

# From Falluja to Elections:

## A View from Iraq

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### Brief Analysis

The forces at play in Iraqi politics have changed over the past seventeen months. There is a glaring absence of moderate Iraqis throughout the political scene, within all three major ethno-religious groups -- Shiites, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. The interim government has perpetuated the dominance of the same seven prominent political parties that controlled the Iraqi Governing Council before the June 2004 transfer of sovereignty. Those outside this elite group of parties, especially Sunni Arabs, are frustrated at the perception that their voices are not being heard.

After Operation Iraqi Freedom, a power vacuum emerged. Since it was not filled immediately by either the United States or a new Iraqi government, foreign extremists took the initiative and were received warmly in places such as Falluja and Ramadi. Meanwhile, Saddam loyalists returned to tribal areas and reorganized themselves. Coalition Provisional Authority and Iraqi mistakes only strengthened the resultant insurgency, creating a united front of opposition among Sunni Arabs that drowned out moderate voices. Many Sunni Arabs felt let down by the aftermath of the invasion, believing that they were treated as a conquered people. They also opposed those Sunni Arabs appointed to the Governing Council, whom they felt had been handpicked by Shiites and Kurds. Consequently, Sunni Arab moderates soon found themselves losing the moral ground, accused by extremists of collaborating with the United States.

These issues have served to perpetuate the crisis in Iraq. Accordingly, moderates across the Iraqi political spectrum, especially Sunni Arabs, must be empowered in order to prevent further sectarian polarization and fragmentation.

### Empowering Sunni Arab Moderates: An Iraqi Conference

Many Sunni Arabs have come to realize that they are doomed if they continue to act in a purely sectarian and regional manner, without true leadership. Accordingly, they believe that a new Sunni Arab constituency must emerge. They believe that the insurgency has been counterproductive; it was because of the resistance that the United States appointed the Governing Council and the successor government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, both of which have been opposed by most Sunni Arabs.

In light of these factors, an Iraqi conference should be convened as soon as possible to help legitimize moderates from all groups (perhaps modeled on the recent international conference held at Sharm al-Sheikh). Contrary to the Sunni Arab conference proposed by Jordan's King Abdullah, this summit should not be sectarian in nature. Rather, it should focus on initiatives that offer something for everyone, including neighboring countries such as Syria and

Iran, who are fearful that the U.S. presence in Iraq is a stepping stone for action against them. The conference should be hosted by a country that does not border Iraq. This host country (or an international organization such as the UN) should play the role of secretariat and moderate the conference. Most important, the Bush administration must be supportive of the conference -- without such backing, the conference will fail.

A conference arranged on these principles could help boost moderate forces in Iraqi society, legitimizing them internationally and showing Iraqis that moderates can reach compromises across ethnic and sectarian lines. Strengthening the moderates could also be a useful step toward breaking the monopoly of power held by the seven major political parties and showing that the new political system is open to broader participation.

### Upcoming Elections

On January 30, 2005, elections will be held for an Iraqi National Assembly, which will draft the new Iraqi constitution. These elections could be instrumental in bolstering the new government and helping Iraq out of its current quagmire. Yet, they must be administered in a manner that does not lead to civil war. In particular, Sunni Arab moderates must be empowered. Although Sunni Arabs are a minority in Iraq, they are still very influential. An Iraq without a role for the Sunni Arabs would be as unworkable as a Lebanon without a role for the Maronites. Sunni Arabs are also needed as a balancing force between the Shiites and the Kurds. Without their active presence in political institutions, Iraq could become polarized between Kurds and extremist Shiites. Accordingly, Iraqis must reach prior agreement on electoral policies that allow for Sunni Arab participation.

The idea of briefly postponing the elections must be considered. Although the Allawi government knows that such a move would have many advantages, it also realizes that postponement in the absence of a larger plan would be counterproductive. The government cannot appear to be giving in to extremists or granting the Sunni Arabs a veto over elections. The only way to postpone the elections without negative political consequences is to hold an Iraqi conference, one in which all parties compromise in an effort to bring Iraq back from what could be the brink of chaos.

Once the Iraqi National Assembly is elected, it must be given tangible power in order to avoid accusations that it is merely an advisory council. Moreover, in its constitutional deliberations, the assembly should keep in mind that a federalist system is best for the new Iraq because it will be inclusive of all parties and will protect the minority Sunni Arabs from the majority Shiites.

### What the United States Can Do

In order for the United States to succeed in Iraq, the Bush administration must first be unified itself, with the White House taking charge. Iraqis have been confused by past divisions in Washington, and it will be important for the administration to establish clear goals for Iraq and guidelines on how to accomplish these goals. Washington must also treat the Iraqis as partners rather than colonists. The United States must permit Iraqis to cooperate in their own way and determine their needs on their own. Washington should also avoid embracing any Iraqi leader so much as to make him or her appear to be an American puppet.

In addition, the United States should approach Iraq regionally, considering the interests of neighboring countries in order to bring them on board for the task of fostering a successful Iraq. As mentioned previously, neighbors such as Iran and Syria are afraid that Iraq will serve as a platform for eventual action against them. This and other factors have led them to support insurgent activity there. As the insurgency has worsened, however, these neighbors have become afraid that the chaos in Iraq will spill over into their territory. Therefore, the United States should reach out to them with policies that pay heed to their interests and that are not too heavy handed.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Max Sichertman. ❖

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