

After Elections:

What Next for Iraq and U.S. Policy?

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Brief Analysis

Freedom As a Strategic Concept

Since the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration has radically altered U.S. Middle East policy. Broadly defined, the administration's view is that democracy and freedom in the region is the central strategic concept offering a serious, long-term alternative to jihadi terrorism. This policy shift marks a fundamental departure from past concepts on how the United States should engage the region. Previous administrations had focused on simply managing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and supporting conservative regimes that, in the end, offered neither stability nor peace to the region in particular or to the world at large, as was dramatically evident on September 11. Thus, the administration has chosen to focus on a new long-term solution based on the principle of freedom, which is rooted in the American people. Moreover, the president personally believes that there is strong empirical evidence, from the Ukraine to Afghanistan, validating the idea that people do indeed crave democracy and freedom.

Critics of this new approach to the Middle East are many, and yet they offer no viable alternative. Worse still, their criticism sometimes has an underlying racist tint to it, as if people not of Western culture or appearance do not want, or are not ready for, the same liberties and rights afforded to Westerners. British literature during the height of the British Empire offered similar views with regard to India during its colonial occupation, and the Indians went on to prove that the notion had no basis in reality.

Iraq and the 'Boom Factor'

The success or failure of the U.S. mission in Iraq will crucially affect American foreign policy for years to come. In the face of much negative commentary emanating from Iraq, the past year has seen many successes. The Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) was completed on time and in a balanced fashion, the transfer of sovereignty was carried out, the interim government is functioning and exerting its authority over ever greater territory, and, most recently, successful elections were held on January 30. Instead of focusing on these positive developments, the media chooses to focus on the "boom factor," whereby the violence, not the progress being made in Iraq as a whole, is the big story. The reality is that the Shiite south and the Kurdish north are relatively quiet aside from the occasional Abu Musab al-Zarqawi car bomb, and the overall trend line is positive in most of the country, except the three Sunni provinces and parts of Baghdad.

The Sunni Problem

Despite the many positive developments in Iraq, it is clear that the biggest obstacle to achieving a free and stable democracy is the insurgency being waged by the Sunni minority against the Iraqi government and the Multinational Forces. The conditions in Iraq are quite different from past insurgencies faced by the United States, however, most notably in Vietnam and the Philippines. The Sunni insurgency comprises a very small percentage of the overall population of the country. Estimates place it at less than one percent of the Iraqi people; given its ethnic and

sectarian nature, it simply cannot get much bigger. In addition, the rest of Iraqi society is not sitting by indifferently, as past atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein's regime have politically galvanized the Shiite and Kurdish populations. In addition, the insurgency is not putting forward any kind of political program to counteract the efforts being made by the central government and the coalition, and it therefore does not constitute a real alternative in the eyes of most Iraqis.

After the transfer of sovereignty, the government of Ayad Allawi began crafting a strategy for dealing with the restive Sunni population. The basic objective was to separate the majority of the Sunni citizenry from the hardcore insurgent elements. Under this plan, Allawi meets constantly with various Sunni leaders and attempts to convince them that they too would be beneficiaries in the new Iraq. Additionally, an amnesty proposal was put forward to all former Baathists (excepting mass murderers or high regime officials) and even to segments of the insurgency to convince them to lay down their arms. Failing this, however, the second part of the Iraqi government's strategy entailed the elimination of anyone who did not choose the peaceful path proposed above. This strategy failed in Falluja due to the fact that the city fathers who were negotiating had no control over the insurgents inside Falluja. It was largely successful in Samarra, however, in large part because of Allawi's leadership.

The Future of Iraq

The future of Iraq, and by extension U.S. policy in the Middle East, gives reason for optimism. The January 30 elections have provided a real chance for a moderate, legitimate government to take control in Baghdad. It is becoming clearer that Iraqis in general, including Shiite leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani, are not interested in an Iranian-style theocracy. Moreover, Sunnis will likely be well represented in the executive branch and in the constitutional deliberations to be held later this year. The weeks ahead will see a flurry of political negotiations and possibly some setbacks, but ultimately a new constitution will be written, which in all likelihood will resemble the TAL in its balance and moderation. In addition, the training and standing-up of the Iraqi army and security forces is moving forward steadily, and many battalions are expected to be ready for action by the end of the year. Even France and Germany, which were so vociferous in defending their criticisms of U.S. Iraq policy, have come to understand that an insurgent victory in the country is clearly not in their interests. Ultimately, developments in Iraq during the course of 2005 will greatly influence America's future role in the region and the administration's new strategic concept of promoting freedom.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Neri Zilber. ❖

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