Iraq:

Between Democracy and Disorder?

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Brief Analysis

On October 22, 2010, Ahmed Ali, Michael Knights, and Michael Eisenstadt addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Mr. Ali is a Marcia Robbins-Wilf research associate at the Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Iraq. Dr. Knights is a Lafer fellow at the Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and the Gulf Arab states. Mr. Eisenstadt is director of the Institute's **Military and Security Studies Program (/templateI02.php?SID=2&newActiveSubNav=Military%20and%20Security%20Studies%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D2&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)** . The speakers addressed prospects for the formation of a new government in Baghdad, the security situation, and challenges accompanying the planned U.S. withdrawal. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Ahmed Ali

Muqtada al-Sadr's endorsement of Nouri al-Maliki gives the Iraqi National Alliance 135 of the 163 Council of Representatives seats required to form a government, enhancing the prime minister's prospects for a second term. Yet serious questions have arisen about the price exacted for this support, with al-Sadr reportedly demanding control over several service ministries.

In addition, it remains to be seen whether al-Maliki can convince the Kurds to support him. He is known to be close with Iraqi president and leading Kurdish figure Jalal Talabani, but Kurdistan Regional Government president Massoud Barzani does not appear to be quite as enthusiastic about a second al-Maliki term. Recently, the Kurdish faction issued a list of nineteen demands and pledged support for any prime ministerial candidate who would accept them. Barzani, Iraqiyah's Ayad Allawi, and several other key political leaders are scheduled to meet in Irbil, and their deliberations could influence the nature and pace of the government formation process.

During al-Maliki's recent tour of Iran, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey, he conveyed the message that he will work with Iraqiyah rather than marginalizing the party. Even so, only Tehran openly backed him for a second term. Interestingly, al-Maliki was accompanied on his Turkey visit y Minister of Planning Ali Baban, who is in charge of a planned census that could help decide the status of Kirkuk. The minister has vowed to eschew census questions regarding the ethnic identity of respondents; by taking him along, al-Maliki signaled to Ankara that he was not yielding to Kurdish demands.

All in all, the protracted postelection wrangling has disappointed many Iraqis. In particular, Iraqiyah supporters believe that as the "winner" of the election, their party should have the right to form the next government. One positive outcome, however, is the newfound broad consensus that some of the prime minister's powers should be trimmed.

Michael Knights

Although security in Iraq remains much better than in past years, the country is arguably being held to a higher standard today: the question is not whether the state will collapse, but what kind of state will emerge. Security metrics are degrading in quality as the U.S. military draws down, but they provide a sufficiently representative sample. Taken together, they confirm that stabilization is slowing overall and even regressing in some places, particularly around Baghdad and other areas associated with Sunni Arab insurgent groups in eastern Anbar and the Tigris River Valley, including Baathist strongholds around Tikrit.

A variety of political drivers are reinvigorating the various interwoven insurgencies in northern and central Iraq. Corruption and ineffectiveness have reduced faith in the federal government, while the protracted postelection process has reinforced the sense that democracy and the "new reality" in Iraq are no better than the old regime. The large number of Iraqis who chose Ayad Allawi and the Iraqiyah list during the election increasingly view their votes as wasted, particularly given the prospect of another al-Maliki government influenced by Iran and beholden to the Kurds. Indeed, many former Baathists and educated secularists believe that Iraq is being surrendered to a class of Islamist leaders and Kurdish separatists who are ill equipped to lead the process of national recovery. Reconciliation efforts such as the Sons of Iraq program have been put on the back burner, while predominately Shiite Arab army units sometimes act like foreign occupiers when stationed in predominately Sunni areas.

Insurgent groups such as the neo-Baathist "Army of the Men of Naqshabandi Way" (JRTN) are exploiting this political discontent to create a powerful narrative well suited to long-term antigovernment resistance. By trading on the sense of exclusion and culture shock felt by many secular and former Baathist Shiites and Sunnis, and by pushing al-Qaeda in Iraq into a subservient position, JRTN is broadening the appeal and geographical reach of the country's web of active insurgencies. Groups such as JRTN have also

shown a deft hand in their ability to sponsor and cobrand attacks using other nationalist groups and seamlessly incorporate al-Qaeda-style suicide operations into their strategy.

The result is an increasingly effective countercollaboration and counterstability campaign that selectively targets the security forces, government officials, and Sons of Iraq or Awakening leaders. The tactics used are simple but effective: silenced pistols, undervehicle "sticky" bombs, small improvised explosive devices, and drive-by shootings. Lethality, while often high, is not the main goal of such operations: instead, their aim is to publicly intimidate government employees and supporters into inactivity.

If Baghdad does not take action to curb this campaign -- namely, through the formation of an inclusive government, reconciliation initiatives, and anticorruption drives in the military -- this new insurgency could freeze Iraq at current levels of insecurity for years to come.

Michael Eisenstadt

Although Iraq's future will ultimately be determined by the Iraqi people and their elected leaders, the kind of country the United States leaves behind will be determined by how successful Washington and Baghdad are in preserving hard-won security gains, and on how effectively the United States uses its remaining influence there.

This influence is not what it was when Washington had billions in reconstruction funds to spend, though even then, effectively wielding this leverage was often more easily said than done. Today, the United States must be more resourceful in identifying sources of influence, more focused in applying it, and more modest in what it tries to achieve with it.

As American military forces have drawn down, the State Department has likewise reduced its footprint. As a result, the United States is losing critical situational awareness regarding developments in the provinces that could limit its ability to identify trends requiring urgent attention. To address this challenge, the embassy's political section should consider employing the services of midlevel military personnel who have served multiple tours in the provinces and who still have contacts there.

Moreover, Iraq's importance as a past and potential future player in the Levant and Gulf is such that a long-term bilateral security relationship is highly desirable. Washington therefore has an interest in maintaining a residual military presence in Iraq after 2011. Yet the American people will not support such a relationship unless they believe that Iraq has a legitimate, effective government that is responsive to U.S. concerns and willing to work with Washington to achieve common goals.

Finally, experience has shown that postconflict societies have a much better chance of avoiding renewed civil war if they go through a broad-based national reconciliation process. Iraq is not yet a postconflict society and has to date experienced only "tactical reconciliation" -- that is, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former insurgents. Going forward, hopes rest on reconciliation through politics, with the formation of a broad-based governing coalition that gives elements from every community a stake in political order. But it is just as easy to imagine Iraqi politics obstructing reconciliation.

To lay a foundation for national reconciliation, the United States should continue to encourage the Iraqi government, the UN, and international and Iraqi nongovernmental organizations to draft a blueprint for a reconciliation process that reflects Iraqi cultural values, preferences, and political realities. Baghdad can then implement this blueprint at some future date when conditions permit.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Hale Arifagaoglu. ❖

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