Give the Sunnis a Break—and a Stake

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Wistful expressions of hope by US officials that the demise of Odai and Qusay, the sons of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, and indeed of Saddam himself, would undercut the Sunni Arab resistance in Iraq betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the opposition in the so-called Sunni triangle north and west of Baghdad. While the departure of Saddam would reassure Iraqis who fear the former regimes return, the elimination of Iraqs former rulers or the dismantling of their political and security structures would be insufficient to end the low-level insurgency simmering in the region.

The resistance, prosecuted by varied elements acting out of diverse motives (including former regime dead-enders, local Islamists, foreign jihadists, and criminal elements), draws considerable strength from political and religious attitudes, tribal values and communal solidarities deeply ingrained in the population of the provincial villages and towns of Iraqs Sunni triangle.

Among the factors driving the resistance are the deeply felt humiliation engendered by the Anglo-American coalitions military victory and occupation; the sense of entitlement still felt by members of the Sunni Arab tribal minority that until recently ruled Iraq; the anxieties of the larger Sunni Arab community (some 20 percent of Iraqs population) that fears political and economic marginalization in a democratic Iraq; a potent brand of Iraqi-Arab nationalism well entrenched among sections of Iraqs Sunni Arab population; and the increasing popularity of political Islam among sectors of the rural Sunni population.

Capturing or killing members of the old regime engaged in violence against the coalition, accompanied by civil-military operations to create goodwill, remain the key to success for the Anglo-American effort. But military action and civil-military operations are not enough. Defeating the insurgents will require parallel steps to alter the larger political and economic context in the Sunni triangle in order to build bridges to residents of the region and isolate those who have taken up arms against the coalition.

Thus, as the coalition mercilessly pursues the insurgents, it must reassure the residents of the triangle that it is not pursuing an anti-Sunni Arab vendetta; and that although the Sunni Arab minority no longer enjoys a monopoly on power, those who embrace change have a crucial role to play in the new Iraq.

To this end, the coalition must ensure that the residents of the triangle have an identifiable voice in the new political

order. At present, only one of the five Sunni Arabs on the 25-member Iraqi governing council is from the triangle (and he only recently returned from exile), and it is not clear whether any of the newly appointed interim cabinet members hail from the region. A special effort should be made to involve more individuals from this region in the drafting of a new Iraqi constitution in the coming months, and in the new Iraqi government established thereafter.

The coalition thus needs to cultivate individuals and tribes from the triangle region that suffered under the old regime (there are many) and who would regret its return. Many of these are also hostile to the coalition out of distrust for US intentions or because of nationalistic or religious conviction. Bringing these people around to work with the new order and eliminating the ideology of entitlement that makes many hostile to the idea of sharing power is essential to building post-war Iraq. While it may not be possible to win hearts and minds in the Sunni triangle, it may be possible to demonstrate that the coalition and residents of the region have a shared interest in cooperating.

To deal with Sunni Arab fears of marginalization, the US should encourage Iraqis to adopt a form of decentralized administrative federalism (versus ethnic federalism) as the basis for a new government in Baghdad. In Iraq, federalism has generally been cast as a means of dealing with Kurdish demands for autonomy within the framework of a unitary Iraqi state. It can, however, also be thought of as a way to ensure that the residents of each region in Iraq -- including the Sunni triangle -- retain the final word on how they run their lives at the local and regional levels, within constitutional parameters, as a means of guaranteeing minority rights.

Finally, the coalition must address the plight of those who have lost their jobs as a result of de-Baathification and the dismantling of the military, knowing that a disproportionate number of former soldiers lived in the Sunni triangle. While many of these individuals deserve little sympathy, it is in the coalitions interest to make sure they are not just receiving handouts (as in the case of former members of the armed forces), but that they find stable employment, perhaps in public works projects, where they can be watched -- partly to ensure that they do not participate in anti-coalition violence -- and be made to feel that they have a stake in the new order.

By taking these steps, the coalition will not only enhance the prospects for success in dealing with the low-level insurgency it is now fighting in the Sunni triangle and in Baghdad itself; it will also improve the prospects for the eventual emergence of a stable, and democratic Iraq. ❖

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