

**An Iraq-US Summit**  
*Creating Our Common Future*  
**A Program of the Global Peace Initiative of Women**

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Beginning the Dialogue Between Iraqi and American Women

March 26<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006

New York City

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## OVERVIEW

This report of the first Iraq-US Women's Summit provides a glimpse of the situation in Iraq based on the accounts given by the Iraqi delegation. The report gives an overview of the main themes that emerged from these discussions and also includes recommendations and action points for the 120 women and men from government, civil society, NGOs and the private sector, who attended the Summit organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women. In bringing these women together, the Summit also provided a platform for the Iraqi women to reach out to a larger American audience. Various members of the press covered the meeting, including CNN, BBC, Christian Science Monitor and the Associated Press.

For the first two days, the participants became acquainted with one another and the program began with the American women listening to stories from the ground told by the Iraqi delegation of 21 women and 2 men. Included in the Iraqi delegation were individuals from various sectors of society – there was representation from Muslim Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, Christians and the Yazidies, a religious minority in Iraq. They gave personal accounts from different perspectives and periods in Iraq from pre-Saddam time, during Saddam's regime with the Iran/Iraq war and sanctions, the overthrow of the regime to the present. At the end of the first day, there was an interfaith service presided over by Rev. Joan Brown Campbell at St. Bartholomew's Church followed by an opening day reception. The theme of the service was 'building human unity', which included Muslim, Sufi, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Native American prayers. For some, this was a new experience.

However by the second day, it was evident that the women were split on their view of the US presence in Iraq and their varying experiences caused division within the group. There were those who called the US presence a 'liberation' and those who called it an 'occupation'. Clearly, there were different perceptions. There were certainly differences in views on the American side as well, on whether US military forces should withdraw immediately or stay. It was a sobering experience for the US women present as they realized the complexity of the issues and that there were no easy solutions.

The common themes, which emerged from the meeting, were the social problems affecting Iraqi families, women and children as a result of the deteriorating situation in Iraq. Regardless of when the problems started or why they had gotten worse, the women agreed these issues needed to be addressed in order for the situation in Iraq to improve. There was a consensus by the group that the future of the country would depend greatly on the social fabric of the Iraqi society and thus the wellbeing of women and children - their safety, shelter, education, health and livelihoods. Another theme that surfaced repeatedly was the tragic consequences of mistakes made after the US invasion. There was also much discussion about the loss of dignity, and poor treatment of the Iraqi people and culture.

The second part of the Summit was devoted to finding solutions and shaping the commitment of the American women to form partnerships with the Iraqi women with concrete plans of action. Roundtable discussions on issues such as: democracy and civil society, women's issues, environment, business, art and culture, reconciliation and—

trauma healing took place and allowed the American women present to offer their support and resources to assist the Iraqis in tackling their problems and obstacles for the mutual good of both countries.

The Global Peace Initiative of Women, along with others present, committed to bringing the group together again in the Middle East to ensure the inclusion of more women. GPIW and Chautauqua Institution would organize a larger gathering of Iraqi and American women to concentrate especially on interfaith understanding to address the interreligious divisions that are preventing development and peacebuilding in Iraq. An Iraqi Youth Summit was also proposed aimed at bringing focus to the conflict's impact on young people and their role in creating a peaceful future for Iraq.

## The Impact of Conflict on Iraqi Children and Women

Whenever there is conflict, children and women suffer the most. During this vulnerable stage of life, children surrounded by conflict can easily become accustomed to a culture of violence, remain traumatized in the aftermath of conflict and are susceptible to sectarian indoctrination. It is extremely important that the rights of children are protected. Mr. Olara Otunnu, President, LBL Foundation for Children and Former UN Under-Secretary General and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, moderated the pre-summit session on the impact of conflict on Iraqi children. Some of the reports from the Iraqi delegation were natural and universal consequences of war, but there were also instances unique to the Iraqi conflict, such as reports of juveniles being detained in Iraqi prisons such as Abu Graab. Mr. Otunnu provided insight into the international procedures and standards that protect children's rights and recommended submitting these allegations to the relevant agencies whose responsibility it was to monitor the treatment of children in areas of conflict.

### Reports from the Iraqi Delegation: The gravest issues affecting children and families

#### *Lack of security*

The gravest issue for children is the current lack of security in Iraq. For security and financial reasons, students are forced to stay at home or drop out of school to find work. Many children are now orphaned. After the US invasion, many children left orphanages out of fear and now live on the street. For the first time, there is a culture of street children. Some of them join the militias. Living on the streets they are exposed to very harsh and dangerous conditions. Drug addiction and drug dealing are on the rise among young people and many are engaging in reckless behavior. All of these factors work together to threaten the family unit and social fabric of the country. The psychological, mental and physical trauma from the war is having a deep impact on the children, who represent the future of Iraq. In addition, the people who are supposed to care for young people, doctors, teachers, health professionals, NGO workers are leaving the country.

#### *Education – long-term solution to financial stress, health issues, gender inequality and unemployment*

Illiteracy rates in Iraq are very high especially among girls. There has also been a regression in vaccination programs, school nutrition programs and an increase in blood born diseases (rather than sexually transmitted diseases suggesting that transmission is being conducted through other means – intravenous drugs, sharing dirty needles, infected blood supplies, etc.), which was very rare in Iraq before. Thus investing in education will be an investment in the future given that the more educated people are, the more likely they are to take better care of themselves and their children, have better chances at employment and less likely to engage in destructive behavior. In order for learning conditions for the children to improve there needs to be greater security and stability in Iraq. It is still very dangerous to go to school, because of the attacks and bombings. Even when the students do attend class, they have no materials and supplies, and there are a lot of disruptions that cause children to miss many days of school, so they are not able to learn properly.

#### *Care for Street children, Orphans and Widows*

After the fall of the regime, the number of homeless and handicapped children dramatically increased, especially in the poorer neighborhoods. This is also where the insurgents are most active in recruiting young people. Street children, both boys and girls, are vulnerable to sexual abuse, rape, exploitation and other harsh conditions. They<sub>3</sub>

join gangs and terrorists groups for protection and to belong. There were also reports of an increase in cancer among children with little or no medical supplies or equipment to treat them due to the absence of a functioning health care system. The economic hardships, exacerbated by the 40-50% unemployment rate in the country, put an immense burden on the family and those who pay the heaviest price are the widows, street children and orphans. They need love and care and a normal life in which children can just be kids and play with toys, computers and do sports.

### Recommendations

- Lack of security in some areas, but can start programs in safer areas.
- Enforce laws that protect children's rights and make all members accountable.
- Use a grassroots approach with a comprehensive view in programs for children.
- Appeal to the international community and agencies with the mandate to protect children.
- US and international community should assume financial burdens and make efforts to prevent corruption in social service sector.
- Provide political support via financial, human resources, training and assistance in creating a social system to protect children and families and provide them with basic human needs.
- Create a balance between the US military presence and humanitarian role in Iraq.
- Establish a bank for widows to help them start small businesses with micro-credit/finance tools and encourage social entrepreneurial opportunities for women to support their families and children.
- Be sensitive to the Iraqi culture and dignity in programs.

*"The lack of security has made things very difficult. NGOs are saying what is happening, but who is listening?" -- Iraqi Delegate*

## Different Views on the Situation in Iraq – Stories from the Ground

The opening session was designed to set the context for the dialogue and introduce the themes. The Summit began with a reading from Rumi by the wife of the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, Mrs. Maryam Zarif. Ambassador Samir Shakir M. Sumaida'ie, Permanent Representative of Iraq to the UN then gave the opening address. He noted that beginning this dialogue between Iraqi and US women was an opportunity to help the United States to understand the complexity of the problems the Iraqi people face in their daily lives. "Even to buy bread or send your children to school is a huge risk...We Iraqis have been to hell and back," said Ambassador Sumaida'ie, but even so he reported that polls showed an overwhelming number of Iraqi people believe the future will be better. Elizabeth Vargas, Co-Anchor of ABC *World News Tonight* and *20/20* moderated the first plenary discussion. The Iraqi women gave accounts of their experiences, representing many perspectives, ethnic backgrounds and regions within Iraq. Some of the issues included the impact of the conflict on the security of family and children, efforts and challenges to building national unity, updates on infrastructure and rebuilding, perceptions of the Iraqi people regarding the American presence, and the newly emerging religious divisions.

### *Challenges to building National Unity - Perceptions of the American Presence*

There were varying perceptions of the American presence in Iraq, but almost all agreed that the mistakes made by the American military after the overthrow of Saddam's regime helped to create enemies for the US among the Iraqi people. Many delegates mentioned the flawed post-war strategy, which caused the release of 1 million professional Iraqi armed forces, including border patrol guards, policemen and soldiers.

When the US came to Iraq people were expecting things to improve, but instead the war and continuing conflict has left millions of men without work (over 50%unemployed) and without a functioning social service

program. These hardening conditions have caused divided perceptions of the American presence in the country.

There has also been great misunderstanding of Iraqi culture, which has led to a loss of dignity and sovereignty for the Iraqi people. Iraqi government members especially feel shut out of discussions about critical governance issues – as well as matters of rebuilding. They feel they have the human resources and capacity in Iraq but the US is not giving them the opportunity or an equal partnership to help determine the future of Iraq. They also feel they do not have a voice in the decision making on who gets contracts for rebuilding.

One story that was told several times was of an Iraqi parliamentarian who was stopped when he tried to enter the green zone. A soldier threw him to the ground face down and put his foot on the back of his neck. After the man cleared up the situation and entered the Parliament building, he started to cry and said to the others, “We lost our dignity when the Americans came here.” A question was raised about why the US embassy was now in the presidential palace. “Imagine if we occupied your White House,” said one delegate. These stories conveyed the extent of the cultural insensitivity that exists, causing the Americans to lose much of the goodwill that was initially generated by the overthrow of Saddam.

Another delegate referred to the problem of creating a democracy in Iraq when the concepts of democracy and freedom are very foreign to the people at the grassroots level. Much training and education is needed. A civil society must be built, and for this time and patience are needed.

### *Emerging Religious Divisions*

Many of the Iraqi delegates affirmed that the Iraqi people are not divided by religion. Historically, they have had an open society, and within a single family can be found Shias, Sunnis and Kurds. This new situation, these religious divides, are being created for political purposes. Although the divisions may be very real now, they seem to go against the grain of the Iraqi people and Iraqi civilization.

One of the Iraqi delegate spoke about the need to evaluate the war from the Iraqi perspective stating that the real victims of the war are the Iraqi civilians, who have no one to protect them. The US troops have a military mission and the Iraqi police are not as efficient in protecting the people, as they should be. The people do not have anyone to protect them and they are scared. The religious divisions are encouraging this fear to grow. For examples, men with beards (a practice of Muslim men) are considered terrorists and are detained by the interior ministry and held without being able to call their families.

Another Iraqi presenter discussed ways of dispelling myths about religious divisions:

- Just because some people are Christians does not mean they are supporters of America because they are of the same religion. Christianity existed in Iraq long before the United States was founded.
- Iraqi civilization spans thousands of years and they have been able to organize themselves and were the first to live under a code of law, the Law of Hammurabi. The culture is a very old and rich one. But because they lived in isolation for so many years under Saddam, they need time, money and support to rebuild.
- Diversity should be seen as richness of culture and is being misunderstood.
- The violence is a natural consequence of destruction and it is difficult to rebuild because they are starting from nothing, below nothing and therefore it needs time. This is the price of freedom and a better future, because no country has obtained freedom without suffering.

In the open discussion, American women asked the Iraqi panel what they thought of the American military presence in Iraq and if they wanted them to withdraw and when. The delegation was split in their responses on whether the US troops should stay or not and what the plan moving forward should be. Some suggested a balance of humanitarian and military forces, others said the US should not leave until the mission was complete and others argued that the military forces should leave so that Iraqi people could rebuild their country. However, common themes emerged from the discussions as well, including:

- **Women and Children** –greater humanitarian assistance from the US, particularly for orphans, street children and widows.
- **Equal Partnership** –respect for the sovereignty and dignity of the Iraqi people in building a new democratic Iraq and whether the US stays or not, there needs to be accountability for mistakes and corruption.
- **Healing for the future** – reconciliation of divisions due to political differences and religious and ethnic violence for a better future for all.

Closing remarks were made by Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, Co-Chair of The Global Peace Initiative of Women who encouraged the women not be become divided by hate telling them “Do not drink the water of hate and division”. Mr. Olara Otunnu then reminded both parties that they have a right to hold their governments and the international community accountable for their responsibilities in protecting the rights of children in conflicts. Ms. Charlotte Ponticelli, Senior Coordinator, International Women’s Issues, the US Department of State - “Generating Economic Support/Partnerships for Iraqi Women” reported on the progress and resilience of the Iraqi women working to rebuild a new democratic Iraq.

Diana Taylor, the superintendent of banks for the state of New York and Wendy R. Acho from the American Middle East Economic Affairs Committee (AMEAC) Women’s Business Committee of US Arab Economic Forum presented as lunchtime speakers. Both stressed the power of business and finance to empower women.

### **Split Opinions on Post-Saddam Hussein Iraq Achievements and Challenges**

In the afternoon session, it was evident that the differences in views on the situation in Iraq had fractured the group. In the panel on the role of women in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq achievements and challenges, the discussion became very intense because of contrasting experiences during Saddam’s regime and the differences in opinions regarding the progress or lack of progress in the current Iraq and the impact it has had on women. Allowing regions and religious and sectarian governments to decide the rights of women based on their interpretation of the Sharia Law (Islamic law) was of deep concern to many of the women. However the comparison of the status of women before Saddam and after caused a disruption in the session. It was decided to let the women have round table discussions, each table with an Iraqi woman to discuss what they were learning from these presentations and sharing of experiences. Topics varies from hardships during the past regime, constitutional rights for Iraqi women, the need for inter-religious and ethnic dialogue, pain and suffering, the educated women of Iraq, alternative ways to support Iraqi women and engage Americans, honoring the hearts of mothers to suspicions about the ‘other’.

Day two started with a plenary dedicated to fostering people-to-people dialogue by changing attitudes and misperceptions, which was moderated by Kate Snow, co-anchor of ABC News' weekend edition of Good Morning America. The disagreements from the previous day made this all the more difficult, but allowing each person to share their own opinion was an important part of the democratic process as was the audience’s right to respectfully disagree. Carol Bellamy president of the World Learning University and former executive director of UNICEF gave opening remarks on the presence of women in rebuilding societies after conflict. She commended the group for making their differences known and stressed that there was potential for moving forward by continuing the dialogue with women.

In Carol Bellamy’s opening remarks she quoted Simone Weil’s *The Power of Words*,

*“To clarify thought, to discredit the intrinsically meaningless words, and to define the use of others by precise analysis – to do this, strange though it may appear, might be a way of saving human lives.”*

## Shaping the Commitment: Creating Partnerships

In the second day of the summit, the women turned their efforts towards exploring ways for moving forward to build a secure and healthy Iraqi nation. The American women delegation played a more active role as they offer their support to the Iraqi women having heard the women communicate the state of affairs in the country and their needs. The women sat together to devise ways in which they could create partnerships in the following areas. In looking at each area, we are encouraged to look at five 'M' elements that would help envision proposals: 1) Manpower; 2) Money; 3) Materials; 4) Methods; and 5) Measurements

These were their recommendations:

### **BUSINESS**

Create a Business Widows Bank for very poor women and micro-finance. Iraqi delegates would connect to other NGOs in Iraq and Wendy Acho, US-Arab Economic Forum, Women's Business Council Collaborator would also connect to US NGOs and lending organizations.

### **WOMEN ISSUES**

Start a literacy program for women in rural area and educating women about health and need literature for this. A suggestion was made for GPIW to host a web page with these recommendations and the contact information and to have a forum on the website online for the network. Also start shelter for women who are victims of domestic violence abuse when there is more security in the country to do so.

### **YOUTH AND CHILDREN**

1) Get a tax deductible and trustworthy NGO to have account set up to give donations as well as teacher gifts and materials; 2) Clothing sewing machines to the mothers; 3) Donations for medication for children and health care; 4) Creating a mailing list.

### **THE ARTS**

Organize art exchange exhibits with Iraqi and US artists. Create an international arts network and include art for children and expressive arts. Young artists exchange and seeking corporation donations and send them to Iraq.

### **CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION**

US delegates were encouraged to pressure their government to encourage the Iraqi government to remove sectarian divisions. Identified conflict resolution resources: Garrison Institute, American Friends Service Committee, and Culture of Peace and interested in women who are working already in conflict – Family Circle. The challenge was finding where to have trainings and conferences – safe places and safe people. An Iraqi delegate volunteered to explore conflict resolution activities in Iraq and report back to the group.

### **COMMUNICATION**

1) GPIW could establish web based online network and forum where everyone can post ideas and communicate on an ongoing basis; 2) Create PSAs to share the message and highlight the efforts being made; 3) Reduce media censorship in Iraq and try to bring more entertainment shows to open Iraqi society and encourage joy and culturally sensitive; 4) Strengthen public relations infrastructure and ways of transmitting this kind of dialogue to the larger audience in a newsletter, to share information and keep dialogue on-going.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY**

Civic engagement where people lack security and so there was a bit of chicken before the egg situation to ensure that all funds are benefiting all groups and there is good governance and also that there is fairness reaching out.

## ENVIRONMENT

Start planting projects because there is psychological healing in growing plants and it also has practical uses as it gives sustenance. Mention of the *Ramadi* project means 'green' and they clean and start parks and plant trees. Want to get in touch people doing this project and working in the country. They also could do chemical free seeds, a suggestion from Shumei International, a Japanese natural agriculture network. 'On Eagles' Wings' made a comment on ways to make sure the money goes back in the country and offered their assistance.

## INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING

Chautauqua Institution and GPIW were very interested in helping to organize interfaith programs.

## Closing Session: How To Move Forward

Ms. Jane Arraf, Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations and former CNN Baghdad Bureau Chief and Senior Baghdad Correspondent made closing remarks. Having lived in Baghdad during Saddam's time, she has been able to see both realities, one of progress and improvement and another of extreme violence. She told the women that she found that the easiest and most dangerous thing to do at this time was make accusations. She advised them to only say things, which were their own 'truth' that they had themselves experienced. The Summit was the beginning of a healthy dialogue because it gave people an opportunity to speak when they were not able to before.

The Chairs, Rev. Joan Campbell and Sr. Joan Chittister, closed the session asking the participants to stay in touch with the Global Peace Initiative of Women because the organization's mission is to help stimulate reconciliation and the resolution of interfaith conflicts. Dena Merriam announced the idea of organizing a small conference of young Iraqis and perhaps some American youth. She also proposed having a larger conference with more women in the region in the future. The organizers also expressed their gratitude to the Iraqi women who demonstrated immense courage, resilience and 'backbones of steel' in sharing their realities with the American public. They also thanked the American women for the 'can do and will do' spirit that they brought to the Summit and for their commitment to working with their Iraqi sisters. Ms. Laila Atshan, a Palestinian consultant who has been closely involved in the GPIW Middle East Partnership for Peace between Israeli and Palestinian communities, was moved beyond words and then admitted that the past few days had proven that the situation in Iraq was much more complicated than people could have imagined. She encouraged the women to establish trust among one another. The Venerable Chang Ji, a Buddhist nun from Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan also shared her observations from the discussions saying that the future was wide open for the women and that they should strive to live in the present. The meeting came to an end with a poem from Rumi by Mrs. Zarif.

Overall the Summit was viewed as a great learning experience and the beginning of more open dialogues and greater understanding between Iraqi and American people in the future. Two outcomes of the Summit have been the planning of a meeting in September with the GPIW Iraqi Steering Committee, which is now being set up, to discuss the future of the program and the invitation of two Iraqi delegates to the Dharma Drum Mountain Compassion Retreat in Taipei.