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Prospects in Iraq

Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad
Minaret of Freedom Institute

The Bush administration professes that Iraqi resentment at the American occupation is limited to Saddam loyalists and outsider terrorists and protests that the press reports of failures at restitution of services are grossly exaggerated. On the contrary, they insist that this is the dawn of a new era of liberty and democracy not only for Iraqis but for the entire Middle East.

Are these dreams of a free and democratic Middle East realistic, or have we gotten ourselves into a quagmire that will only make things worse? If we want to be guided by reality rather than wishful thinking, there are three questions that we must address. First, factually, what is this situation now? Second, logically, what outcome may be reasonably expected from our actions to date? Finally, what does history tell us about such enterprises as this mission in Iraq?

It may well be that the recent spate of violent attacks on U.N. personnel and American soldiers—including the downing of a series of military helicopters, are mostly or even entirely the work of Ba`th loyalists and foreign commandos. It is certainly true that the bulk of the civilian Iraqi population is glad to see Saddam gone and it might even be true that they are still hoping that the American forces will succeed in fully restoring vital services and set Iraq on a path of democratization and liberalization.

However, what is undeniably true is that no people, including the Iraqis, want to be occupied by foreign troops. It is a fact that the level of services has not been restored to the pre-invasion level. While things may not be as bad as the impression given by the American press, a source on the scene reports to us that even the Americans in Iraq do not yet have reliable electrical service.

The American contractors in Iraq are actually slowing down the pace of recovery. Ariana Eunjung Cha of the *Washington Post* (“Success, Traced in Cement: Iraqis Rebuild Factory at a Fraction of Estimate,” 11/10/03, A1) documents a specific example of how local Iraqi entrepreneurs and engineers are able to restore factories and infrastructure much more quickly than and at a fraction of the price requested by the gargantuan American firms.

By using scrap parts and cannibalizing one production line to restore another, the natives were able to get a badly needed cement factory back in operation now, using \$240,000 of the factory’s own funds supplemented by a mere \$10,000 of U.S. military funds. In contrast, the U.S. army engineers, constrained by bureaucratic regulations and inspired by grandiose visions wanted one year and \$23 million of American taxpayer money to build a state-of-the art factory with imported building equipment and machines. Cha quotes a

military officer who belittled the Iraqi effort as “a band-aid fix,” but the Iraqis are delighted by the fact that even with the second production line down they are now producing 1,500 tons of cement a day, more than one year ago—before the invasion.

The United States could have sent a clear message that it was serious about establishing a democracy in Iraq by establishing immediate elections, under international supervision, for a Constitutional Convention. Alternatively, an election campaign could be underway now for a new parliament had the U.S. opted to temporarily restore the constitution that had been in place before the Baa`th party took power. Instead, a governing body appointed by the foreign occupiers now produces little beyond excuses as to why it can't meet the timetable for holding elections and writing a constitution (Daniel Williams, “Iraqi Warns of Delay on Constitution, Vote: Security Issues Cited as Appointed Council Presses for Provisional Government Status,” *Washington Post*, 11/10/03, A20).

Just as stories began breaking in the press that the United States was losing faith in its appointed council, American soldiers killed the head of council, Muhammad Kaabi, in what appeared to be a dispute over American military demands to search his car (Anthony Shadid, “GI Kills Head of Council in Baghdad Slum: Army and Iraqis Disagree on Circumstances,” *Washington Post*, 11/11/03, A12). At the very least Iraqis must perceive the American administration's faith in its appointees to lead Iraq to be rather slim, if they insist on searching their cars. At worst they may be reminded of the assassination of Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem after the United States had given up on him and suspect that this is a case of “termination with extreme prejudice” of a man whose lost his usefulness.

Perhaps of more concern than the lack of respect shown Iraqi “leaders” is the mistreatment of Iraqi women. Al Jazeera (which has been bombed in the past by American forces), in defiance of a warning from Major David Farlow of U.S. military headquarters Centcom in Florida, has published photographs of the women and children tied up by American soldiers (Yvonne Ridley and Lawrence Smallman, “Shocking Images Shame US Forces,” <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/6B135A01-B99C-41C1-B36A-53197281D21E.htm>, 11/10/03). The American forces had already been criticized for a lack of cultural sensitivity, insulting Muslim standards of decency by allowing male soldiers to search female Iraqis and putting their shod feet on peoples' heads (Rajiv Chandrasekaran and Vernon Loeb, “The Battlefield for All Iraq?: Intense Resistance Mounted in Fallujah,” *Washington Post*, 11/4/03, A1).

The fact most Iraqis are not actively fighting against American soldiers does not necessarily mean that they have no resentment against the occupation. Most of the residents of the Baltic states were not in violent resistance against the Soviet occupation but they resented it very much. The fact that most Palestinians are not bearing arms against the Israelis doesn't change the fact that they resent the Israeli occupation. As Americans, we should be asking whether our policies are likely to provoke people who are not fighting us into taking up arms against us.

What should our strategy in Iraq be? How can we make the best of a bad situation? Is there any course of action that might lead to a better future for Iraqis and a warming of relations between America and the Muslim world?

We are between a rock and a hard place. If we stay in Iraq we continue to fuel the alienation of the Arab and Muslim world to America. If we just get up and leave, we will be blamed for the humanitarian disaster that will almost certainly ensue as factions fight for power in the vacuum we have created. The Ba`thists might return to power or the contending factions might would turn the cradle of civilization into a civil war zone reminiscent of Afghanistan at its worst.

It is too late to undo the invasion, so America's best approach is to try to minimize the damage. I would recommend a set of policies that will allow for a rapid exit of American forces while minimizing the chances for civil war, that will maximize the local Iraqi talent in reconstruction encouraging the development of the entrepreneurial class that had been undermined by Saddam's socialism, and that will allow for the development of a legal system sanctioned by Islam, the one common thread among all the significant factions in Iraq, and that will return the oil industry to the Iraqi people in a way that makes them all stakeholders without turning Iraq into a "rentier state," that is, one that depends on renting oil concessions to outsiders without developing the productive forces of its own internal economy. To the degree that we influence the design of the new constitutional system, it should be to encourage these results.

How can we do these things? We can develop Iraq's civil society by pairing up Iraq's nascent civil society institutions with Muslim American organizations so they can exchange ideas on how to operate Islamic institutions in a free society. We can encourage organizing Iraqi political system as a highly decentralized federal system with the federal government restricted to those things that must be federalized (the national defense, oversight of the mint, regulation of inter-province trade, court of last appeal, etc.) and most of the power reserved to the provinces. With Kurdish, Sunni and Shi'a provinces in charge of their own affairs there will be no incentive for civil war. Protection of Islamic rights like freedom of conscience (with recognition of all Sunni and Shi'a schools and protection of *dhimmi*s) and freedom of trade and private property could be incorporated into the federal constitution. The oil industry can be privatized and shares of the regional oil companies distributed among the Iraqi people.

An unambiguous American policy committed to these ends and implemented in a manner that gave the Iraqi people the final say in accepting or rejecting all such proposals would minimize the damage now being done to America's status while maximizing the chances of a true democracy emerging in Iraq.