

Twentieth Anniversary Soref Symposium: Overcoming Challenges in the New Iraq

May 19, 2005



In-Depth Reports

On May 19, 2005, Barham Salih addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium. Barham Salih is minister of planning and development in the new Iraqi government. Previously, he served as Iraq's deputy prime minister. An engineer and computer scientist by training, he served as prime minister of the Sulaymaniya-based Kurdistan Regional Government before the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Transforming Iraq from a tyranny to a democracy is a monumental undertaking tantamount to changing the course of history in the Middle East. Despite the many problems it faces, the new Iraq is a drastic improvement over the Iraq of old. The current difficulties pale in comparison to the horrors endured under Saddam Hussein's tyranny. His regime was a uniquely criminal state, comprising all the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarianism: ethnic cleansing, torture, terrorism, devastation of civil society, flouting of international law, use of chemical weapons, and latent regional ambitions waiting to resurge.

Bringing down a tyranny that enslaved 25 million people is no small matter, but creating a functional democracy in its place is an even greater challenge. The liberation of Iraq has been vindicated not only by the discovery of mass graves, but also by two landmark political developments: the drafting through consensus of an interim constitution, and the success of democratic elections in which more than 8 million Iraqis participated despite intimidation and violence. The Iraqi government now faces three major challenges: delivering internal security, fostering economic growth, and establishing a viable political structure.

Training and equipping indigenous security forces is the top priority. By May 2005, Iraqi police and army personnel outnumbered coalition forces. Enhancing their capabilities so that they can assume full responsibility for defending the country is the best weapon against terrorism. The Iraqi Security Forces are already doing an admirable job; much of Iraq is stable and secure despite images of carnage emanating from more violent locales. Nevertheless, Iraq will need the support of multinational forces until its own personnel are capable of delivering security independently. Despite protracted public debate regarding the withdrawal of foreign troops, the Iraqi government and the coalition agree that such redeployments should not be based on an artificially imposed timetable.

Enduring partnerships between free nations will be necessary to combat global terrorism in the long term. The United States is leading the way in helping Iraqis establish internal security; the British role has been admirable as well. Other NATO countries are helping, but they can and should do more. Fostering a stable and successful Iraq is in the broader international interest.

On the economic front, the international community should help the Iraqi government demonstrate that democracy can defeat terrorism, provide material needs, and inspire debate and ideas. Even as they yearned for freedom under Saddam, Iraqis also hungered for basic economic development and equitable distribution of natural resources. Over the course of his twenty-year reign, Saddam dragged Iraq back into the nineteenth century. The country now has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the Middle East and a shockingly high rate of child malnutrition, while

public services and infrastructure are in shambles. Indeed, compared to twenty-five years ago, Iraq is a tragedy. Compared to just two years ago, however, Iraq is doing better. Spending on health and education are up, along with immunization rates; refugees are returning home; family incomes are on the rise; and the economy is growing.

At the same time, corruption and inefficiency continue to plague Iraqi political institutions, sustained by state revenues. Iraq must therefore move away from a command economy and empower the private sector by developing a legal and administrative environment that encourages investment. International assistance is essential in this respect. Debt relief, while important, is insufficient; a stable, federal, democratic Iraq is worth more extensive investment.

On the political front, the January 30 parliamentary elections and the subsequent creation of a new government were important successes. Regarding the former, the interim authorities opted for a proportional national list system to bring as many Iraqis as possible into the political system. Regarding the latter, the interim constitution -- the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) -- imposed a steep hurdle on the formation of a new cabinet, requiring the approval of a two-thirds majority in the national assembly. Nevertheless, Iraqis met these requirements through discussion and compromise.

The next challenge for the Iraqi government is to ensure that the Arab Sunni community is included in the political process. The current government is the third since the establishment of the Iraqi Governing Council nearly two years ago, and each transfer of power has been peaceful and constitutional. The drafting of a permanent constitution to replace the TAL is the next critical juncture in this process. Although the debate will be lively, it will remain within the parameters of democracy. The drafters will work hard to meet the demanding timetable and ratification requirements imposed by the TAL.

If these three principal elements -- security, economics, and politics -- are addressed, Iraq will be a state at peace. In order for this transition to be successful, however, regional actors must play a more constructive role. Iraq's neighbors are clearly interested in the fate of Iraq. But this interest often leads them to unacceptable and unwarranted interference. For example, some of these neighbors have violated their international obligations by permitting illegal access to Iraq across their borders and by harboring former Baath regime figures. Such dangerous and shortsighted tactical decisions will come back to haunt these countries. Iraq's neighbors must realize that the Iraq of Saddam is no longer. In its place is being built a federal, democratic state that has renounced aggression and the pursuit of nonconventional weapons.

Despite being afflicted by daily terrorism, the new Iraq has a population of immense courage and politicians who are dedicated to compromise and consensus. Through their success, Iraq can transform itself from a land of aggression and mass graves to a land of peace and democracy. More important, it can become the cornerstone of a peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Iraqis would then have an opportunity to complete the daunting but necessary mission of changing the perverted course of political history in the region.

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