

COMMUNITY CONSENSUS STATEMENT

As Arab Americans, we seek to make a positive contribution in the national debate on critical issues of importance to our country.

October | 2010

Iraq

We support a responsible end to the war in Iraq modeled after the key recommendations of the Iraq Study Group Report focusing on political reconciliation and regional diplomacy. Although the recent withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq is a significant milestone, it must not signal the end of our commitment to leave Iraq as a stable, safe country for its citizens.

A responsible end to this war must recognize that long term peace and security in Iraq can only be achieved through political reform and national reconciliation. We support the departure of American forces from Iraq, noting that diplomatic engagement, not a military strategy, will be the only way to resolve the ongoing political stalemate in the country.

We believe that the international community should pressure the Iraqi government to solve the humanitarian crisis facing refugees and internally displaced persons, making it safe for them to return to their homes. This must be part of a wider effort to provide protection for minority groups and vulnerable communities in Iraq. The international community should also support Syria and Jordan as they accommodate their Iraqi refugee populations, as well as assist in Iraq's reconstruction and development. In order to achieve these goals, the United States must lead diplomatic efforts involving all of Iraq's neighbors, working towards a plan for long-term peace and stability.

We strongly endorse policies aiming to secure the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iraq. This entails support for reconciliation among Iraq's sectarian groups to bring about stable, democratic governance based on tolerance and transparency, and prevent the spread of violence emanating within Iraq.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces must continue as is required by the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement.

- We recognize that we have a continuing responsibility to the Iraqi people that includes providing the support they need to achieve stability and security, national reconciliation, and reconstruction of their infrastructure and economy.

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- Because one-fifth of the Iraqi population remains either refugee or internally displaced (IDP), this is an issue that must be addressed by:
 - Providing financial assistance to United Nations refugee programs in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan.
 - Pressuring the Iraqi government to face its responsibility to ensure repatriation for refugees and a secure environment that will enable IDP's to return to their homes.
 - In particular, we are concerned for vulnerable ethnic and religious minority communities and Palestinian refugees in Iraq. There must be international pressure on the Iraqi government to protect their rights and ensure their safety and security.
 - We support an expedited visa program and resettlement for all Iraqi refugees and civilians whose work with the U.S. has put them at risk and for families seeking to be reunited.

Palestine

We agree with General David Petraeus that the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is critical to the national security interests of the United States. Additionally, we believe that an independent, democratic state of Palestine will be a strong ally of the United States in the Middle East.

We support the goal of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that ends the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, resulting in an independent Palestinian state and freedom for the Palestinian people. Any solution must include a just resolution of the Palestinian refugees' right of return in accordance with UN resolutions.

In order to maintain the integrity of negotiations, we insist that the U.S. and the international community exercise balanced pressure and restrain Israeli acts of provocation and unilateral steps that have historically undermined negotiations by seeking to predetermine their outcome.

- The Administration should continue to insist on a halt to settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and that Israel's Wall/Barrier and existing settlements cannot be viewed as "established facts."
- We must continue to support the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people as they work to rebuild the democratic and transparent institutions and economy they will need in order to establish an independent and sovereign state. At the same time, the U.S. must insist that Israel end practices that inhibit economic development (including denying Palestinians access to resources, and the ability to import and export) and freedom of movement for Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank.
- In addition to ending the blockade of Gaza and ensuring that the people of Gaza have access to humanitarian and reconstruction materials, the U.S. should support efforts to promote Palestinian reconciliation.
- We support continued US funding for the UN Works and Relief Agency (UNRWA) that plays an indispensable role in ensuring access to basic services for Palestinian refugees.

Lebanon

We support policies that recognize Lebanon as a key component to a stable, peaceful Middle East.

The United States must work to develop a constructive approach to Lebanon that supports its territorial integrity and political sovereignty while working to strengthen its national institutions. Congressional efforts that seek to isolate or punish Lebanon only weaken its government, endangering its stability. Open and sincere diplomatic engagement by the U.S. is essential to achieve the sustainable political reconciliation necessary for progress in Lebanon, and to urge its neighbors to continue working with Lebanon's leadership to reinforce and strengthen full governance in Lebanon by Lebanese authorities.

We also support U.S. initiatives that will assist the Lebanese people in achieving reform, reconciliation and national unity; work to strengthen Lebanon's military and its other national institutions; encourage investment and economic development that will facilitate fair distribution of services, opportunities, and employment; and encourage the implementation of all U.N. resolutions necessary to protect Lebanon's sovereignty and security. It is crucial for U.S. leadership to demonstrate to the Lebanese people that their country is a respected partner in the Middle East, rather than a battleground of foreign confrontation or competition.

- The U.S. should continue to provide assistance for the Lebanese military as an effective and respected, multi-confessional national institution.
- The U.S. should support the government of Lebanon's efforts to promote national unity, while strengthening of the Lebanese state's authority in line with all relevant UN resolutions.
- We should support all UN resolutions, including UNSC Res. 1757, in an effort to hold accountable those responsible for the murders of P.M. Hariri, Members of Parliament, prominent journalists, and other innocent civilians, and we insist that the investigation process must be open and transparent.
- The U.S., in conjunction with the international community, should engage in regional diplomacy in an on-going effort to avert a repeat of Israel's devastating assaults and invasions of the country.

Civil Rights and Immigration

We endorse policies that make our country strong and secure, while defending our civil rights and civil liberties. We support comprehensive immigration reform that will fix our broken immigration system. Reform must both enhance border security and create a path for undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens.

The sweeping counterterrorism measures implemented in the aftermath of September 11th were based on a false dichotomy between safeguarding our national security and protecting our civil liberties. The result since has been a steady erosion of our most basic freedoms; enforcement measures that foster mistrust and policies that have proved both unreasonable and ineffective. Many of these initiatives have targeted Arab Americans and Muslim Americans, and continue to be of particular concern, such as the enhanced powers of search and seizure; racial profiling; selective law enforcement; prosecutorial discretion; the use of secret evidence; indefinite detention; lack of due process; and refusal of the right of habeas corpus. The increased powers of search and seizure in question have been bolstered by provisions of the PATRIOT Act and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. Further, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Domestic Operational Investigative Guidelines (DIOG) approved by then Attorney General Michael Mukasey expanded the ability of agents to engage in intelligence gathering and surveillance without suspicion of wrongdoing.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) should amend the 2003 DOJ Guidance on the use of race in Federal law enforcement that extends to religion and national origin as protected classes, eliminating the national security and border loopholes that have allowed for racial and religious profiling.

In addition, we support expanded immigration opportunities for highly skilled workers and foreign students in science and technology fields, the commitment to clear the family immigration backlog, and changes to the current law to promote family unification. We also believe that any immigration legislation must ensure that the more than 80,000 individuals affected by the “domestic registration” component of NSEERS, including those who did not register, or did not register properly, are not automatically disqualified from earning citizenship, or denied any other immigration benefit if otherwise eligible.

Civil Liberties:

- Our system of laws must guarantee due process, judicial review, and provide equal treatment for all persons. We also believe that law enforcement must be held accountable for their behavior. In that context, we oppose provisions of the Patriot Act that have violated these fundamental principles.
- We call for a rescinding of the Mukasey FBI guidelines (DIOG), which have opened the door to widespread abuses such as ethnic and religious profiling, use of informants/provocateurs, and domestic spying.
- There must be a review of TSA practices that have resulted in unfair profiling of Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Arab and Muslim visitors to our country.
- We propose that Congress exercise its authority in oversight over mechanisms that deal with data mining activities to ensure that privacy rights are protected and pass the End Racial Profiling Act, which bans profiling based on race, religion, ethnicity, and national origin.

Immigration Reform:

- We support Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) that addresses the needs of our nation's broken immigration system and includes a high level of transparency and guidelines.
- For Arab and Muslim Americans, real immigration reform must include a termination of NSEERS coupled with a commitment to redress the residual impact that program has had on our communities. We oppose any future immigration measures that base their actions on race, religion, or national origin.
- As an immediate first step on the road to reform, we support the passage of the DREAM Act.
- We recognize that regulation of immigration is a federal matter and that state and local initiatives with the purpose of preempting federal law only harm the process. We also recognize that there must be mutual trust, cooperation, and respect among the federal, state, and local law enforcement levels, which extends to and includes those communities involved and affected.