

**FINANCIAL REVIEW****Don't withdraw, Iraqis say**

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The leaders of the Australian Iraqi Forum have celebrated the handover of power in Baghdad, at a meeting in Melbourne at which they said the disbanding of the army and police was America's biggest mistake.

The forum, a unique voice in Australia of Iraqi opinion, also urged Canberra to remain engaged and Opposition Leader Mark Latham to rethink his intention to withdraw Australia's contingent of troops.

The forum was created following Saddam Hussein's downfall with the aim of building links between the two countries. It was set up by a group of professionals and academics who had fled the former dictator's regime for Australia.

They travelled to Canberra two weeks ago and presented their analysis to Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and the parliamentary standing committee on foreign affairs and trade.

Forum president Riadh Al-Mahaidi, a senior lecturer in civil engineering at Monash University, said his group was "proud that our adopted country is playing an important role in the rebuilding of Iraq", and "no one in their right mind would like to see the coalition troops withdraw before the new Iraqi police and army are well established".

Dr Al-Mahaidi, who has visited Iraq twice in the last year, said Australia's military presence and expertise in reconstructing infrastructure was well regarded.

The new Iraqi government reflected the religious and ethnic diversity of Iraq but was mainly composed of technocrats. Some strong potential leaders hung back from participating in this interim government in order to begin campaigning for the elections early next year.

He said that on his visits "I saw Baghdad and a few other cities alive and bustling with activities, with free expression quite evident after three decades of oppression".

He said much of the chaos in Iraq since the war had been due to mishandling the situation, such as dissolving the regular army and police.

Vice-president Khairy Mageed, a microbiologist, said the overwhelming majority of Iraqis supported the handover, and phone calls to family members reflected optimism, "but, of course, there are a lot of challenges facing the new government".

Dr Al-Mahaidi said that some critics questioned the viability of democracy in Iraq. But before Saddam Hussein, he said, the country had a highly developed civil society and institutions. "Iraq today has a strong potential to combine Arab culture, liberal politics and a modern outlook. And success is infectious."

Nabil Sulaiman, a senior lecturer in medicine at Melbourne University, said that new Prime Minister Iyad Allawi delivered an initial speech that focused on unity and reconciliation and had been well received.

The solution to the security issues, said Dr Sulaiman, depended on the population getting behind the government.

