for a diversity of views.

- Issue a statement on the need to heal divisions between the Sunni and Shiite communities in Iraq and worldwide.

The ultimate success of this Summit, however, shall depend upon the emergence of spontaneous relationships and the open and frank exchange of ideas as well as of the expression of commitment of the participants to the amelioration of the condition of women in Iraq.

The Summit will provide the platform for follow-up in a form determined by the participants, according to their preferences. The organizers shall serve as facilitators in this process of building partnerships and goodwill by bringing these participants together and providing an opportunity for an interchange that is open, neutral, compassionate and supportive.

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