

# First Steps to Remake Iraq

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Apr 8, 2003

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**W**hat to do in Iraq postwar could easily become the next crisis within the Western alliance. Canada has the credibility as a close friend of the United States, a strong supporter of international institutions, and an experienced peacekeeper to play an important role in urging all sides to make the necessary difficult compromises.

In theory, everyone agrees on the way forward. After U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell met with his European counterparts Thursday at NATO headquarters in Brussels, NATO Secretary-General Lord George Robertson declared, "We are seeing the emergence of a consensus" about postwar Iraq.

In reality, we are more likely to see the same process that unfolded at the United Nations about disarming Iraq: first, an agreement in principle that everyone endorses; then a bitter dispute once it becomes apparent how different are the understandings of what that agreement means. Already on Friday, the French, German, and Russian foreign ministers meeting in Paris made clear they would insist on the centrality of the UN, while U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice warned, "Iraq is not East Timor, Kosovo, or Afghanistan" (in which new administrations were established under UN auspices).

Compromise about the role of the UN will not come easily, because both the U.S. and the European critics of the war think they are in the driver's seat, and that the other side will inevitably have to let them choose which route to take.

The United States is convinced that it has the responsibility and the capability to administer Iraq during a brief transition while order is re-established, and an Iraqi interim authority is set up. In this conception, the United Nations has an important humanitarian role, along the lines of the prewar oil-for-food program, but the United States and its wartime allies will make the key political decisions and reap the credit from transforming Iraq. A more active role for the UN, it is felt, would detract from the U.S. claim of victory, and retard the handover to Iraqis. As well, the United States wants no limit on its ability to pursue remnants of the Saddam Hussein regime, including tracking down its weapons-of-mass-destruction programs.

European critics of the war, such as France and Russia, as well as the UN bureaucracy and the non-governmental organization (NGO) community, think the United States badly needs the world community for postwar reconstruction. Only a UN-run transition with a substantial NGO role would, they argue, have the political legitimacy to gain acceptance from the Iraqi people, as well as to forestall Arab outrage at what would otherwise be seen as

American imperialist domination. As well, they argue that the reconstruction is going to require substantial donor funding and humanitarian expertise beyond what the U.S. government will provide.

And they argue that the transition will take years, pointing to how the solemn U.S. pledges to Congress that America would quickly be out of first Bosnia, and then Kosovo, turned out to be empty words. Indeed, the Balkans experience convinces European critics of the war that no matter what Washington now says, the Bush administration will have to come cap in hand to the United Nations and Europe asking for their assistance. They are prepared to concede that so long as the security situation is unstable, the United States will be running the show -- and that even after that, it will continue to have the main role for ensuring security. But the political task of rebuilding the Iraqi government is a different matter.

Each side tells a story it finds convincing about why it will inevitably be having an important role but not the central role. The conflicting views are not going to make it easy to reach a compromise -- and the still-raw feelings about the events leading up to the war will not help. The potential is all too real that there could be another major disagreement.

The biggest losers from a deadlock over a UN role would be the Iraqi people. Absent a role for the United Nations, the United States would be tempted to turn over responsibility very quickly to Iraqis, in order to put to rest fears of a prolonged colonial occupation. That might not leave the time for the new government to gain the trust of Iraq's neighbours.

If the Sunni Arab minority no longer dominates Iraq as it has for many decades, Saudi Arabia and Turkey will be wary, if not hostile: The Saudi government has no love for the Shiites and it worries about the impact of empowered Iraqi Shiites on the Saudi Shia minority -- in much the same way that Turkey feels about the Iraqi Kurds.

And a quick handover would require giving a prominent role to returning exiled Iraqis, whom some would be quick to paint as U.S. puppets. Meanwhile, it would not leave enough time to develop new leaders from among the many skilled Iraqi professionals who stayed in the country but kept as far removed from politics as they could during Saddam's rule.

Nor would a quick transition leave the time to develop the institutions of civil society -- such as a free press and political parties -- that are necessary to make democracy work. So the new Iraq would inevitably be, at best, a benevolent dictatorship, no matter how many democratic-sounding trappings are set up.

Iraq deserves better. This is why a UN-assisted transition process would be the better way to go, if that can be made consistent with a pre-eminent role for the wartime states.

The British are making a valiant effort to promote compromise. They are pressing for Security Council approval of the least-controversial matters first, while setting aside, for the moment, the more difficult issues. But the British will need support to forge a broad international consensus that includes countries that were not active in the fighting.

And Security Council action is more likely if countries with experience in postconflict situations, such as Canada and Japan, step forward to volunteer, whether it be to organize an international conference about humanitarian assistance, or to provide for work in Iraq respected officials whom all parties will trust to implement the Security Council resolutions in a neutral spirit, neither hostile to the U.S.-led war effort nor endorsing it. ❖

Globe and Mail (Toronto)

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