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The Charlie Rose Show

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**HEADLINE:** A Look at Iraq From Perspective of **Fouad Ajami**; A Look at Iraq From Perspective of Robin Wright of `The Washington Post`; A Conversation With Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author Michael Cunningham

**BYLINE:** Charlie Rose

**GUESTS:** **Fouad Ajami**, Robin Wright, Michael Cunningham

**HIGHLIGHT:**

A look at Iraq from the perspective of **Fouad Ajami**, who just returned from a visit with Ayatollah Sistani, and Robin Wright of "The Washington Post," whose weekend piece on Sunday talked about a reassessment from the United States` government. A conversation with Pulitzer Prize- winning author Michael Cunningham, whose his new book is "Specimen Days."

**BODY:**

CHARLIE ROSE, HOST: Welcome to the broadcast. Tonight, we look at Iraq from the perspective of **Fouad Ajami**, who just returned from a visit with Ayatollah Sistani, and Robin Wright of "The Washington Post," whose weekend piece on Sunday talked about a reassessment from the United States` government.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ROBIN WRIGHT, WASHINGTON POST: I think the United States, after 28 months, has come to the realization that on each of the three critical fronts -- security, politics and the economy -- that the kind of Iraq they had envisioned leaving behind isn't going to be there. When it comes to politics, they hoped for a secular, modern state that embraced women's rights, and they had not calculated on the fact that both the Shia and the Kurds would to some extent want privileges, want security in the face of the kind of Sunni-dominated government in the past.

**FOUAD AJAMI**, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY: If the Iraqis succeed, everyone will draw their own conclusions. The Syrians will draw their own conclusions. The Saudis will draw their own conclusion. If we create -- if we help create, if we help midwife a good and decent Iraqi state that would hang together, even if it's decentralized -- I actually welcome a decentralized policy, because the Arab world could lead -- could use decentralized political entities.

So, if you create this kind of model, with American help, if the Iraqis do it with our help, the consequences and the example would follow.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

CHARLIE ROSE: Also this evening, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Cunningham, whose his new book is "Specimen Days."

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, AUTHOR, "SPECIMEN DAYS": The only appropriate way to show my gratitude was to not write "The Hours II," was to take what I'd been given, this recognition and this sense of broader readership and push it, and do something -- do something I wasn't sure if I could do.

I think as a writer, if you begin to feel too confident, if you begin to feel too good at what you're doing, you're in trouble. You should always be working right at the edge of your own ability.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

CHARLIE ROSE: Two perspectives on Iraq, and a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, next.

CHARLIE ROSE: We begin this evening with Iraq again. Earlier this week, the constitution-drafting committee failed to meet their deadline to produce a draft constitution. There is an extension in place.

August has also been one of the worst months for U.S. casualties since military

operations began.

We want to talk about all of this with Robin Wright from Washington. She`s with "The Washington Post." Also with **Fouad Ajami**. He is the director of the Middle Eastern studies program at John Hopkins University, and a contributing editor for "U.S. News & World Report," and a consultant for CBS. He recently returned from Iraq where he saw, among others, Ayatollah Sistani.

Let me begin by welcoming Robin and Fouad. Tell me about.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Thank you.

CHARLIE ROSE: . what you learned from your visit with Sistani, and how do you get this sort of command appearance that most American officials don`t get?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Well, I wish I could claim any great credit, Charlie, for meeting Sistani. I was just granted an audience, and I learned one thing about myself in many ways, that there is an ancestor that lives in each and every one of them. As you know, I grew up in a Shia household in Lebanon, and awash of the faith. It was a very interesting meeting. I went to Najaf and I went to Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Chalabi, and we went to visit.

CHARLIE ROSE: You went with Chalabi to see him?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Yes. We went to.

CHARLIE ROSE: There`s the reason you got to go.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Exactly. Exactly. That was -- and we went to visit with this amazing man. And if you ever get to interview him, I want to be your translator. He is an incredible individual.

CHARLIE ROSE: Why?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** And it was -- it was quite -- I mean, even arriving at his place, if you just look at the setting of where he lives -- we came to a little alleyway in the souk, in the bazaar, and we walked in. And I thought, surely this would lead to some, you know, grander place, and this was the street, this was the alleyway on which Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani lived. A piece of batik separated this alley from his home -- the home in which he lived.

And we walked in, and there were two rooms, basically. One was full of guests. And one was a stark, big, spacious room, an air conditioner humming in the background, a fan overhead, some I think mid-quality Persian carpets on the floor, cushions on the floor, no tables, no chairs, no desks. A verse of the Koran, I think, behind a glass frame that said, "Blessed are those who listen, and from

what that listen and what they hear, they choose, which is good."

So we visited with his son. And I could not be sure that the man himself would make an appearance. His son basically complained about the performance of the Iraqi government, which, of course, I am an innocent bystander. I was just watching this performance.

And then the son went into -- through the back door of this room to the private quarters of his father. And I could not be sure, of course, if Grand Ayatollah Sistani will or will not make an appearance, because I thought maybe we had received a stern reading of the mood of Najaf about the performance of the government.

And then the man made his appearance, and I think one day I would like to -- I wish I even had the chutzpah to bring you my notes. I mean, just the appearance itself, majestic and simple at the same time. He sat in this one corner that was his corner, and he received us extremely warmly.

You hear a lot about, you know, Sistani being frail of health. Nonsense. A man of medium height and quite good health, as much as, you know, the eye can see. And I was very curious. I had always been curious about his Arabic, because here is a man of Iranian birth, who lives and works in Najaf and is revered by the Iraqi Shia. It was beautiful, ornate Arabic, but with very much of a Persian accent. And his message for the day -- I mean, there were many things, and I'm sure we could talk about other things, as well -- his message for the day is you must bring the Sunni Arabs into the politics, the constitutional drafting. Deeply worried about them and deeply worried about their absence from political life.

And then, after, you know, a fairly lengthy discussion, we went to the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, of course, just across the street from his home. And the overseer of the shrine received us, and we had a kind of the view of the clerics of Najaf of the political life of the country.

But as a kind of human experience, and in terms of just meeting -- I mean, I never had the chance to meet John Paul II. Just, you know, you don't see these great men. But the clarity of the man's thinking and the presence and the decency and the moderation -- because I asked him about terrorism, and I asked him about preachers, Islamic preachers, who sanction terror and give their name to terror. And just the clarity of the man and the modesty.

He made sure that we understood that this was a rented house. This was a rented house. He owned nothing. He said, you know, "this is a rented house, my dear, this is a rented house. Whatever happens to the people of Najaf, if they don't have electricity, this house doesn't have electricity. If they don't have running water, this house doesn't have running water." And you know, I could go

on, but you get the flavor. I just wanted to give you just a sense of the physical space and the setting, and the kind of man that Ali Sistani is.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** So what is his assessment as to why the government has not been able to come together with the Sunnis and produce a constitution that can move to an election?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Well, Charlie, I mean, I think you are a student of law, and I think you will understand this. The disagreement over the constitution is a disagreement about the country's political life.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** Right.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** I mean, that's really what it is. And I did spend quite a bit of time with someone I befriended, Sheikh Humam Hammoudi, who is the chairman of the constitution-drafting committee, in his own right a very interesting man, also a Shiite cleric -- a Shia cleric of a certain bend. His brother is a physician in Columbus, Ohio; his sister is a physician in Vienna. And I talked to Hammoudi and many other members of this constitution-drafting committee at length.

The disagreement about the constitution is a disagreement about what is Iraq and how can Iraq be divided, how can it be claimed. We are not there yet. We have not arrived at this moment, where Iraqis agree about the shape of their political life, even about the very identity of the country, because as you know, and you've done the story so deeply, when you say Iraq is an Arab country, the Kurds will say, no, it's not an Arab country. Et cetera.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** Because we are Iraqis.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Absolutely, but we are Kurds and we are different. So in fact, there's disagreements over many basic things. And as we know, the big disagreements are over oil, Islam and federalism, you know, to be cute, over OIF -- oil, Islam and federalism, and how do you define this country, and how do you divide the oil treasure, what's the place of Islam in the public life. And whether you will have the same centralized, tyrannical state which the Sunni Arabs want, or do you have a more decentralized federalist state.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** All right, I want to go to Robin Wright in Washington, who wrote an interesting piece about lowered expectations.

But before I do that, so Chalabi, what is his -- is he gaining strength as time has passed? He at one point was certainly on the outs point with the United States, and policymakers in Washington. Is his strength being solidified because of his relationship with the Shia?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Well, he's a player in the country's political life.

CHARLIE ROSE: But is he gaining strength?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Absolutely. But then again, you're talking to someone, I mean, so that I wouldn't.

CHARLIE ROSE: You're his friend.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Truth in lending.

CHARLIE ROSE: You're his friend, I know.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Truth in lending, I am his friend.

CHARLIE ROSE: And how does he see it?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** I think, obviously, I mean, if you take a look at the cast of characters and what they're trying to do, I can walk you through some of the demands that he wants and some of the positions he's taken. For example, he has...

CHARLIE ROSE: Hold on. Don't do that yet. Let's come back to that. Because I want -- so, Robin, here you have the United States, and you write about lowered expectations. Give me a sense of what Washington thinks about what is going on. Rumsfeld went to Baghdad, and he urged the people to get past these difficulties, because the United States fervently wanted to see a constitution, fervently wants to see the building up of the Iraqi military, and it seems to me fervently wants to minimize losses and retreat out of there, as long as there's some semblance of some kind of something in place.

But you know better than I. Tell me about lowered expectations.

ROBIN WRIGHT: Well, I think that over the -- there are four months left in the transition to an election of a permanent government. And I think the United States, after 28 months, has come to the realization that on each of the three critical fronts -- security, politics and the economy -- that the kind of Iraq they had envisioned leaving behind isn't going to be there.

When it comes to politics, they had hoped for a secular, modern state that embraced women's rights, and they had not calculated on the fact that both the Shia and the Kurds would to some extent want privileges, want security in the face of the kind of Sunni-dominated government in the past.

CHARLIE ROSE: Why hadn't they counted on that, if I could just interrupt? I mean, it seemed to me everybody expected that. Did they not? I mean, wasn't

that one of the warnings about don't get involved, included the fact that if you break it, these are the pieces that are going to be hard to put together?

**ROBIN WRIGHT:** I think it was a realization about the Kurds and the fact they've always wanted autonomy, some kind of self-rule in the north. But I think the thing that took them most by surprise was the recent demand by the Shia for their own federal region, their own autonomy in the south. That came out of the blue for the United States.

When it comes to security, they had envisioned building an Iraqi army that would be able to take over for the United States, not fully upon the end of the political transition, but to some degree, and the fact is that in the face of the insurgency and challenges to their own problems with the coalition, keeping a long-term multinational force in Iraq, that began to be unrealistic. And I think they're now looking at, according to U.S. officials, a transition to perhaps forces less capable of taking over militarily but who will have more credibility on the ground and will compensate for the fact that in the access to information, knowing what's going on in their own neighborhoods, is what the United States troops can do.

When it comes to the economy, there were claims before the war by the Pentagon and others that Iraq's oil income would pay for the military costs and for reconstruction. And the reality is that Iraq does not produce enough oil -- does not produce as much oil today as it did in the pre-war highs, that there are real problems with basic things like security, like electricity and water, that unemployment is still 50 to 65 percent, that across the board, that Iraqis are suffering in ways that no one anticipated more than two years after the end of the invasion.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** Let me -- before we go back to your trip and what you saw there, you actually pointed out on this very reality in which you talked about the dream gone. What was the title of that piece?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Yes, that was -- as you know, when you write, other people attach their titles to your pieces. I think -- I mean, I read Robin's piece. And I think it's very interesting. It's the beginning of wisdom, if indeed our...

**CHARLIE ROSE:** So it's interesting and right?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** I think it's right. That's fine. And actually, I don't think we disagree with the Iraqis about this. In fact, our desire, the American desire that the Iraqis take control of their own destiny is what the Iraqis themselves are asking for. In fact, if you -- you know, much has been -- much commentary has been spilled on this war, and appropriately so. I thought at the very beginning that the Bremer vision of this kind of Douglas MacArthur view of the world, that we would run things and that the Iraqis would do what we want, I think that was flawed.

I think the post-American era in Iraq, if you can see it, you can begin -- you can see the shape of the post-American era in Iraq. For example, take this green zone where we are located. I mean, this time I happened to live in the red zone. I didn't want to go into the green zone, where I had gone three or four times before. I mean, clearly there is a kind of separation. Clearly the bubble, the American command, this American embassy, this massive structure we have in the green zone, its knowledge of the rest of Iraq is flawed and incomplete in the extreme.

So I think Iraqis will have to step -- will have to step forth and claim their own destiny, and we can't -- this presence was not intended to be there for -- forever, and I think Iraqis are beginning to understand this.

They're very nervous. They're extremely nervous about any talk of American withdrawal or drawing down of American forces, and the question is: Are the Iraqis -- the question of the hour: Are the Iraqis ready? Are the Iraqi security forces ready to pick up the burden? That is, I mean, you talk...

**CHARLIE ROSE:** The answer to that is no, and the question is when.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Well, exactly. I mean, I happened to have been just, you know, just one of these many sort of people standing as Secretary Rumsfeld flew in to watch a live ammunition exercise, and, you know, you see these Iraqi forces. Their intentions are good, but I don't think the Iraqi forces -- I don't think training forces is only a military matter. You have to create a sovereign, legitimate government that the people will have a vested interest in. And the question is: Are the Sunni Arabs now ready to accept Iraq? I mean, are they ready to accept a diminished role for themselves in this new Iraq?

I met many Sunni Arab leaders, and one interesting thing that, you know, that came up is they still have a majoritarian mind-set. I mean, this is very peculiar about the Sunni Arabs in Iraq. They're a minority of the population, but several of them came and told me what their numbers were by their own lights. Their numbers are 42 percent of the population of Iraq is Sunni Arabs. I told them, yes, I grew up in Lebanon, I know these numbers, and I know the politics of numbers. So it's really -- I mean, we have to see if the communities have arrived at a decent definition -- I mean, I think people say that the Shia want a theocratic state. I don't see that, that that's the main drive of Shia politics in Iraq today. I don't see it even in Najaf.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** But take the point that Robin made, and this idea of wanting a region of their own where most of the oil is located.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Why not? Let them have a region.

CHARLIE ROSE: But what does that do to the Sunnis if.?

(CROSSTALK)

**FOUAD AJAMI:** That's exactly right. The Sunnis will -- I mean, that's -- and there have been many, many proposals to enfranchise the Sunni Arabs economically. I mean, there was even one proposal, and it was even -- there is one proposal that you would divide the oil of the country, you would allocate shares in the national oil of the country, and every Iraqi would have a piece of this.

No one, trust me, Charlie, no one in Iraq believes that you can create an Iraq at peace and that the country would work without a major role for the Sunni Arabs. A major role that would even over-represent them. They would have more power and more wealth than their percentage of the population.

CHARLIE ROSE: But do they feel -- they don't feel that way, do they, Robin, the Sunnis?

ROBIN WRIGHT: What is striking, I think, since January elections is the fact that Sunnis have become ever more involved in the process. Clearly, the Sunnis are also the largest component in the insurgency, but I think that there is some hope that they -- many important members of tribal communities, elder figures really do want to be part of the process. They realize that they made a mistake in not participating in the election. But they still have to be convinced that they have a stake, a role, a central role in Iraq's future, and that's the real key, both in political legitimacy of a new Iraq and ending the insurgency.

CHARLIE ROSE: OK, but do you think that this extension is going to give them time enough to come together on a constitution?

ROBIN WRIGHT: You know, I think a week -- it's possible they will come together. I think the majority of them really want to get together. There are a few who are holding out, making ever tougher demands. If it's just a weeks, then it's going to be a blip that won't even be remembered in the history books. If it slips again, then I think that we begin to see real trouble.

Iraqis have been very good at keeping to most of the deadlines so far.

CHARLIE ROSE: And real trouble is what?

ROBIN WRIGHT: Well, I think that, you know, it shows how deep these divisions are. They're not going to be easily healed. In the face of the obstacles they've faced in the past, you know, the insurgency and the elections, and still the majority turned out. There was a will. And the question is, is there a will, you know, eight months later to pull this off?

I think that it's true among the majority. A lot of the people I've talked to in the last 24 hours really are intent on pulling this off. And I think they've made some, you know, headway today. But it's those last little bits that are going to be the key.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Well, Charlie...

CHARLIE ROSE: Will we see an agreement in two weeks?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Yes, well, as you know, I am a professor. And professors are used to giving incompletes. I mean, the grade for this effort is an incomplete.

CHARLIE ROSE: To all concerned.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** I mean, exactly. The grade is an incomplete. But let's face it -- there is nothing -- there is no problem with the date, and Robin is right, if we're talking about one week or so, I mean, we have these milestones, and these milestones were as much an American political need as they are an Iraqi imperative. Elections by January 30th. Our president made that decision and gambled and won. And the elections took place. And then, of course, we would have a constitution by August 15th. There would be ratification of the constitution by October 15th, an election by December 15th. I mean, these are hard dates. And I think we have to be somewhat patient as these dates slip. So long as there is a fundamental agreement on the political role of these communities, and...

CHARLIE ROSE: How long have they been working, trying to hammer out a fundamental agreement on the...

ROBIN WRIGHT: Only 10 weeks.

CHARLIE ROSE: . political roles. Only ten weeks?

ROBIN WRIGHT: Only 10 weeks. I mean, this is -- the reality is that, again, we get back to lowered expectations. The United States anticipates at this point that they will get a raw document that will have some core agreements, but that some issues will be deferred, in effect, and, in fact, they're looking for a document that is amendable, that -- to allow Iraqis to make changes as they come to grips with different challenges, that Iraq can basically grow into democracy, that this is not going to be in a final form.

CHARLIE ROSE: There is this notion that the administration, perhaps wishing to do well, with all good intentions, was too heavily involved for a while, and then was not involved well enough, and therefore sort of let everything happen, because they didn't want to look like it was an American creation, whereas they

should have been playing a stronger role.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** You're exactly right. I mean, that's the dilemma. We did not know the country well enough. This was a shotgun wedding. We blew into a country. You know, there was one -- I was going once to the National Assembly, to interview some of these people drafting the constitution, and I was in a convoy. I mean, the image, it's just an image, I'll just give it to you as a metaphor -- this convoy was just blasting through the streets of Baghdad at full speed, with policemen and so on. And then all of a sudden, this convoy comes to a chokepoint in Iraq, and this convoy is a sitting duck. You know, this convoy was fast and powerful and mighty and blowing its way through the streets of Baghdad, but now it's suddenly in the middle of this chokepoint, and it can't get out of it. And this convoy, because it's official, because it's marked, is the most vulnerable. It's the most vulnerable.

This was like our war. We blew in. We blew all the obstacles in our way. And then we met the realities and the difficulties of Iraq. And mark this, Charlie, there was an ambivalence that ran through the American enterprise in Iraq. And when I say this to administration officials, they contest this -- and this is the ambivalence: We upended, we destroyed Sunni hegemony in Iraq, but we were very uncomfortable with the rise of the Shia power. We were very uncomfortable with the rise of the Shia power. And we kept second-guessing the Shia. Sooner or later, we thought, their demand, which of course is a theocracy, so we thought, will eventually rear its head. And everyone kept thinking, ah, the Shia, they have this doctrine called taqiya, dissimulation. And even someone as decent and moderate as Sistani, surely he must have a secret agenda, and his secret agenda is an Islamic government.

There is no such thing, but we were afraid of Shia power. And there was this ambivalence that ran through our enterprise. The American enterprise was riddled with this kind of contradictions.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** Because they feared Iran.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** They feared Iran. They didn't know Iraq. They feared Iran, and they genuinely believed in this idea of a Shia international.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** Right.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** They really believed in it.

**CHARLIE ROSE:** Robin, this realistic assessment that you wrote about Sunday in "The Washington Post," who is part of this realistic assessment? Is the president signed off on that? Because his rhetoric doesn't suggest that, and his rhetoric may very well be what's necessary for a commander-in-chief to say in a time of war. But you know, how deep and how profound is his realistic

assessment of where we are and what we have to do?

ROBIN WRIGHT: The commitment hasn't changed. That's what's reflected in the president's enthusiasm and his repeated statements that sound very much today as they did in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.

What has changed over time, gradually, with -- faced with the challenges on the ground, and it's been incremental, it's been the assessment. And I think it's reflected throughout the U.S. government. It's not as if there is a document which they've all signed off on and said, this is where we stand today. It is this slow recognition of what they face with just four months to go. And that's been reflected particularly in this constitution, and the fact that they will end up with a country in which Islam is the determinant, largest single determinant when it comes to making law.

The United States had hoped for a secular state, which separated mosque and state. The issue of women's rights and the fact they may have some guarantees but not as many as the United States had hoped. And on many of the key issues, you see this issue of autonomy among both Kurds and Shia, the sense that both communities want long-term privileges, in effect, when the United States was hoping for a united state, in effect. The constitution has brought all of this to a head, and particularly in the wind-down with just four months left.

CHARLIE ROSE: Do they need in Iraq today some -- some figure who has the -- I'm trying to say someone like Saddam, who doesn't have Saddam's tyrannical, you know -- is there the need for some very strong figure, who is not a dictator, not a tyrant, but has the capacity in a sense to bridge these gaps? Is that what's missing from the body politic of Iran -- of Iraq?

ROBIN WRIGHT: I don't think anyone is looking for another strongman, but there is a real need for strong leadership. I think there's some disappointment already in Prime Minister Jaafari. He's not emerged as a strong figure, someone who can pull everyone together. One does not hear him as visibly or vocally as the former prime minister -- not to say that he was any better.

But you know, this is a moment that there needs to be someone in Iraq to kind of take over and lead the country. And I think Iraq is still groping, and I think it will grope for a long time.

CHARLIE ROSE: Does Sistani speak to this point? I mean, what he thinks Iraq - - what's wrong with the present government and what he thinks is necessary?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** The last thing Sistani wants is a strongman or Saddam-lite. Actually, the Americans...

CHARLIE ROSE: I'm not saying it was the idea for Saddam in terms of the

brutality and violence and all of that.

**FOUAD AJAMI:** I want to speak to your point about this. There was actually some feeling that maybe Iyad Allawi was the man, that perhaps Allawi would be the strong figure. You know, he was a Shia, but he still was an old Baathist and he could work with the Baathists. And there has been terrible disappointment in the Allawi government. If you go back and review the record of the Allawi government, even now Iyad Allawi admits, the money was being taken out of the country in suitcases, as he said recently in an interview with Knight Ridder. So there is disappointment in the performance.

CHARLIE ROSE: Who was taking it out?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Federal government officials. There has been massive, massive corruption in the Allawi interim government, and the auditing -- the Supreme Auditing Committee of the Iraqi Republic now concedes that up to a billion dollars was taken from the Defense Ministry, which could have used the funds, as indeed the defense minister in Iraq told me when I was there and I was with him, you know, we need all these funds. But there has been this kind of corruption.

Now, Robin is right, there is disappointment in Washington with the performance of Jaafari. Jaafari seems just a very weak man. There is not a commanding presence. You don't see him in Iraq commanding the stage. But I think let's remember, this is an interim government. This, maximum, it will have, what, several more months, five more months, six more months?

And I think Iraq must not identify with one person. It must identify a political class that's devoted to the country. And Talabani, actually, you have a very good president, ceremonially. And then, you know, there are a number of people who are -- and Hammoudi, as the chairman of the drafting committee, and Chalabi, as a technocrat with real leadership skills and real presence in the Shia community. I mean, you can identify 10, 15, 20 people. Barham Saleh, again, a Kurdish leader of genuine talent. The country is full of such people.

And will there be a place for the clerics in Najaf? Sure. Is there going to be an Islamic government? Absolutely not. Not one single -- I mean, there may be a minority of clerics, Shia clerics, who may think of an Islamic government, but no one, none of the major clerics I talk to believe in an Islamic government in Iraq. They want a government that is respectful of Islam. That's all. And that's not a problem.

CHARLIE ROSE: OK, let me go back to Robin. From her previous reporting, she's written and spent a lot of time in Iran, written reams of columns about Iran.

What are the Iranians doing? How are they exercising their own wishes, and

what are their wishes?

ROBIN WRIGHT: I think the Iranians want a stable Iraq next door. I think they also want the Americans out as fast as they can get. They're looking for a friendly relationship.

Remember, there are divisions between Iran and Iraq, even though they share a Shiite common religion. One side is Arab; the other side is Persian. They have a long-standing hostility across that border, issues of water rights and other territorial problems.

But the bottom line is they're looking for -- they have some influence with the new government. Do they want it to be another Islamic republic? I don't think so. They have their own Kurdish minorities, Arab minorities, Sunni minority, and they know that instability in those communities could spill over on their own borders.

But one point that Fouad made, I agree. The greatest problem in Iraq today is not the insurgency, it is corruption, which reflects the erosion of the political class. I have friends at high levels of government who talk about their fear that, you know, civil war is possible now, but they say the thing that really concerns them is corruption. It is so, so extensive, right up to the tops of government ranks, and it is a deep concern, because it reflects a lack of commitment to the state, to rebuilding Iraq, to the -- to, you know, a common destiny.

CHARLIE ROSE: This realistic assessment, the consequences are that the administration now believes it will be able to draw down American troops by the end of 2006 to some level?

ROBIN WRIGHT: I don't think that there -- I think there's a lot of contingency planning. I don't think anybody knows. There clearly is an intent once the final election is held and a permanent government takes office to begin figuring out ways. There are many of the coalition members who are beginning to pull out this fall and tend to pull out after that permanent election. The United States is going to be more and more on its own.

It wants to have an Iraqi stamp on this, and it's going to look for ways to do that as fast as it can, and in some cases it will probably mean handing over in ways that the U.S. plays a role, perhaps in backing them up from the air, but not less and less on the ground.

CHARLIE ROSE: What does Dick Cheney think at this moment?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Well, I don't -- I mean, I don't have any sort of view of that. I think the general view that Robin expressed of the official reading in Washington, the official cast of mind, I think they are very realistic about what could be achieved and what can't

be achieved in Iraq. And I think it's great. I mean, I don't think -- I don't read...

CHARLIE ROSE: Realism is good?

**FOUAD AJAMI:** Yes. And I don't read -- I don't read Robin's column as -- as saying that the administration has lost faith in its project. I think they are more realistic about what could be done and what could be accomplished in Iraq. I mean, gone is the talk about the beacon of democracy and so on. Nevertheless, I mean, we have this project in Iraq. If the Iraqis succeed, everyone will draw their own conclusions. The Syrians will draw their own conclusions, the Saudis will draw their own conclusions. If we create -- if we help create, if we help midwife a good and decent Iraqi state that would hang together, even if it's decentralized -- I actually welcome a decentralized policy, because the Arab world could lead -- could use decentralized political entities -- so if you create this model, with American help, if the Iraqis do it with our help, the consequences and the example will follow.

There is no need to trumpet this. There is no need to tell the Arabs, you know, we're going to create this beacon of democracy, and you people are going to follow the Iraqi example. Yes, and that's fine.

CHARLIE ROSE: Robin, thank you very much. It's always a pleasure to have you on this broadcast.

ROBIN WRIGHT: Thanks.

CHARLIE ROSE: Robin Wright from "The Washington Post." **Fouad Ajami** from CIS (ph), "U.S. News and World Report," and a consultant for CBS News.

We'll be back in just a moment. Stay with us.