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Commentary

One American's Vote for Iraqi Democracy

By JOSEPH HANANIA

As an Iraqi American living in the United States since I was 3, I never thought I would have a chance to vote in an Iraqi election.

My father, a Jewish physician with roots in Baghdad that extend back to biblical times, never voted in his home country. My mother, a Syrian who moved to Iraq with her husband, never voted there either. Now the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq has made it possible for me to exercise this basic right. I was driven by curiosity and opportunity.

There were supposed to be five polling centers for Iraqi Americans living in the western United States. But in the end there was just one, El Toro Marine Base in Orange County. We Iraqi American voters had to appear in person between Jan. 17 and today with two forms of ID, one of which proved we were born in Iraq before 1987.

I presented a passport and a driver's license and, in turn, I was awarded registration receipt No. 61833516, roughly the size of a valet parking receipt, which I must take back when I



A NEW RIGHT: The author's voter registration slip.

return to El Toro this weekend to vote. I also got a sample ballot, entirely in Arabic. Was any translation available?

"The ballot here is identical to the ballot in Iraq," one official explained. Another suggested helpfully: "Why don't you go to a mosque and ask them to translate it for you?"

Instead, I found Fuad Killu, 71, an election volunteer from

Glendale. Where on the ballot, I asked, was the American-backed candidate for prime minister, Iyad Allawi? Allawi's name, he replied, is No. 280. And who among the more than 100 names on the ballot were the other American-backed candidates? Not even Killu, who is fluent in Arabic, was sure.

Though officials far outnumbered registrants, an almost

tangible giddiness pervaded the process. "This is the most wanted days in my life," said Killu, who left Iraq in 1953.

I have always had to reach, to rationalize pride in my homeland. Here, for the very first time, I truly felt it.

Could it last?

Behind one of the 17 registration tables where polling officials idly sat, a multicolor poster read, "The Future of Iraq has a voice: your vote!" But I couldn't help thinking about the American soldiers — and Iraqi citizens — who are dying every day allegedly to make this election possible. If I could "refund" my ballot and somehow get back the lives lost, the treasure spent, the cities blown up, the blood spilled, I would do so.

Still, I have registered, and I will vote, even if I don't understand the ballot. I'll do it for my parents, and I'll do it because I can: The simple act of voting may be my way of helping my former homeland toward democracy.

Joseph Hanania is writing a book about a Slovakian merchant who saved more than 1,300 Jews from the Holocaust by sailing them out of Europe.