

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROAD TO IRAQI DEMOCRACY

Yethrib is a town in the heart of the Sunni Triangle in Iraq. Ahmet Shauket lives under constant threat but is avowed to build the institutions to support democracy, peace and human rights in his town. This piece reflects one man's struggle for freedom and democracy in Iraq.

Ahmet Shauket *



* Ahmet Shauket is the Major of Yethrib, Iraq.

Once Saddam Hussein's regime was overthrown by coalition forces, a historical opportunity arose for the Yethrib people: to establish a democratic system. The support of those - among the 80,000 person community - who believed we could achieve democracy has been crucial. The Yethrib, as well as the majority of other Iraqis, were totally isolated from the outside world and living with severe sanctions. Iraqis were brainwashed by Saddam's media machine, to the point where most believed Americans had come to steal their oil and kill civilians.

The first important step for me on the road to creating a free democratic Iraq was to select some distinguished figures who had influence among their people. Yethrib society is tribal. It consists of 12 large tribes. I belong to the largest tribe, the Al buhishma. In the Arab world traditions, customs and tribal bonds in rural areas are stronger than law and religion. My tribe's sheik, Ahmed Abudal Lateef is my cousin. He is a strong and brave person. He agreed to contact U.S. forces in the area, and soon after we both met with Brigadier General Fletcher. It was at this meeting that we chose to be soldiers of freedom and agreed with the general to work together as one team for the sake of our peoples' freedom. Sheik Ahmed invited him to an Arabian feast at his home to show our solidarity. At the sheik's house, the general met all the other sheiks of the tribes along with many other well known figures from the area. The general stressed the main mission for U.S. forces in Iraq was to assist the Iraqis in building a new and free country. □

For me, this meeting was the first spark in the dark in our road towards democracy. I started to think about how to establish our local government in a democratic way. Sheik Ahmed and I stayed in touch with U.S. forces solving day-to-day problems. We worked hard to reopen offices and departments that related to citizens' necessities such as electricity, water, fuel, and salaries. Along with this campaign we faced hard opposition from the majority of the people. They insulted us, hit us with stones and incited their children against us. They believed that Sheik Ahmed and I were helping the Americans against them. Nonetheless, we persevered because we believed that they would understand this dramatic change sooner or later. It was just a matter of time.

On 2 May 2003 I held our first meeting with the Yethrib sheiks. I explained to them how to build the government: they had to choose 20 of the most influential figures in the area to establish the city council. A big argument broke out and we had to hold a huge community meeting to select those 20 figures. In the end each tribe voted for its representatives in the council. This was the first democratic conduct ever in Yethrib. They were all convinced that voting was the best solution. Afterwards, I shared with the city council every decision in developing our local government. We began to build Iraqi police forces and the Iraqi Civilian Defense Corp (ICDC). We chose qualified young people for those forces. Their main task was to stabilize the area and enforce law and order in the city. In other words, these armed forces were to be readied to fight the opposers of freedom.

Many different types of weapons from the old regime ended up in private homes, stores and farms as coalition forces dissolved the former Iraqi army. Most of the Iraqi men have experience in how to use these weapons due to their participation in previous wars. Some of those trained men turned against us with huge amounts of weapons. Most of them do not have doctrinal training to fight, but at this stage they are still stronger than our IPs (Iraqi Police) and the ICDC (Iraqi Civil Defense Core).

Therefore, we had to take political steps to drag as many of them as possible in our direction, the path to freedom. With the help of U.S. forces, we held meetings with the imams (religious leaders in Yethrib) along with Cap Palliwoda, U.S. company command in Yethrib (he was killed by the terrorists months later). We tried to make the imams aware of what we are doing for our people. Through these meetings we succeeded in convincing some of them to be on our side, some of them stayed neutral, and a minority sided with Islamic extremists. We used the tribal nature of the area to enhance stability. We established the Sheiks' council and held regular meetings, divided Yethrib into different areas and bore the responsibility for security in each area to its sheik. In a large ceremony we signed a symbolic peace treaty between U.S. military forces and the sheiks in front of hundreds of Yethrib men, under one tent and called it the Tent Treaty. □

The next step was to organize all the educated people into a league, the Yethrib League of Educated People. I am a member. We drafted an internal charter for the league in democratic manner and won many educated people to our side. At the same time, we established a local newspaper called *The Yethrib Paper* which covered Yethrib local news and regional news. We used it to publish all the progress that we made politically, with the military and in public services. We also concentrated on creating jobs to give people a chance at advancing their lives. We allowed them the possibility to attempt different kinds of projects such as schools, clinics, water treatment facilities, work on restoring electricity, building roads, cleaning and repairing irrigation canals, as well as providing school and medical supplies. These projects affected the minds of many people positively. For example, we renovated the former Ba'ath party headquarters in Yethrib, furnished it and equipped it with medical devices. In a large ceremony we opened it as hospital. Instead of a place to torture people that everyone was afraid of, we turned it into a place for healing. We see crowds of people directed to this hospital everyday.

Amid these successes, the opposition began attacking U.S. forces in order to shift their focus from playing a role in building a free country to a defensive military role. They made the area unsafe to contractors and companies involved in rebuilding projects. This forced us to consolidate our security forces and attempt to provide security and assistance so that the contractors and companies could continue to build. The opposition implemented horrid methods in their pursuit of hindering democratic progress. For example they attacked my house five times

using different techniques: by placing an improvised explosive device at the main door, to kill me or any one of my children; they kidnapped an innocent civilian and asked for high ransoms; they killed drivers to steal their trucks; they killed police and army members and they killed distinguished figures such as our soldier of freedom, Sheik Ahmed Abudal Lateef with four of my relatives using a car bomb which also injured two of my brothers, destroyed our vehicles and damaged the administrative office in Yethrib. Everyone believed that I would leave Yethrib; but I continue to push on for the goal of freedom and democracy. The image of a free Iraq is clearer now than ever before. Former Ba'athists and the Islamic extremists have come together in a terrorist trench because the Ba'athists lost power and the fanatic Muslims seek it. Ba'ath party ideology is totally opposite to extremist ideology. They had never met before. In fact, they were enemies before the war. It is obvious that their aim is gaining power and not a pure ideological slant. The most dangerous thing is that they believe they can get it by force. They know well that the democratic system does not help them because they do not have people behind them. They are just dictators recast. They cannot compete peacefully and for this reason they tried to destroy the first free general elections on 31 January 2005. However, as the world witnessed, heroes challenged death and voted for our Iraqi future. This was a turning point in the struggle for democracy. I call it a turning point because many people, especially the Sunnis, now believe they were wrong and are eager to participate in the political process.

For now, Iraqi government has made good progress; but it is not yet enough to declare victory for freedom. The other side is very small and growing smaller. Slowly but surely, we are winning. The soldiers of *Freedom* will win.