

Kurd describes 'traumatized' Iraq, why his people worry about U.S.

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BY BILL HESS



Qubad J. Talabany, representative of the Kurdistan regional government to the United States, talks about the Middle East during the TRADOC Culture Training Summit on Thursday. (Ed Honda-Herald/Review)

SIERRA VISTA -- The Kurds in Iraq are afraid they will again be left in a lurch if American troops are forced to leave next year, the Kurdistan representative to the United States said Thursday.

If the U.S. leaves early and does not protect the Kurds, it will be the third time in a little more than three decades the ethnic group will have been betrayed by the United States, Qubad Jalal Talabany said during an afternoon sit-down interview with the Herald/Review. Earlier Thursday morning, Talabany spoke to nearly 350 people during the last day of a three-day Training and Doctrine Command Cultural Awareness Summit.

In 1974, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger led the United States away from supporting a Kurdish homeland.

After the first Gulf War against Iraq in the early 1990s, "we believed (President George) Bush senior," Talabany said. When the current President George H.W. Bush's father called for Iraqis to rise up against Saddam Hussein and promised support, the Kurds and Shiites in southern Iraq did, only to see the United States turn its back.

The end result was Hussein killed thousands of Kurds and caused others to flee into the Turkish mountains for protection, where many died of exposure.

Marsh Arabs near Basra also were killed.

Trust is difficult

"We didn't trust the United States after that," Talabany said.

But with the full commitment of American forces finally toppling Hussein in 2003, Kurds once again were willing to take a chance on America.

If the United States decides to pull out before the job is done, "we Kurds want guarantees we will be protected," he said.

All of Iraq is watching the current debate in the U.S. Congress over supplemental bills to pay for America's work in Iraq and Afghanistan, but that would include a pullout next year. If such a bill is finalized, President George H. Bush has said he will veto it.

Talabany said Iraq is facing a difficult time in establishing a federal style of government, which is made worse by some American political leaders who want to force an American style government on the Iraqis, he said.

Iraqis must decide

"We want a federal government, but one that fits our needs," Talabany said, noting there are many types of national federal governments, ticking off Switzerland, Canada, Australia and others besides the United States. He said it may be best for Iraqis to pick and choose from the different forms and mold them to fit the needs of a multi-cultural Iraqi society.

Iraq does not have a history of good governance. During its modern existence, which has been about eight decades, the decisions were centralized and mostly done by dictators.

"Iraq has been a failed state," the son of the current Iraqi President Jalal Talabany said.

It also will be difficult to create a political system "when the social fabric is torn," he said.

Many Iraqi communities have been left out of the process in the ruling process, Talabany said. Since the British establishment of modern Iraq, the minority Sunni Arabs have been in control. The Shiite Muslims have been oppressed for more than a 1,000 years, and the Kurds have been for hundreds of years.

With the fall of Saddam Hussein ending Sunni domination, that group believes they are being oppressed, although it has only been for four years, Talabany said.

"It is very true Iraq is a traumatized country, a traumatized society," he said during his speech.

Though the Kurds, an Aryan race that speaks an Indo-European language, are primarily Sunnis, the Arab Sunnis have not treated them well, he said. Kurds are also Shiite and Christian.

But Kurds have a more secular outlook on life, which is why the Kurds want a federal government, Talabany said.

Centuries ago the Kurds were a nation spread across what is now Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Attempts to re-establish a Kurdish homeland have been beaten down.

Kurdistan economic power

Talabany said Kurdistan in Iraq is an economic power in the nation, and concerns have been expressed by the other areas that oil revenues will not be shared.

With the proper government, the oil revenues will be shared because they will be taxed, as they are in the United States, he said. The revenue will then spread around like in America.

Talabany does know that the Kurdish area of Iraq is the most peaceful and entrepreneurial, which can be an example for the rest of the country. The distrust prevalent today came from seeds planted nearly a century ago

When modern Iraq was founded, the first thing the Iraqi army did "was put down a Christian uprising," Talabany said. The nation's military has always been used to quell internal dissent.

Turmoil between Sunni and Shiites was the problem within Arab Muslim culture, Talabany said. The conflict between Sunni and Shiites within the Kurds is not as great.

With a laugh, he said there is a Kurdish joke that says "We are neither Shi'a or Sunni. We are "Shunni."

Arabs of all beliefs in Iraq face a need to get over feelings that they are better than anyone else in Iraq, Talabany said. Throughout the world, there are more non-Arab Muslims and they are offended by the superior attitude of Arabs.

Within Iraq, the country will continue to suffer until the Arab and non-Arab citizens can get along better, he said.

An important adviser

Before he spoke, Maj. Gen. Barbara Fast, commander of the Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca, said Talabany has been involved in Kurdish politics from a young age. He has been an important adviser to his father, and the general said that during a visit to the senior Talabany's home in Iraq she saw the younger man in a place of honor.

"He was sitting at the right hand side of his father," Fast said.

The Talabany's have "been longtime friends of the United States," the general added.

That friendship has "his (the younger Talabany's) fingerprints along with his father," she said.

Speaking to the crowd at The Palms, the president's son said, "Iraq has undergone a major transformation over the past four years."

The transformation isn't exactly what the Iraqis expected or wanted, Talabany said. The euphoria of the end of the Hussein regime has been taken over by the despair of the insurgency. Some of the problems were caused by Iraqis, but others can be placed at the feet of Americans.

Understanding needed

Talabany said too many American politicians became involved directing what they thought should be policy in Iraq without understanding the cultures involved.

A Doonesbury cartoon some time ago caught the essence of the conflict between Shiite and Sunni, he said. As the cartoon panels unfolded " which was of an American officer and an Iraqi officer driving along the streets of Baghdad "the American said they were going to take a Sunni into custody. The Iraqi officer, a Shiite, said he knew where the man lived and was pleased he would be arrested.

As the story goes, the Shiite officer told the American that one of the Sunni's relatives killed one of his relatives. When the American asked when, the Iraqi responded "in 1387."

The cartoon showed how far back the anger goes in part of Iraqi society, Talabany said.

Once Americans came into Iraq, they were seen as occupiers. Instead of doing what good occupiers should do, the United States failed, he said.

The people blamed the Americans if a light bulb didn't work because it was the responsibility of the occupier to make things work, Talabany said. Iraqis listened to rumors and began to resent Americans, who did not counter the falsehoods fast enough.

While the Kurds warmly welcomed the Americans, the same could not be said in other parts of Iraq, he said.

For example, one day he stopped as a woman in Baghdad was yelling at a GI sitting on the tank. The woman wanted electricity to run a fan because it was hot and she thought the GI was cool, even though he was sweating, because there was a rumor Americans had "air-conditioned suits."

Talabany said it becomes difficult to counter what is not true after it "goes through the neighborhoods and tea gardens."

There were more serious issues, such as a female American soldier using her foot to hold down a tribal leader.

"To regain his honor he had to go out and set off a bomb," Talabany said.

Future far off

During his interview, he said that although he would like to see an Iraq at peace and prosperity in five years, it is not a vision that will happen.

"There's just too much hatred that will take generations to overcome," Talabany said.

The anger will continue as long as the nation's capital city is in turmoil.

"Baghdad is the prize, the center of the problem," he said, noting between 500,000 and 700,000 of the nation's 6 million Kurds live in the city.

Pessimistically optimistic, Talabany said he does have a dream: "Iraq to be a federal democracy, a symbol of tolerance."

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