Eyewitness Perspectives Assessing Progress in Iraq (Part II):

Politics, Transition, and the Kurds

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Brief Analysis

On February 9, 2004, Patrick Clawson, Soner Cagaptay, Jeffrey White, and Jonathan Schanzer addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. All four were part of the Institute fact-finding delegation tasked with conducting an independent survey of local security conditions and emerging political currents in Iraq. The delegation traveled throughout Iraq, from the Turkish border to the Kuwaiti frontier, speaking with Coalition Provisional Authority officials, coalition military leaders, Iraqi Governing Council members, and Iraqi clerics, tribal leaders, and intellectuals. Dr. Clawson is deputy director of the Institute, and Dr. Cagaptay is coordinator of the Institute's Turkish Research Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. **Read a summary (templateC05.php?CID=1708)** of Mr. White and Mr. Schanzer's remarks.

PATRICK CLAWSON

The New Iraqi Politics

The character of Iraqi politics has completely and irreversibly changed in recent months. The prevailing sense among Iraqis is that Saddam Husayn is not coming back; they are now focused on the question of what new power arrangements will emerge.

Because Saddam prevented the formation of civil society institutions, Iraqis are beginning their new political life with few social connections outside the family. When they do look outside the family, Iraqis will initially have few places to turn. As a result, they may well fall back on their primordial links -- that is, their ties to ethnic, religious, and tribal groups. Because such groups often define politics in zero-sum terms, it should come as no surprise that ethnic, religious, and tribal tensions have increased since the war's end.

Nevertheless, the nascent Iraqi government is beginning to mature as the new ministries take responsibility for

making decisions (e.g., regarding government pay) that were previously under the purview of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The progress of the new government in addressing daily life issues seems to be as important to ordinary Iraqis as any national political issue. In fact, CPA polling in the Basra province found that repairing roads and sewers were among the respondents' top concerns, while national political issues barely registered.

The Iraqi police force serves as a good example of the new government's progress. Five months ago, only a few Baghdad intersections were allotted police officers to direct traffic, and those few officers appeared dispirited at their lack of success in getting drivers to pay attention to them. Now, however, almost every major intersection has a police officer standing confidently in the middle of the street, able to halt multiple lanes of traffic with a simple hand gesture. The police are also beginning to experience some success in investigating crimes, something they never did under Saddam. The fact that Iraqis are now reporting crimes illustrates the increased level of public confidence in the police, as does the high demand for police jobs. For example, Basra already has more policemen than it needs, and tribal leaders there have gathered long lists of men seeking police jobs.

Despite the steady progress it has made, the new government faces an uphill climb before it can be considered adequate to all of the tasks that will be thrust upon it. In particular, it has not yet been able to deliver personal security to all Iraqis, for whom the main danger is ordinary daily crimes rather than political attacks. Equally troubling is the fact that many Iraqis are still swayed by the old paradigm of force. For example, one tribal leader argued that the local governor should have an armed contingent at his disposal because political power is based on force.

The U.S. Role in the New Politics Is Unclear

In the old Iraqi politics, the exclusive role of the United States was to depose Saddam. In the new politics, however, the U.S. role has yet to crystallize. Many of the relevant issues are quite complicated, and the CPA lacks detailed knowledge of Iraqi society. To be fair to the CPA, reliable information on Iraqi society is difficult to come by; as two Iraqi sociology professors aptly explained, Saddam strongly discouraged studying the subject because it was too politically sensitive.

This problem of inadequate information is most pressing with regard to the Shi'i community. Although Washington is placing all of its bets on Shi'i cooperation, U.S. officials have only the vaguest sense of the diverse dynamics inherent in Shi'i politics. For example, Shi'i leaders who proclaim their undying respect for Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani (the most senior Iraqi Shi'i cleric and a potentially powerful political candidate) will often qualify these sentiments by arguing that elections should not be held for at least two years, in part because they are far too complicated, but also because Iraqis do not understand what democracy entails. Indeed, many Iraqis may give different information to coalition officials than they do to others with whom they speak, a problem to which CPA officials do not seem fully sensitive.

Another disturbing trend is that the United States continues to receive full blame for the CPA's shortcomings but no credit for its successes. Iraqis rarely say anything positive about what the United States has accomplished other than offering praise for deposing Saddam. Although many Iraqi criticisms are exaggerated, it is fair to blame the United States for the slow pace in delivering aid. The $18.6 billion supplemental budget has yet to be implemented, and few expect the aid program to make a noticeable difference on the ground until at least six months from now. The U.S. reconstruction effort is drowning in red tape, and the situation is likely to become much more complicated after June 30, 2004, when the CPA is scheduled to hand over power to the Iraqi authorities.

At the same time, the Iraqi economy is recovering, mainly due to the Iraqi people's new freedoms and growing confidence about the future. Iraqis are spending more money, and expatriates are sending more funds back into the

country. One particularly striking example of this economic improvement occurred following the removal of international sanctions and the subsequent lifting of Iraq's 300 percent tax on automobiles. As result of these measures, the number of vehicles registered in Basra province has increased from 21,000 before the war to 50,000 today, and many more vehicles are not yet registered. Iraq has also experienced a construction boom. For example, Sulaymaniyah has so many building projects in progress that there is a shortage of construction workers. In the south, numerous small brick factories have sprung up in response to the tenfold increase in brick prices (unfortunately, this brick boom has created a serious pollution problem). -

The Transition Will Pose a Great Challenge

It is perhaps overly optimistic to expect that the new Iraqi institutions will be ready to assume full power by June 30. The most obvious reasons for concern lie in the security realm. Clearly, Iraq will still depend on U.S. forces to carry out large-scale operations against the resistance long after the deadline passes. In fact, the new Iraqi government is unlikely to have even a functioning Ministry of Defense to provide informed guidance to U.S. forces.

Another daunting challenge for the CPA will be the task of managing changes in its own structure. After June 30, the CPA's authority will be curtailed to an advisory role. The plan is to shift jurisdiction over the CPA from the Defense Department to the State Department, in the manner of an embassy. The difficulties in changing from one set of bureaucratic procedures to another can paralyze an office for weeks.

On the Iraqi political front, the CPA is currently devoting much of its attention to the question of whether the country's Transitional National Assembly should be selected by election or by caucus. Yet, the coalition may be better served by putting this issue aside for now and seriously reconsidering its deadline for transferring authority to the Iraqis. If the CPA insists on a June 30 handover, the new Iraqi government may lack legitimacy: the new assembly would likely be unelected, the government would not be prepared to take on many important functions, and U.S. influence would remain so pervasive that it would be viewed as still in control. Indeed, such an arrangement might remind Iraqis of the early-twentieth-century British mandate: indirect imperial control behind a faade of local democratic government.

In general, Iraq is on the road to sovereignty. The main question that remains is which Iraqi constituencies will wind up holding the primary reins of power. June 30 is not a magical date on which everything in Iraq will suddenly change. Rather, Iraqis are slowly taking on more responsibility and working out power arrangements. After June 30, the new Iraqi government will still be on training wheels and heavily reliant on the United States.

SONER CAGAPTAY

Northern Iraq

The Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq already has the trappings of independent statehood, and the Kurds will look to maintain as many of them as possible. Among the most important of these trappings are control over borders, militia forces, and finances. For example, the Kirkuk area alone holds about 40 percent of Iraq's oil. If the Kurds have control over this oil, they will effectively become the holders of the world's ninth largest oil reserves.

In general, Kurdish officials are prepared to accept federal status for Iraqi Kurds with two caveats. The first is that laws passed in Baghdad cannot contradict Kurdish laws or secularism. Some Kurdish officials have been adamant on that position. The second caveat is that Iraq should be organized as a binational state of Kurds and Arabs. Over the next year, Kurdish authorities will likely pursue two strategies in order to ensure that these conditions are met. First, they may resist calls for holding Iraqi elections soon, preferring that national elections be held one or two years down the road. Kurdish authorities already have a large sphere of influence, and elections could undermine some of their control, given that they represent a minority in Iraq.

Second, they will try to maintain de facto control over as much of the north-central region as they can during the transitional period. This region stretches from the Syrian border to the Iranian border and includes the cities of Mosul, Irbil, and Kirkuk. It is the only area (other than Baghdad) where all of Iraq's various ethnic groups -- from Turkmens, Arabs, and Kurds to Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Muslims -- coexist in significant numbers (the south is 90 percent Shi'i, if not more; the far north and northeast are heavily Kurdish; the central region and the western desert are overwhelmingly Sunni). North-central Iraq contains ethnic enclaves within enclaves and is the only area where no group enjoys plurality across the board. Despite its diversity, much of the area is currently controlled by the Kurds, whose checkpoints stretch as far south as an hour's drive north of Baghdad. Hence, if Iraq does fracture, it will do so because of developments in the north-central region.

Despite their currently extensive reach, it is uncertain whether the Kurds will retain this level of influence in the long term. The Kurds have maintained a maximalist agenda in part to ensure that they have a strong hand when they begin bargaining with the rest of the country. Afterward, they may in due course give up some of their gains. In particular, they may be willing to give Baghdad control over their borders and integrate the Peshmerga militias into the Iraqi army.

Turkey and the Kurds: Natural Political Allies

Iraqi Kurds and Turks can become close political allies if they can overcome their political differences in the short run. Given the large Kurdish population in Turkey, Turks view the Kurds as a part of the Turkish family. Moreover, as a country on the brink of European Union membership, Turkey is a natural passageway to the Western world for the Kurds, whose largely secular political culture mirrors Turkey's own. In fact, the Kurds are the most potent secular force in Iraq, which fact will put them squarely in Ankara's camp when it comes to maintaining a secular Iraqi political culture. Water will be another key issue binding Turks and Kurds. Turkey has long held the most favorable upstream position with regard to water rights in the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In the new Iraq, however, the Kurds will join Turkey as another upstream power, given their control over the mountainous north. Hence, if negotiations on regional water issues are held in the near future, Syria and Iraq, the two downstream countries, will be sitting on one side of the table, with Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds on the other side.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jeff Cary, a Dr. Marcia Robbins-Wilf young scholar and research assistant at The Washington Institute, and by Ryan Phillips, also a research assistant at the Institute.

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