

Meliha Altunışık

Mr. Melkert was a member of the parliament from Dutch Labor party, Minister of Social Affairs and Employment. In 2001 he was elected as the party leader, later he served as member of the board of directors at the World Bank for over 3 years and then appointed by the then Secretary General Annan to the position of the UN Undersecretary General and associate administrator of UNDP in 2006.

Currently he serves as the Special Representative for Iraq and today he is going to be talking about Iraq in the wake of recent parliamentary elections, he will just talk about 15-20 minutes then we would like this to be more interactive, so open the floor for questions and comments.

Ad Melkert

Thank you very much for this introduction and for also this great opportunity.

Good morning,

First of all, the reason for me to be in Ankara is to have the great opportunity to have consultations with the Turkish Government about its views and suggestions on the role of the UN in Iraq. Yesterday I met President Gul and Foreign Minister Davutoglu and most of others. It's for me also great opportunity to have the chance to see your questions or concerns, because for the UN, it's very important that we see ourselves as truly representative of the global communities' interests and views in the very complicated context of Iraq.

We are there on the basis of a Security Council resolution that is annually reviewed and basically provides us with a broad mandate to advise the Iraqi government at their request and to facilitate processes politically, economically in the way that serves interests of Iraq.

We are active in humanitarian, human rights field, but obviously some of the political issues are really also the key of what we are dealing in day to day basis. And that is what I would like to focus on in my introductory remarks but please you of course feel free to raise any issue that you would find of interest.

Let me say something about current affairs that are to large extent defined by the elections. Actually already for over a year we also as UN are very closely involved in the electoral process that is led by the Independent High Electoral Committee; IHEC.

So really Iraqi leadership and the committee are basically composed of the representatives of different political groups but is supposed to lead the process independently. We, as the UN on daily basis advise them on each stage of the elections.

The elections started with the important task of putting voter registration together which is not easy to do in Iraq where there is no overall civil registry. And then the second stage was to advise on the formulation of the electoral law, so that meant a lot of interaction with parliamentarians. It took quite a while to have agreement on that but it was very important to note that after all, there was a strong consensus which was an important achievement in itself and the UN played important mediation role to break the deadlock at some points when major parties to come together and asked basically to the UN to step in to make some suggestions.

Then the next stage was the technical preparation of the elections including the candidate lists. You may know that there was quite a complication on the basis of a law that disqualifies people from holding public office on the basis of the rule under the Saddam regime. That is in itself a legitimate thing and certainly it is the sovereign right for Iraq to agree on such a decision however the application of that law raised concerns, it was quite intransparent. People who were disqualified were not really shown the grounds on the basis of which they were disqualified. We tried as much as possible to continue to advise IHEC keeping the right ballots which by and large happened because after all even numbers of candidates were disqualified that parties were not. And those disqualified candidates were replaced by other candidates in most of the cases. It means that Iraqi people really had a big chance of choice of over 60.000 candidates and more then 300 parties to chose from and what we saw on the election day, 7th of march, was a truly motivated Iraqi people going out to vote, over 62 % turnout which is quite good by many standards even despite some violence particularly in Baghdad in the early hours of election day. But the overall day was very good. Turnout was good and the general atmosphere which is maybe the most important was one of seeing this as an important opportunity for Iraq and a big step forward. And then the stage started of the counting which was complicated because the election law was quite complicated. Many checks and balances were introduced to the system because experiences in the past with the

elections have shown serious efforts at that time occurred to defraud and to influence the results. There were efforts this time as well but we believe that this time system is by and large managing to avoid those efforts from having such an impact that would affect the results. So, on that basis we have advised the IHEC that we didn't see indications of widespread systemic failure of fraud. And on that basis we considered the elections credible and that was also the basis for the IHEC to declare results on 26th of March which are preliminary results because in the Iraqi system it is the supreme court that has to ratify the results after dealing with complaints and appeals by candidates or parties and that is the stage where we are right now so the court, so called election judicial panel has the appeals including some partial recounts particularly in Baghdad and some of those complaints were by the State of Law coalition headed by Prime Minister Maliki who is on record that he was not happy with the way that elections were conducted and has argued for a recount and it is now up to the judges whether that will happen.

This may still take 2-3 weeks from now but interestingly we see now at the same time while this process is still going on, the political negotiations have already started between the major four big blocks that have emerged from these elections. The Irakiya block headed by Mr. Allawi, then the State of Law coalition headed by Mr. Maliki, the Iraqi National Alliance that is composed of different parties but led particularly by the ISCI and Sadrist is largest parts of that coalition and then there is Kurdistan Alliance, main Kurdistan parties headed by basically by the President Talabani.

We see a pattern of many bilateral contacts and also many travels abroad including to Istanbul and Ankara, very popular destination but also to Riyadh, Damascus, Tehran and it is at this moment early to see how this process will shape up.

The starts of the government formation has to wait final ratification by the supreme court and on that basis, the current president Talabani should call for the meeting of new council of representatives and the council has to elect the speaker and the new president should be elected and the largest block in the council is then entitled to propose a candidate prime minister who should try to put government together within one month and if he doesn't succeed then there would be a next person appointed.

This sounds all very constitutional and promising but definitely it will run into political complications because as you may imagine there will be a lot of negotiations about who will have the speaker, the president, right to start as the first candidate prime minister to try to put government come together and this comes to the question which parties will eventually be ready and acceptable to make government and that is all matter of speculation at this point of time.

From the UN's point of view, we are particularly concerned that we are ready to advise and even to facilitate some of the negotiation processes to the extent that it would be requested by the Iraqi counter part because it is clearly their responsibility and their process. Let me just say here it is really historic what is going on because basically these elections and this government formation process is the first time that the Iraqis has to do it by themselves. Four years ago it was dominated and influenced by the Americans and this is now different, the Americans are taken step back.

The UN is a facilitator but by nature only at a request of parties, not with our own preference of course. It means that this peaceful transition to new government is actually something that is happening for the first time in Iraqi political history.

It will take some time. I noticed that in particular in the US media there is high criticisms but they are not completely aware what it takes to bring minority parties in to coalition. I myself with my European background have a little bit more understanding about the time needed for that, like Holland, Belgium, we see it takes months and months sometimes.

However there are potential downsides to the time that is needed and as you may have seen last Sunday, Tuesday, there were quite bad explosions in Baghdad and speculations that they were because of the political vacuum. I think we should be careful to try to understand what the reasons behind them because there are so many actors, so many motives in the Iraqi context but obviously it will be important that as soon as there is a government with requisite authority that is really recognized and that is also in fact seen as responding to the expression of preferences by the Iraqi voter since Iraqi voter is wondering what happened with my vote. In that sense it would be important that this process will be continued and completed as soon as possible.

Let me finally say something on the international context within which we observe all those developments. I mentioned about the high frequency of interaction with the Iraqi political leaders and wider region and that includes even some European countries as well as Washington as the destinations of frequent visits. It shows actually that Iraq is still very much matter of concern and attention of the international community even when in many ways Iraq has disappeared on the front pages.

Iraq is still under the supervision of the UN; Chapter 7, sanctions that are still applied after some decades starting even going back to the 1991 Gulf War. Iraqis want of course to be released from that and it is one of our tasks to help them in that but as a condition it should recognize the borders with Kuwait which actually has not happened after the Saddam regime. There is vivid interest of the region in Iraq for all kind of historic and economic reasons and you are also well placed to understand in Turkey and that history has not really changed.

Yet it is important that the Iraqis themselves will have the space to define their own fate and future and so that is why we as the UN very much advocating that, yes there is international engagement but the basis on the Security Council mandate but it is very important that it is constructive engagement. For instance through strong economic bilateral relations between Iraq and Turkey i think that is a way of constructively engaging with the future of the country but there are of course examples of non-constructive engagement through support for acts of violence or interference and that is a matter of concern.

Some where in between is vivid interest in some of the political decisions that will define a lot of the stability for the future of Iraq and particularly future relation between Kurdistan region and the federal state of Iraq will be crucial and obviously there is strong Turkish interest there.

We as the UN are preparing for an active facilitating role to the extent that will be desired by Iraqi parties. Last week I hosted a meeting on the problems between Arabs and Kurds in Mousul and maybe in coming weeks or months we will start to adhere the wider agenda ranging from petroleum revenue sharing between Kurds and Arabs to the future of Kirkuk and other disputed areas, the joint security arrangement between Iraqi security forces and peshmerga and the Iraqi army, which are currently under the supervision of the US but of course it will be changing in the near future and also the support for social and economic development in number of areas that are actually quite poor despite the oil wealth.

Those are all elements of potential instability if they are not addressed; sooner or later they could be cause of any incident, conflicts and maybe even wider ranging confrontation, maybe not only in Iraq but also in wider region.

That is exactly the reason why the UN has a political mission in Iraq, to try to work with parties in and outside of Iraq to make progress basically.

So let me stop here and leave the place for discussions. Thank you for this opportunity.

Meliha Altunışık: Thank you. I think you clearly mapped out the opportunities but also challenges that emerged in the post-election Iraq. The floor is open for discussion now.

Questions:

1. Oytun Orhan from ORSAM: I want to learn your opinion about the impacts of the election results on Kirkuk's status.

2. From the US Consulate: What are the leaders trying to achieve by taking their political discussions about government formation outside the country?

3.? (En baştaki medya mensubu adam) : What will happen next after Iraqi elections in Iraq?

4. Meliha Altunışık: What is the UN doing about Refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDP)?

5. How will be the security situation after the US troops withdraw?

6. Selen Tonkuş from ORSAM: I was observing the elections in Erbil and I was very much impressed in terms of turnout and fairness. The only problem that I observed was regarding the name lists. In each station over 100 people could not vote because they could not find their names on the lists. And other problem related to this one is that although they were complaining about this situation, they did not want to fill the complaint forms. What do you think about these problems and are there any others problems that the UN observed related to electoral process? What were the main complaints regarding the process?

7. From Canadian Embassy: The election results placed the Kurdish parties to a very interesting situation. What is their strategy, what do they want to get out of these negotiations?

8. Meliha Altunışık: One of the problems in Iraq has been framing of the politics in terms of identities and some people refer to it as Lebanonization of Iraqi politics. But from our side it seems like there is limited move towards a more secular politics based on Iraqi national identity. I am observing this since last summer and this elections seems to sort of support that view to some extent. As someone on the ground, do you see a limited transformation from politics based on primordial identities to a Iraqi national identity based politics?

9. Christian Wilson from the British Embassy: How do you evaluate Turkey's role and relations with Iraq?

10.? : Could you share your observations on PKK activities in Iraq?

Answers:

1. It is still difficult to analyze the impacts of the elections results. It has of course been noted by many that the outcome of the elections in Kirkuk were quite balanced between Kurdish parties and Iraqiya coalition. It seems to emphasize the points that already recognized for a long period of time that different ethnic groups are finding their home in Kirkuk. It implies that a solution for the future should be based on a consensus among the parties living in Kirkuk and in that sense the election results approve this view. It will be wrong to comment on Kirkuk as isolated from overall political picture of the outcome of the elections for Iraq. What direction would be taken on the most sensitive issues which includes Kirkuk depend on the results of the overall elections and the government to be formed out of those results. I think we should wait and see how the new government addresses the issue.

Moreover, there is a wide ranging agreement that a census would take place in Iraq this autumn. That census is important for Kirkuk as you know it is part of article 41. But also that census is important for broader issues such as the issue of voter registration that we faced in the electoral process.

On the issue of what way forward with regard to Kirkuk would be, as I said we as the UN, we are preparing ourselves for making suggestions. There is something that I shared with the Security Council that the time has come after the elections to address Kirkuk and other disputed areas as well as oil revenue sharing and more security arrangements. If these are not addressed at the right time, they would stay as obstacles before the investments or trust construction and normalization.

2. The official process has not started yet. The intention of the travels abroad may be creating understanding with other actors about intentions of Iraqi leaders and asking them to support some certain views on putting a broadly inclusive government in place. As we have observed in the time before the elections many candidates had gone out neighboring countries to take support probably. But now is the time for leaders to feel reassured or encouraged by those whom they want to cooperate with outside the country in order to be accepted by the regional actors. There is long tradition of interest representation by other countries within Iraqi domestic scene. My hope is that once the official elections results are declared, whole emphasis would be placed in Baghdad. Some parties suggested organizing a round table with key political parties, as the next step. And we as the UN of course don't have a preference on how the government composition should be but it might be in terms of progress, a good step forward.

3. There is two dimensional agenda of any new government in any composition; one is; the type of political issues that I have indicated on normalization of Iraq in international community, the Arab - Kurds coexistence issues; and the second dimension is social-economic developments. As you know at the end of last year, important contracts on oil production have been concluded and the next stage is that there will be more understanding on management of oil production and development in the whole country, also between Erbil and Baghdad. There is enormous need to develop socioeconomic standards which were damaged over the past years which will be important indicators of stability. When we talk about stability, we should not only think about political issues, but also about economic future and the social inclusion.

4. The situation for IDPs and refugees is different.

For the IDPs: The UN is particularly involved through UNHCR, refugee organization, UNICEF and the office for coordination of humanitarian affairs to support people in their daily existence and problems. There are several hundreds of thousands IDPs. They are living in very poor conditions and we are very concerned about that and we are trying to convince political parties that it should be, for the new government, a question of honor to make sure that people should find a place to live. In any case resettlement will be taken seriously and people will be supported in their employment opportunities.

Refugees: This is a bit more differentiated issue. Some are very desperate to return, others are desperate but not so desperate to return and others are not poor at all. A number of people wants to stay where they are ; Jordan, Syria. So it is a great of variety situation. UNHCR and other organizations are this moment looking and trying to get a clear picture of what Iraqi government is required to do to try to provide employment where refugees are welcomed to come back. Some refugees are afraid of security situation and others for political reasons, don't want to come back. So it is difficult to make more general picture. But when one thinks about normalization of the situation of Iraq it is certainly necessary to talk about the refugees because at the end of the day it is a very important sign of normalizing.

Let me add here one remark. I didn't refer to the security in my introduction. Security is still a big issue in terms of hindering the government and hindering also international organizations such as us, to do supportive work in the country. Even if the total number of violent events decreased, there are still tremendous amounts of incidents, injured or killed or kidnapped. So the situation is not normal although it is better than before. There is need for a better cooperation between Iraqi security forces and police. At the same time there are substantial differences in the different parts of the country. In Kurdistan region and in the south, it is better but in Nenowa, Diyala, Baghdad, Ambar, the security situation is sometimes predictable but sometimes quite bad. This is a responsibility of the government to work on and for us, too in the sense of normalizing the situation.

5. We will see in the coming months. Last June the US combat troops withdrew from the cities basically but this is still relatively small step because it left numbers of by and large US forces. In coming months as it is announced, there will be substantial reduction to leave 50,000 troops behind. I actually think that the gradual improvement of the security situation on the basis of the cooperation between the US and Iraqi government to ensure training of the

Iraqi forces could make possible gradual transition that will not hugely impact to security perception. As everything related to security is all speculation, nobody knows exactly, but the remaining capacity in terms of intelligence and intelligence sharing may provide the Iraqi government with the tools to be in charge of the security by itself.

6. About the complaint forms, we as the UN and I personally in almost all statements encouraged people if there is a complaint, to make use of their rights. That is an interesting point. I will search for that whether there were the same problems in other places too.

The first point that you mentioned that is something that occurred frequently, I was myself was in Kirkuk on the Election Day. They were supposed to be sent to the voter updating center where basically they could cast their votes as in the form of so called –conditional-ballots- so people vote in a closed envelop and that closed envelop goes to the place where their names are written, so that gives the opportunity to check the name lists of those updated lists whether they are entitled to vote. If they are, the envelop would be put in the ballot to be counted. That is happened in many instances but there is the issue of distortion of course.

A huge distortion of election results happened in the past, between different governorates but we believe that the current system is better to avoid it. This is one of the reasons that lead us to think the election was relatively fair.

I very much appreciated that you were there, it is important for Iraq to see many people from other countries showing interest and being there.

This is quite striking that the reports of the most of the observers, were more or less indicating the same issues but never indicating huge problems that affected the process.

7. From the UN point of view, basic feature of Kurdistan parties is two folds.

Internally they are now more parties then before who obtained votes; there are Goran and the Islamic parties. Interestingly last Saturday all the Kurdish parties came together and agreed that in the Council of Representatives they will cooperate as one block regarding the fundamental issues as they see. That is an important fact for their presence in Baghdad.

Second point is that, leaders of the government in Erbil tell us all the time that they have strong aspiration for the autonomy of the region but also they want to be strong in Baghdad and that is very essential for the sake of the unity of Iraq and the future of Iraq.

Although theoretically it is possible to think of the coalitions that leads the majority of seats without the Kurdish blocks, I think this is well understood that it is very important to have them as part of a government because this will serve the interests of the link between Baghdad and Erbil to be balanced in the best possible way.

8. It is a very important question. It is not so easy to give an answer on that. I would like to see a sequence of different relevant steps. One relative sequence is the parties present themselves in that way as you said, so in that sense that is true that Iraqiya has made an effort and reached number of seats in the south and Mr. Maliki and his coalition obtained votes from Ambar and some other places more Northern. In that sense the emphasis is on the agenda of Iraq rather than the agenda on one part of the country. This is how the way that parties have presented themselves.

Last week the UN concluded an agreement with the government, so called UN Development Assistance Framework which is basically guideline for all the UN agencies and World Bank to work with the government in next 4 years. To address Iraq as an entity reinforces the fact that, despite some of the distinctions particularly around Kurdistan region's status, the historic cohesion of the Iraqi state is still the predominant factor in defining the positions of the leaders and parties.

9. I have truly experienced that the cooperation with the Turkish government is very constructive. Before coming to Ankara, I had numerous changes particularly with the Turkish Permanent Mission in New York and with Ambassador Özçelik in Baghdad, on the basis of trying to look for solutions that are in the interest of Iraqi processes and parties coming together for the future of Iraq as a whole. There is specific interest with regard to the tensions in Nenowa and we are as the UN also supported by the Turkish side to try to bring parties together as we did last week with the close cooperation with the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister who took several initiatives before elections which could not continue due to some reasons and due to elections.

I am very well aware of Turkish interest in Kirkuk and the other disputed areas. Obviously Turkish government has a position on that which I cannot comment on, but that position is in itself a relevant important factor for the UN in looking how we can facilitate the process as much as possible, with taking into account different views and bring them on a common denominator.

We are quite happy with the effort by the Foreign Minister Davutoglu to mediate at a time of conflict between the Iraqi government and Syrian government after bombings in Baghdad in last August and although the efforts didn't lead a result, they certainly helped defusing the tensions and showed the intention of Turkish government to be an interlocutor. It is very important because the relations between Iraq and some of the neighboring countries could still be improved, as the UN, we hope this very much after the government formation. Some countries can play role in that process, and Turkey is well placed.

It is quite impressive to see the increase of economic relations between Turkey and Iraq, particularly the northern part, but I believe it will be distributed through the whole country, which contributes the infrastructure to make Turkey and Iraq for the matter a very interesting gateway between the Gulf and Europe.

10. I don't have any observation on that other than I can read in the newspapers. There is humanitarian concern represented by UNHCR for refugees in Makhmour camp. The UN is ready for solutions regarding them but those solutions should be found between Iraq and Turkey, as you know there is also involvement of the US. But there is no direct role of the UN.