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Call for National Reconciliation

In April of 2003, the people of Al Anbar chose NOT to resist the entry of Coalition Forces into their lands. In fact, a group of two thousand Al Anbar citizens was mobilized to rally in support of the liberation. By May, Al Anbar's leadership had organized the Council of Sheikh to provide governing assistance in the political vacuum that was quickly leading to national anarchy. During the Summer months, numerous efforts were made to communicate the concerns and shared interests of the Al Anbar community to representatives of the CPA, including Ambassador Bremer and his staff. These grassroots efforts demonstrated the overwhelming desire, and ability, of the people of Al Anbar and their representatives to participate in what they hoped would be a new democratic Iraq.

Sadly, the Coalition Provisional Authority and Forces responded to the citizens of Al Anbar with policies of rejection, discrimination and exclusion. As early as four months into the liberation, the tide was turning toward occupation and the hopeful citizens of Al Anbar began to distrust U.S. intentions in their province and in all of Iraq. Voices of Al Anbar's moderate leaders, those who had advocated peace and national unity, were increasingly drowned out by angry individuals who were instigated and supported by foreign elements – elements that reject a stable and democratic neighbor in their midst.

Violence begot violence, and thousands of Al Anbar's residents became victims in the fight that failed to differentiate between legitimate local concerns and externally-motivated terror. In recent months, nearly 300,000 citizens have fled Falluja – creating an Iraqi refugee community within their own country.

Despite this, Al Anbar leaders have continued the push for dialogue and to resolve disputes through discussions and mediation, in line with democratic thinking. During the months of July-November 2004, Al Anbar leaders trekked the long journey to Amman no less than four times to meet U.S. government and military.

Perhaps diplomacy in Al Anbar was never given a fair chance. Ramadi and Falluja have been in a state of military siege and attack since May of 2004. Under these conditions, normal daily activities such as buying food have become risky, even deadly. Communications are nearly non-existent. All businesses are closed. Snipers line building tops.



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In this climate, it has been impossible to mobilize politically; to discuss with candidates the pros and cons of participating in the elections; to disseminate information about the electoral process; and to campaign. Any move is a suspect, and any meeting interpreted as an insurgency activity.

Despite this harsh reality, the Al Anbar leadership has not given up on the process of democracy; calling for a *National Reconciliation Conference* which they hope will result in the reintegration of the Sunnis into Iraq's political and democratic process, and ultimately, an end to the violence from all sides.

Today, statements were issued by most Sunni representative organizations, including from Al Anbar, that they would not be participating in the January 2005 National Assembly elections. This decision is an indictment on the policies of occupation and marginalization, not a rejection of the democratic process itself.

Nevertheless, this decision is likely to further alienate the Sunni community from Iraq's political system. We have seen how marginalization is the antithesis of democracy. Strategically, the future Iraqi government cannot neglect one third of its territory and millions of its citizens. Therefore, efforts to increase popular support for the institutions and systems in democracies in this region will be critical to the unity, stability and moderation of Iraq.

The following conclusions regarding the potential for democracy building in Al Anbar are based on the deeds of its citizens during an occupation that has been harshest on them:

1. The desire for democracy and representation exists in Al Anbar.
2. The ability to organize grassroots efforts exists in Al Anbar.
3. The tribal leaders, *Shuyukh*, can facilitate political transition if they are involved; they can bring the process to a halt if they are excluded. It is, therefore, wise to integrate them into the democratic process [i.e., consensus building, security, knowledge-sharing].
4. The process of democracy building cannot leave anyone behind. If the U.S. is to be credible in the region, it needs to demonstrate that it is an advocate of Democracy for all, not an entity that seeks to punish an entire region because of the acts of individuals.
5. Programs are needed to increase the role of women in civil society in Al Anbar.
6. The citizens in Al Anbar have a tremendous need for electoral process training [including organizing political parties; defining issues and developing a platform; and utilizing media as a partner in this democratic step].

Without full representation, elections in January will not resolve the crisis in Iraq. The International Community can help to stabilize Iraq by supporting a National Reconciliation Conference, the aim of which should be to bring all players together, with honest brokers, and to formulate a strategic plan for the way ahead.