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LOCAL NEWS

US withdrawal from Iraq disastrous: Ex-top brass

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KUWAIT: "There are numerous-positive and negative-interferences from many of Iraq's neighbors and it is of strategic interest of those neighbours, in the long term, for Iraq to calm down," said a high-ranking Iraqi official. Saifaldin Abdul-Rahman, senior aide coordinating public policy and public relations for Iraq's vice president Tariq Al-Hashimi, was dwelling on the issue of the influence of Iran and other neighboring countries in the region on Iraq. Abdul-Rahman was a participant in a panel discussion titled: "Iraq: Is There Hope?" that was held at the Marina Hotel on Sunday evening. Kuwait-based Jusoor Arabiya Leadership and Consultancy Center and Smadja Associates Strategic Advisory hosted the event which was held under the patronage of the Prime Minister of Kuwait Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. Dr. Shafeeq Ghabra, president of Jusoor Arabiya and Claude Smadja, president of Smadja and Associates hosted the event in honor of the 4th Global Strategy Group Middle East (GSGME) conference. Meeting bi-yearly, the GSGME - a network of global strategists and thinkers - brings together top executives of companies and experts from around the world in order to discuss regional and global strategies about the economic, social and political issues shaping the future of the region.

Ghabra who moderated the discussion, explained that the diversification of backgrounds and expertise among the speakers is what makes the GSGME's content so rich and extravagant. Claude Smadja, on the other hand,

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REGIONAL NEWS



Troops clash with Mahdi Army

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commented that the goal of the GSGME is to "foresee change in an era of transformation, especially in the Middle Eastern region where so many striking developments are happening."

During the debate on Iraq, the panelists addressed many issues focusing on the safety concerns in the country and the implications for the whole region, the future of Iraq, the mistakes done since toppling Saddam Hussein's regime and the challenges and opportunities that the Iraqi government currently faces. They also dwelled on the issues of whether or not Iraq faces a civil war today, on the role of the regional players, and the impact of Al-Sadr's group and other militias in Iraq.

The US's role, the country's progress to a peace process, the role of Syria and Iran and the steps that should be taken to allow Iraq to succeed and stabilize provoked a heated discussion. Some suggestions inclined towards limiting the military role in Iraq, while others contradicted it. But most panelists agreed that support from the Gulf countries, Egypt, Jordan and Syria is also significant.

The issue of sectarianism in Iraq was also tabled during the session as well as the fact that there can be no stability in Iraq (and consequently the region) as long as sectarianism is the foundation of Iraqi politics. Some of the panelists argued that the region must find another blueprint—a new paradigm—for Iraqi politics if there is to be a stable Iraq.

According to Abdul-Rahman, the Iraqi civilians are paying a high price due to the ongoing violence stressing that people were living in constant fear of being kidnapped or being killed in car bombs. The sad fact is that highly skilled people including engineers, doctors and professors are leaving the country as the situation has reached a point whereby their safety cannot be guaranteed, he said.

Panelist Joseph Hoar, former commander in chief of US Central Command (1991-1994) and US Marine Corps Chief of Staff of operations during the 1991 Gulf War, USA, was of the opinion that there is a growing dissatisfaction among Americans in the way in which the Iraq issue is being handled by the Bush administration. The Bush administration's handling of the Iraqi situation has been characterized by "mismanagement and a shocking lack of understanding of the political and cultural realities in this part of the world."

Providing his personal opinion, Hoar emphasized, "It will be disastrous for the American forces to withdraw prematurely from Iraq." Dwelling on the strategic mistakes done by the US in Iraq, Hoar observed that the disbandment of the Iraqi army was one such huge mistake. To that, Abdul-Rahman added the disbandment of the complete security force, the police, traffic cops, and the complete Interior Ministry structure, which were the backbone of the institution of the state during Saddam's regime.

Rend Al-Rahim Francke, Executive Director of the Iraq Foundation and first ambassador for the Iraqi Governing Council in Washington, D.C., defined the core problem about the way the US handled Iraq to be the lack of "a coherent project for Iraq."

Zuhair Humadi, political scientist and senior advisor to Iraq's vice president Adel Abdul Mahdi, explained that there was a shift in the political system in Iraq and that major groups such as Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds were trying to share power in the new Iraq and that this was being done in a violent way. "Things will calm down and we will be able to find a solution to the Iraq problem," he concluded.

Francke observed that there are multi-layered armed groups in Iraq, which are

locked in fighting because they do not believe in the new order and are determined to dismantle the same.

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