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Political Reconstruction in Iraq: A Reality Check

By Marina Ottaway and Judith Yaphe   March 27, 2003

The Bush administration's plans for post-Saddam Iraq beyond the initial occupation remain uncertain. In developing those plans, the administration needs to take a hard look at the reality of the country. Iraq is not a political blank slate, to be transformed at American will into a democratic, secular, pluralist, and federal state. Instead, it is a difficult country with multiple social groups and power centers with conflicting agendas. Some of these, such as the intelligence and security services, will be replaced with new versions acceptable to the United States and the future government. The top echelons of the military, government ministries, and the Ba'th Party will be eliminated. Other power centers, however, will remain, adding to the problems of reconciling rival ethnic and religious factions as well as internally and externally based opposition elements.

A successful reconstruction effort will have to

- Determine which groups must participate in and which must be excluded from the new political system, and create mechanisms to ensure justice and foster reconciliation.

- Create a political system that is accepted by all important groups and that cannot be eliminated, including ethnic and religious groups, tribal and other kinship organizations, as well as parts of government and private institutions, political exiles, and new internal political factions.

- Address the fundamental issues that remain both critical and divisive in the international community, including how to eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, preserve its political and territorial integrity, ensure international access to the region's energy resources, and bolster regional security.

- Dispel the widespread, deep suspicions that undermine U.S. credibility in the entire region and risk undermining reconstruction efforts.

The United States has been able to invade Iraq to get rid of Saddam Hussein almost single-handedly. It has the power and resources to maintain an occupation and administer the country in the same way. But the United States alone cannot establish a stable government in Iraq and security in the region. Iraq's diverse political and social groups must

1

participate actively and forge at least a minimal consensus about the new political system. Iraq's neighbors, the United Nations, the Arab League, and other members of the international community should all be involved if Iraq is not to turn again into a flashpoint for conflict.

The Social Map

Iraq is home to a diverse mix of ethnic and religious groups. Its population is approximately 55 percent Shia Arab, 20 percent Sunni Arab, and 25 percent Kurdish (Sunni and Shia), with a smattering of Turkmen, Chaldeans, and Assyrian Christians. Iraq does not readily divide into "parts." The Kurds make up the majority population (about 3.8 million) in the three northern provinces, but their territorial aspirations extend further. The Kurdish parliament that met in late 2002 agreed that Kirkuk, not now under Kurdish control, must be the capital of a common autonomous Kurdish region with virtual independence from Baghdad except in national defense. Kirkuk and its oilfields are also claimed by the Turkmen and inhabited by Arabs. Turkey threatens military invasion if the Kurds seize Kirkuk, declare self-rule, or threaten the vulnerable Turkman minority.

Iraq's Sunni Arabs have formed its political and military elite since the time of Ottoman rule. They trained in the best Ottoman government and military academies, and they were the last to break with the Ottoman Empire. The long years of British mandate, monarchy, and republic did little to alter this basic pattern. Sunni Arab clans and tribes—many linked to Saddam Hussein's clan—constitute a large part of the Republican Guard, special military and security units, and the intelligence services. The base of the regime's support, they have also been the greatest threat to it: All coup attempts during the past decade have come from this strategic center.

Iraq's Shia Arabs form the majority of Baghdad's population of nearly 5 million and dominate a large portion of southern Iraq in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In many areas, they live interspersed with Sunni Arab tribes and villages. Many clans, including Saddam's own, have both Sunni and Shia branches. Intermarriage is common. Some Shia are urban, secular, Ba'thist and even Communist Party members, and Western educated and oriented. Some are more rural, tribal, and traditional in faith and social outlook. A smaller number reside in the shrine cities of Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad, are of Persian origin, and restrict their activities to faith, education, and good works.

Few Shias look to Iran for political solace or as a model to emulate. Rather, they are apolitical by tradition and custom. Spurned by the Turks and the British and denied the opportunity to share real power by the various governments since 1920, Iraq's Shias retreated from political life for the most part. Some were attracted by the Iraqi nationalism envisioned by Saddam and the early Ba'th Party, but they rejected its pan-Arabism, fearing it would eventually submerge Iraq's Shia majority in a Sunni-dominated culture. Iraq's Shia shrine cities—Najaf and Karbala, in particular—have long been home to religious Shia clerics and scholars from Iran, Lebanon, and the Gulf, as well as India. Once great centers of learning and pilgrimage, they have been decimated by years of repression because of the presence of anti-Saddam extremist religious elements and by United Nations–imposed sanctions dating from the Kuwait war.

The Shias of Iraq and Iran share a common faith—both are Twelver Shia Muslims— but all similarity ends there. Iraq's Shias remained loyal to the state and to Saddam during the eight-year war with Iran because they saw themselves as Arabs and Iraqis against the Persian

enemy, rather than as a religious cohort. Religious practices, conversion experience, and relation to the state historically have also set them apart.

Despite their differences, Sunni and Shia Arabs share a common vision of Iraq. The vision is a united Iraq with all oil and land resources governed from Baghdad. Sunni and Shia clerics and tribes joined with city-bred nationalists in 1920 to oppose the British occupation of Iraq. Clerics spoke from common pulpits and issued decrees legitimizing revolt against the foreign invader. Although they had different visions of governance—secular state versus Islamic government—their opposition to imposed rule and feelings of political disenfranchisement linked them for a short period of time. Sunni Arabs and Shias who left the villages for the more cosmopolitan ways of Baghdad regard the more tribal and traditional tribes of the south with disdain.

The Political Map

Competition for whom and what will succeed Saddam and his regime will be intense. Organized groups in exile all will look for power—the Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi National Accord, Kurdish and Christian elements abroad, Sharif Ali (a cousin of the last king of Iraq who heads the Constitutional Monarchy Party from his home in London), Shia dissidents based in Iran. So, too, will prominent generals and politicians long in exile. These groups all say they want elections; democratic, representative, and transparent political institutions; the rule of law; and political pluralism. In reality, they developed bitter rivalries during the years of exile and are likely to clash in post-Saddam Iraq.

New political factions and leaders will enter the fray in the coming months. Some will be Ba'thists, others Communists. Some will want a secular state, others (Sunni and Shia) will demand an Islamic republic. One thing is certain: Once free of Saddam, his family, or a military clone, Iraqis will emerge who reflect traditional and progressive outlooks, secular and religious interests, tribes and parties.

One of the uncertainties in Iraq's new political landscape is the military. Saddam extensively damaged Iraq's political and military institutions. He politicized them, devaluing professionalism and technical competence. Recruitment and promotion were by party patronage and personal loyalty, not merit. The high-ranking officers and the special corps that were part of Saddam's power core will be quickly removed, but parts of the military may try to play a political role—particularly officers from elite families that historically used the military as a way to political power.

What the United States Can and Cannot Do

U.S. military and civil administrators initially will have inordinate power in deciding how to deal with Iraq's disparate social and political groups. They could handpick a successor to Saddam or set up an interim council comprised of a coalition of Iraqis from inside and outside Iraq. They could simply rule the country under martial law. Yet none of these options will be viable in the long run. Iraqis inside the country will likely reject any effort to impose as leaders members of the anti-Saddam opposition in exile. Few of the oppositionists are known inside Iraq or, if known, respected. Ahmed Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress, is widely disdained. The exiled generals are identified with the regime's oppression of the Kurds and Shias. Finding a figure acceptable both inside and outside Iraq may be impossible. No senior military or civilian bureaucrat survived the many years under Saddam without bloodying his hands in internal repression.

Building a broad coalition may appear more promising, but coalitions have been inherently unstable and short-lived in Iraq. A period of martial law—hopefully short—will probably be necessary, if only to establish law and order, prevent revenge killings, and establish a secure environment in which Iraqis can emerge to resume their jobs and rebuild their lives. Martial law, however, cannot foster longer-term political, economic, or social reconstruction.

Initially, the United States can try to ensure that Iraq's political, social, and economic infrastructures are de-Ba'thized. This does not mean arresting all members of the Ba'th Party and stripping them of their civil rights. It does mean banning the party, encouraging the emergence of new political organizations, and removing from power senior party loyalists in the government, its ministries, and the military. Most Iraqis joined the Ba'th Party to gain access to education, jobs, and security, not because they were swayed by ideology.

The United States can easily eliminate the Ba'th Party—Saddam removed its intellectuals and devalued its ideology long ago. But it would be difficult as well as unwise for the United States to try to eliminate the belief of many Iraqis in Ba'thism's core values: Arab unity, nationalism, and social and economic justice. Even the most pro–United States successor to Saddam will be an Iraqi nationalist who will look to an Arab consensus for validation and to ensure his long-term survival. No Iraqi government will want to recognize Israel unless every other Arab government also does so. Support for the Palestinians and opposition to Israel is deeply engrained in Iraq. The Iraqi army has fought in all four Arab–Israeli wars and underwritten all Palestinian causes.

One issue best reflects the peril the United States has invited by underwriting Iraq's political future. This is the challenge of developing a common Iraqi national identity. Unless such common identity emerges, U.S. or international efforts to create a pluralistic, multiparty, integrated government with representatives chosen in free and fair elections will become a source of conflict. In an atmosphere of ethnic and religious tensions, elections could give control of the government to the 55 percent of the population that is Shia. Other groups would feel threatened. Kurds might refuse to participate in a national government and, more important, to merge their *pesh merga* fighters into a unified national military force. The Sunni Arab minority would feel marginalized and unprotected against those seeking revenge. The Turkmen of northern Iraq would fear being Kurdified, just as Baghdad tried to Arabize the Kurds.

Iraq's neighbors can exacerbate the situation by trying to influence Iraq's political identity. Saudi Arabia, which has long discreetly encouraged religious revival among Iraq's Sunni Arabs, would prefer a government under a Sunni Arab general. Syria might prefer the installation of a new Ba'thist regime whose ideology and leadership were pro-Syrian. Iran hopes that Iraq's Shias will have a large role in the new government, but it also worries that a weak central authority may not be able to contain ethnic and religious squabbling that could spill across its long border with Iraq. Turkey is determined to fight any form of self-rule for the Kurds. Ankara believes that expanded rights for Iraq's Kurds will mean renewal of civil war in Turkey and ultimate partition between Turk and Kurd.

The United States risks contributing to the divisions by pursuing policies that are inherently incompatible in the short term. The United States is committed to maintaining Iraq as a multiethnic, secular state within its present borders. It also wants Iraq to become a model of democracy in the region. Until the issue of identity is successfully addressed,

however, the goals of democracy and multiethnicity will remain incompatible. Given a chance to express their demands, the Kurds will insist on a high degree of self-rule and will not easily be denied it to accommodate any U.S. need to appease Turkey. A Ba'thist purge accompanied by the removal of internal security forces will increase the risk that ethnic, tribal, and even neighborhood groups will exact revenge on anyone suspected of complicity with the regime. Finally, the choice of the next leader, whether Sunni or Shia, Arab or Kurd, will cause resentment in the groups that lose out.

Paradoxically, the emergence of a strong national Iraqi identity also would not be without problems for the United States. The war, and above all American occupation, are heightening outraged Arab solidarity and generating a sense of Islam under siege. This anger cuts across ethnic and sectarian lines and extends to other countries. There is a real possibility that a common Iraqi identity will develop in opposition to the United States.

The United States also risks making serious mistakes if it tries to decide for the Iraqis who can participate in the new political system. Iraqis will agree with the United States that senior officials of Saddam's regime must be excluded because of their crimes against the Iraqi people. But making party membership, separatist ambitions, or political extremism reasons for political exclusion or denial of civil rights would put the United States at odds with many Iraqis. Banning individuals or parties simply because they are Ba'thist-sounding, ardent Kurdish nationalists, Islamist, or even members of the moribund Communist Party could create new political fissures and cost the new government support. Successful political reconstruction cannot be achieved by excluding from participation large numbers of individuals and organizations, particularly if decisions are made by U.S. administrators.

Finally, the United States needs to step back as much as possible and let Iraqis decide how to deal with the conflicting needs to bring to justice individuals believed guilty of crimes under Saddam's regime and to promote reconciliation within the country. Many countries have faced such a conundrum in recent years. Two options have emerged: bringing suspects to trial, often in international courts, as for the Bosnian or Rwandan atrocities; or setting up truth and reconciliation commissions, to reveal what happened, punish the worst offenders, forgive the majority, and heal the divisions. The first option is better for justice, the second for reconciliation. It will be tempting for the United States to impose its justice, but this may keep Iraqis from coming to grips with the past and healing divisions, as it is happening in Serbia and other countries.

Setting Priorities

The United States should not try to prolong the occupation until Iraq can be transformed into a democratic, secular, pluralist, and federal country. Iraq's social and political map is too complex, and many fundamental problems of political reconstruction must be addressed by Iraqis, not U.S. administrators. A long occupation would thus be a costly and futile undertaking. It would also be politically dangerous for the United States. It would bring back memories of the colonial past, further increasing suspicions of U.S. intentions not only in Iraq but in the entire region.

The United States, together with international organizations and other members of the international community, needs to decide what changes are critical and must occur in Iraq soon after the war ends and what changes lack sufficient importance to warrant a prolonged occupation and foreign administration. Some priorities are clear: regime change, eliminating weapons of mass destruction, restoring Iraq's oil production, and depoliticizing the military

and limiting its size so that Iraq cannot threaten its neighbors. Other long-standing demands, including reparations to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and border issues, must be postponed or even waived permanently.

Depriving Iraq of its nonconventional weapons and rearming and reforming its military may ensure greater regional security. Yet excessive political demands that Iraq's government be decentralized, de-Ba'thized, and obligated to honor all past U.N. commitments would place the new, vulnerable government at risk and encourage aggression from other countries. Who would protect a disarmed Iraq against an Iranian, Turkish, or Israeli attack? By demanding Iraq's disarmament and occupying the country, does the United States become the guarantor of Iraq's security? And what replaces the military in holding the country together? Newly minted democratic institutions will be unlikely to do that. The military has had a long and even respected role in Iraq's checkered political past. Today Iraqis may mistrust it, particularly the Republican Guard, because of its loyalty to Saddam, but Iraq will need a conventionally rearmed, professionalized, depoliticized military for defense and national self-respect.

Recommendations

The deep complexities of Iraqi society and politics strongly condition whether and how the United States can shape a better future for the Iraqi people, the region, and the world. Washington, to date, displays little comprehension of the conditions analyzed above. Loose talk about bringing democracy to Iraq confuses what external actors can do and what Iraqis alone can accomplish.

If U.S. policy makers and the media seem unaware of Iraqi internal dynamics, they also underestimate the degree to which broader U.S. policies toward the Middle East will affect the willingness of parties within and outside Iraq to cooperate in its peaceful reconstruction. Most citizens and leaders throughout the region distrust U.S. motives as being determined by oil interests and Israel. Washington's next steps in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, in relations with Iran, and in shaping the Gulf security system will determine whether the Iraq war is the beginning or the end of regional crisis and bloodshed.

This analysis yields several imperatives for U.S. policy:

- ***Refrain from imposing a new government, rushing to write a constitution, or organizing elections.*** Give time to Iraqis to work out their own solutions. If U.S. occupation ends within one or two years, it will be better to set up a transitional government under U.N. supervision than to rush through an artificial democratic process that is bound to fail. Two years are not remotely sufficient to negotiate an agreement among ethnic, religious, and political factions, solve issues of identity, and start reconciliation. Premature elections will lead to increased conflict, not a democratic government.

- ***Focus on Iraq's interests, not its neighbors'.*** It will be difficult enough to handle conflicting Iraqi ambitions without also trying to accommodate its neighbors. Decisions concerning the degree of autonomy for the Kurds or the composition of the new government must not be determined by Turkish fears and Saudi preferences. The primary issue is what is good for Iraq, not what would appease its neighbors.

- ***Make the political reconstruction of Iraq into a truly international effort.*** This will allay fears of U.S. domination and increase the probability that Iraq's neighbors and other countries will refrain from undermining the new regime. If the United States insists on calling all the shots and the other members of the international community refuse to get involved out of pique, the chances of stability for Iraq and the region will decrease greatly. The United States and the Iraqis will be targets for every disaffected government and terrorist with a stake in the region.

- ***Keep oil management international and transparent.*** The United States will be closely scrutinized for opacity and abuse of Iraq's resources. The American "advisory" role should be discreet and short. Oil revenues must fund the rehabilitation of the oil fields, food and humanitarian purchases for the Iraqi people, and the rebuilding of the country's physical infrastructure. They cannot be used to pay for the war or the occupation. Nor should the United States decide which oil contracts should be honored and which rejected. Doing so would confirm the widespread international suspicion that the United States invaded Iraq because of its oil and increase hostility among Arabs, further undermining U.S. credibility and its ability to foster political reform in the region.

- ***Reengage in the Arab–Israeli peace process.*** The United States cannot afford to ignore the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians any longer if it wants to restore its credibility. Two issues are most significant. First, Iraq cannot be forced into agreeing to a peace settlement with Israel before other Arab governments do so. Such an attempt would weaken and isolate a new government, ensuring that it will have no influence on other Arab countries. Second, U.S. engagement in restarting the peace process will be critical to easing popular domestic pressure on friendly regional governments that helped the United States in the Iraq war. Such engagement could also help staunch anti-American resentment and even violence triggered by the invasion.

- ***Create a new security venue.*** No matter how successful, the political reconstruction of Iraq will not eliminate threats of war in the region. A militarily weaker Iraq could invite aggression from neighboring countries. A new regional organization—perhaps the Gulf Cooperation Council plus Iraq and Iran, with the United States and European Union as observers—would encourage negotiated conflict resolution rather than military confrontation. Neither Iraqis nor their neighbors will be liberated from fear, insecurity, and repressive government without a durable regional security system. ♦

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