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Iraqis observe democracy in Richmond

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RICHMOND -- The mention of bridge and road repairs brought nods of recognition from the eight Iraqi visitors at the Richmond town meeting Tuesday morning.

When Selectboard Chairman Erik Filkorn outlined the need to conserve spending on vehicles, the visitors' U.S. State Department translator, Mustafa Sayid, quietly repeated the comments through a tiny microphone.

The Iraqis again nodded. In this respect, small-town Vermont resembled their respective Baghdad constituencies.

Later, they outlined the differences; the foremost being an Iraqi dependence on the very country that leveled its infrastructure in 2003.

Security was loose at the Camels Hump Middle School gym; the chains of command transparent. Filkorn introduced the urban council members and the town meeting crowd applauded.

Nominated by the American Embassy in Baghdad, the Iraqis had come stateside for three weeks as a part of the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program. They came as students.

In an informal meeting with Rep. Denise Barnard, D-Richmond, in the school cafeteria, they voiced the hope that future delegations to Iraq would likewise sidestep diplomatic and military agendas.

"We're suffering daily burdens: no electricity, no services, high unemployment," said Jabar Sulaiman, an education specialist in Baghdad's al-Mansur District. "Carry this message faithfully: Your high officials need to meet with the true representatives of the people, with district and provincial councils."

The group emphasized the importance of reconstruction. They also advised against any sudden pullout of American troops.

"Most Iraqis think that a total withdrawal cannot happen right now," said Sabeeh Radhi Al-Kaabi, who serves on the Rasheed District Advisory Council. "Your military must first reinforce the Iraqi army and police. You must first help us rebuild our country."

His visit to Vermont, he said, gave him hope.

"Here I find honesty and sincerity. The other face of America, represented by those in Iraq, is completely different," he said.

Did Al-Kaabi have advice for Americans on how to best govern their own country?

"I'm not here to lecture you," he said. "We simply ask that you go back to our history. We have a great religious history, a history with great civilizations with the first great code of laws in Hammurabi. We ask for continued dialogue, so both parties can learn from each other."

Kadum A. Al-Shimary, chairman of the Baghdad Regional Council, weighed in against further attempts at a military solution to Iraq's troubles.

"We must thank you for saving us from a dictatorship," he said, "but despite this great gesture, you should know that we've suffered a great degradation in security, in public services and in employment. Homicides, murders and rapes are up, so has migration and sectarian divides."

Al-Shimary added that Iraqi education and health care, once the pride of the Middle East, has been reduced to that of the poorest African countries.

"Before 2003, Iraq did not know terrorism," he said. "Now we're the center and focus of all the terrorists in the world. Iraq has become a laboratory for all kinds of international experiments. It's a place where settling accounts of all the countries in the region takes place."

"Despite this unbelievable situation, you have men who insist on going forward with life, insist on forging a future for future generations. We can achieve these goals with the help of America. We need everything, including your prayers."

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