

# **Iraqi women get crash course in democracy**

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**WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Ban Shakir al-Emara sat on the edge of her seat Thursday in the visitors' gallery of the House of Representatives, peering over the railing with the glee of a child. As Minnesota Rep. Betty McCollum reported to the House floor for a routine vote, Al-Emara, 36, acted as if she were witnessing a miracle.**

"I want to get this in Iraq," Al-Emara said through a translator. "We have no elections in Iraq."

For Al-Emara and 15 other Iraqi women who spent a half-day shadowing members of Congress, the everyday life of a U.S. legislator was nothing short of amazing. As part of the Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq (WAFDI), the Iraqis hoped to see the underpinnings of democracy so they can help duplicate them back home. Their week-long Washington visit was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Defense Department.

Dressed in Western-style clothing, clutching note pads and purses, three of the women -- all activists or government workers at home -- blended in with congressional aides as they followed Minnesota legislators. But they have a long way to go before they can enjoy a similar system, organizers said.

**Al-Emara's eyes glowed as she and her translator followed what McCollum said, nodding while she explained the legislative process and displayed the electronic ID card she uses to cast votes.**

"For the last 40 years ... every single person in Iraq doesn't understand what democracy means," said Susan Dakak, a WAFDI co-founder who helped arrange the visit. Dakak, an Iraqi national who moved to the United States 26 years ago, said she and other female Iraqi exiles formed the group in April to help Iraqi women improve their lives.

"Before the fall of Saddam, the women and everyone else were just hiding," Dakak said. "Now, [women] know that if there's something the government imposes on them, they can challenge it."

With six female ministers in Iraq's interim government, and a provision in the transitional administrative law that aims for 25 percent of national assembly members to be women, they have an unprecedented opportunity to get involved in government. All they need, Dakak said, is training and time.

Azhan al-Wakeel, a fiery political activist from Basra, jumped at the chance. Sitting across from Rep. Mark Kennedy, R-Minn., she told of working as a teacher, despite her political science degree, because Saddam Hussein's regime shut her out of government.

"I never anticipated the democracy to be in this level," Al-Wakeel said through her translator. But she pronounced her name herself for Kennedy, proudly telling him in English: "It means flowers."

Kirkuk agronomist Surood Falih said she found the 14-hour-a-day crash course exhilarating but overwhelming. She tried to keep step with Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., as he dashed across the Capitol to chair an investigations subcommittee hearing.

In the hearing room, she was rapt for an hour.

Earlier, over breakfast, the Iraqis taught the legislators a bit about their scarred lives, describing the rapes, torture and constant fear that marked Saddam's rule. The legislators said they were convinced the women have what it takes to build a new Iraq.

"It was one of the most moving couple hours of my life," Kennedy said.

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