

**Ambassador Lukman Faily**

**Opening Remarks**

**“Iraq’s Parliamentary Elections: A Conversation with H.E. Ambassador Faily”**

**CSIS Middle East Program**

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Only two days ago, I ran in the Boston Marathon in honor of, and in support of, the victims of terrorism from Boston to Baghdad. I am proud that I finished. And I have tremendous respect and appreciation to those who completed the race following last year’s tragic terrorist attacks.

Iraq’s journey from despotism to democracy is also a marathon. One week from today, on April 30, the Iraqi parliamentary election will mark a milestone on our progress – and serve as attribute to the sacrifices of so many Iraqis and Americans and other countries that helped us stay on the course of democracy.

This will be the fourth parliamentary election since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the first since the withdrawal of American troops late in 2011. Amidst regional turmoil, instability and sectarian polarization, this election offers us the opportunity to consolidate democracy, nurture greater stability and strengthen national unity.

Democracy means the people can elect leaders of their own choosing. In this election, Iraqis will be able to choose among over 9000 candidates from 107 political entities competing for 328 parliamentary seats.

We want the composition of the Parliament to represent the diversity of the people. Twenty-five percent of the seats in Parliament are allocated to women. Christians and other minorities are guaranteed a certain number of seats in order to ensure their representation in Parliament.

Sixty percent of the 21.5 million eligible voters are expected to turn out. Out-of-country voting will take place in 19 nations. Here in the United States, there will be polling stations in Illinois, California, Michigan, Texas, Arizona, Virginia and Tennessee.

We are doing everything we can to make sure the elections are free and fair. The process is being administered by the Independent High Electoral Commission – an independent body of nine commissioners, nominated and approved by Parliament.

Throughout the nation, only 15 candidates have been barred by the Commission. There has been much less controversy than in past elections about excluding candidates and de-Baathification.

To ensure accountability and transparency, electronic voting cards are being used in order to eliminate voter fraud. More than 650 credentials have been issued to foreign monitors.

These improvements help to explain why 75% of Iraqis are more enthusiastic about this election than earlier elections, according to a recent poll commissioned by the NDI (National Democratic Institute).

As the campaign enters its closing week, Americans would find some features familiar. The campaigns are better organized and more professional than in the past. Reflecting the increasing numbers of Iraqis who are online, the candidates are making greater use of social media to reach out to constituents and debate core issues.

What are the issues? Well, I have heard the famous American slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid.” In Iraq, the economy is one of four over-riding concerns.

Security concerns are inescapable. Most Iraqis believe that security can improve if Iraqi forces are better armed and better trained.

Regarding the economy, surprisingly, most Iraqis don’t see the oil sector as the major driver for growth and prosperity. Instead, Iraqis believe that the two things our nation needs most are loans for small businesses and incentives to business owners to hire more employees..

Rounding out their major concerns, Iraqis want to rebuild and improve our education and healthcare systems.

Now, it is no secret that the election is being held amid the rising threat of terrorist groups such as the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. That is why it is more important than ever that the elections are held on time.

When they participate in the elections, the voters will be striking a powerful blow against the terrorists who are trying to frighten us away from the polling places in order to prevent the consolidation of democracy in Iraq.

Make no mistake: Every vote that is cast will be a vote for hope and not fear, ballots and not bullets, and democracy and not dictatorship or divisiveness.

When the final results are released – which is expected to be at the end of May -- the democratic process will continue. Since it is very possible that no single party gain a majority, the conversation will continue about how the competing parties can come together to form a coalition government.

An inclusive government will keep Iraq moving forward towards security, stability and democracy. Having been ruled by one man and one party under Saddam’s regime, Iraqis understand that no single faction – whether political, ethnic, regional or religious – should control our country.

When every segment of society has a voice and no community feels excluded, the new government will gain legitimacy. This will deny the extremists the political support they need for their violent tactics. Inclusiveness isn’t only the best way to build democracy. It is also the best and only way to beat terrorism.

As we succeed at holding elections and forming a new government, we will be better able to make progress on the security, political, economic and diplomatic fronts.

In the southern provinces, throughout the election campaign, there have been no reported security incidents in Muthana, Diwaniya and Najaf.

In the western provinces, improved security will depend on the speed of the process of forming a new government. Despite the current difficulties in Anbar, the Government is committed to ensuring conditions for a strong voter turnout. Displaced persons will be able to cast their ballots at secure sites.

On the political front, the process of forming a government will be conditioned on reaching an agreement with key segments of our society, such as the Kurds over oil revenue and the scope of federalism among other issues. We are hopeful that, following the election, the odds will improve for breaking that deadlock.

This, in turn, will pave the way for a greater focus on trade and investment.

On the diplomatic front, successful elections will improve Iraq's standing in the international community. This will enable us to play a greater role in the region as a force for moderation.

Forming a new government will also re-energize the implementation of the Strategic Framework Agreement between the United States and Iraq. We want to build what President Obama has called "a partnership of equals."

As part of that endeavor, our Embassy will continue our efforts to promote institutional and people-to-people exchanges between Iraqis and Americans.

When you visit Iraq, you will find an energetic and educated people, committed to building our democracy, securing our country, stabilizing our region, and rebuilding our roads, highways and airports, restoring our water and electrical systems, and improving our education and healthcare. We welcome American friendship, partnership and investment.

The marathon we are running is long, but we are determined to cross the finish line despite the challenges we face.

And now I would be glad to take answer your questions.