A Historic Week in Washington for the New Iraq

Think of two book ends for human history — 4,000 years apart. That is what was on display in Washington during the last week of July.

One bookend is "now." Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi visited at length with President Biden and then with other U.S. government and business leaders in Washington, and fashioned a common-sense path to wind down two decades of difficult Iraqi-USA history. In so doing, they implemented the strong desires of both Iraqis and Americans and a thoughtful transition away from combat support and toward capacity-building. Iraqi security forces are strong and with continued advice and equipage, will get stronger. The Iraqi people will no longer feel like an occupied country and Iraq can practice more self-determination to shape its own future.

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi visited at length with U.S. President Joe Biden on cooperative steps for the "new" and self-reliant Iraq (photo: credit news wire photo)

What I found interesting is that the high-level political discussions offered something of a dichotomy. They were at once a major historical moment and, at the same time, almost a non-news event because the events lacked conflict and drama. The Washington Post carried the story on the front page above the fold. The Wall Street Journal covered the meeting on page A 18. With no hostile or unanswered questions from the press corps or opposition party leaders, conflict was missing and, in its place, genuine hope.

The other bookend was the restoration to the Iraqi people of remarkable Iraqi treasures — especially the "Gilgamesh Dream Tablet," one of the world's oldest original religious texts, which was ordered to be returned to Iraq by the U.S. Justice Department. We are pleased to acknowledge the help of many Americans for their support in this effort. U.S. officials, Cornell University, and the leadership of the Museum of the Bible, especially want to thank Steve Green, and also Jeff Kloha, who did the right thing and accelerated the return of 8,000 artifacts. Including, we hope, soon, the Gilgamesh Tablet. All told, Americans are returning 17,000archaeological treasures dating back 4,000 years. "... the result of months of efforts by the Iraqi authorities in conjunction with our embassy in Washington," said Iraqi Culture Minister Hassan Nazim. In these artifacts, the Iraqi people can rediscover our unique heritage that long pre-dates the Saddam and ISIS stains on our history.

Together these two bookends frame 4,000 years of Iraqi human history — and inform Iraq's future history as a people.

What also informs our future history is what ISIS perpetrated in early August 2014, exactly 7 years ago, in their attempt to eradicate and enslave the Yezidi community. ISIS is defeated. It no longer holds any territory in Iraq, and rebuilding is taking place on Mt. Sinjar. It will take time to heal the souls and the bodies. We will never forget.
On his return trip to Baghdad, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi also provided transportation back to Iraq for thousands of archaeological treasures in an "unprecedented restitution," said Iraqi Culture Minister Nazim.

The Sumerian "Gilgamesh Dream Tablet," one of the world's oldest original pieces of literature (photo credit: Associated Press).

Dr. Fareed Yaseen, Iraqi Ambassador to The United States