

Post War Issues:

The Future of Iraq

Feb 27, 1991



Brief Analysis

With the liberation of Kuwait almost completed and Saddam Hussein's army of occupation now firmly in the vice of allied forces, it is high time to contemplate the future of Iraq.

If Saddam Hussein continues to rule, he will be weak and embattled. His military impotence has been demonstrated, pricking the overblown balloon of his pretensions to invincibility that underpinned his reign of terror. His regime will be saddled with some \$80 billion in external debt plus a huge bill for war reparations. He can expect little or no assistance for rebuilding Iraq's destroyed civilian infrastructure and it is doubtful that Turkey or Saudi Arabia would agree to the export of Iraq's oil through their pipelines. In these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that Saddam can survive for long. When he is overthrown, the institutions associated with his rule are unlikely to survive. The Ba'ath party, the secret police and the Tikriti elite are all intensely disliked by the Iraqi people. The army is the one institution still respected in Iraq. If the army ousts Saddam, any new military regime would need a mandate to rule. It could find such a mandate if it declared itself a transitional regime to a constitutional government. Its function would then be to maintain public order for a fixed time period.

Even before August 2, there was a strong desire among the Iraqi population for relief from the regime's repression, or for what Iraqis called "more democracy." Political life inside Iraq was suppressed. Iraqi politics continued in exile. But because to be an opponent of Saddam's, even in exile, was dangerous, strong motivation was necessary. Iraqi exile politics are probably more ideological than the attitudes of the bulk of the population. Yet Iraqi politics are changing. With the regime under assault, more Iraqis abroad are becoming politically active. The same would happen in Iraq if the regime fell. New figures, now scarcely known, would emerge. A transitional regime would provide time for the development of political groups reflecting the sentiments of the population.

The Iraqi population has suffered a great trauma -- the regime's severe repression, the eight year war with Iran, and this war. Yet a visitor to the country gets the impression that the Iraqi population does not share the anti-Americanism of some other Middle East populations. The harshness of life has helped deflate the appeal of ideological movements. The U.S. was not close to Iraq, so there is little resentment of the U.S. for propping up an unpopular regime. Rather, liberal elements in Iraq looked to the regime's relation with the U.S. to limit some of its worst features.

Thus, if Saddam is overthrown and a transitional regime is established, there will be an important role for the U.S. and the international community to play in helping to sponsor a constitutional government. The UN Security Council consensus that authorized the war to liberate Kuwait could be maintained to support the peace. The influence, prestige, and resources of the international community could support a transition to democracy in Iraq. Reconstruction aid and international recognition could be used to help insure a transitional regime kept its commitment to hand over power. The UN could help provide the legal and constitutional expertise an aspiring democracy would need to avoid the instability of an illadvised electoral system.

This process, however, would require American and international support for democracy in Iraq. Presumably the U.S. would welcome it, but no administration official has said so. The American position about Iraq's future is vague, and yesterday The Washington Post even charged that this vagueness was because of concern about Saudi sensitivities.

Turkey's president has said, "Our wish -- and I stress this is a wish and not an aim -- is for a democratic regime to be established in Iraq....For if democracy is victorious . . . this might make Iraq more stable." The United States should say the same and state that it is prepared, to the extent it is able, to help Iraqis achieve that goal. Such a statement would be welcomed by the Iraqi population.

The effort to develop a constitutional government in Iraq would also presume contacts between the international community, including the U.S., and Iraqi political groups. The U.S. has not pursued such contacts, apparently leaving it to others. Congress seems to be the one exception -- several Iraqis in exile have been invited to testify.

Leaving the question of Iraq's political future to other is problematic. Saudi Arabia has contacts with Iraqi exiles. But American interests are not identical with Saudi interests. It is unlikely that the Saudis understand well the complex political pressures that will exist on any future government in Baghdad. The Saudi attitude tends to be to find individuals who will be "their men." The Saudis have assembled a number of Iraqi figures. They are largely Sunni Arab, military men who lack a significant political base among Iraqis. Some are notorious, including one who played a prominent role in the public hanging of Jews in Baghdad soon after the Ba'ath took power. Iraq's sectarian politics clash with Saudi sectarian politics. In Iraq, a Sunni Arab minority rules a country which is over 50 percent Shi'a Arab and 20 percent Kurdish. The Saudis are not sensitive to Kurdish aspirations and discriminate against their own Shi'a minority.

Not all Iraqis are happy with American aloofness. Liberal elements within the Iraqi polity in exile look to the U.S. for its liberal values. They dislike and suspect the influence of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iran. The United States should welcome this interest. After all, we are not only the world's leading democracy but we now have an intense interest in the overthrow of Saddam. Expressing support for a democratic Iraq is an important way of encouraging the Iraqi people to move against Saddam Hussein. The U.S. cannot destroy Iraq's infrastructure and much of its military capabilities and then be passive, as if it had no responsibility for what comes next.

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