The Regional Implications of Pursuing 'Regime Change' in Iraq (Part I)

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In-Depth Reports

Those expressing concern about the prospect of regime change in Iraq fall into two groups: those who are afraid that the intended change will fail and those who are afraid that it will succeed, with the latter group being the more vociferous. As others have said repeatedly, the long-term objective is democratic government in Iraq to serve as a "model for the region."

Although the word "democracy" has undergone many changes in meaning -- having been applied to the Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe, Franco's regime in Spain, and so forth -- I think we all know, broadly, what we mean by it today. The Western world generally assumes that democracy is the natural condition of humanity and that any departure from it is either a crime to be punished or a disease to be cured. This is simply not so. What we call democracy is the parochial habits of the English-speaking peoples for the conduct of their public affairs, a system developed over many centuries and still imperfectly assimilated elsewhere. Even Europe's record of democracy in the twentieth century is, to put it mildly, uneven. The idea, therefore, that we can manufacture and install democratic institutions in the Middle East is somewhat unrealistic.

There are two different ways in which most people look at this issue. One view holds that the Arabs and other Middle Eastern peoples are not like Westerners. They are incapable of running free and democratic institutions. Whatever we do, they will be governed by odious tyrants, and the object of our policy should be to make sure that the tyrants are friendly rather than hostile. This is the view that prevails in the chancelleries, foreign ministries, and embassies of Europe and, to some extent, Washington. This is known as the pro-Arab attitude. (Laughter.)

The other view would say that, yes, Middle Easterners have no experience in democracy, but they can learn, and it is our duty to guide them, to teach them, and to help them to develop democratic institutions on the model of ours. This is known as imperialism. (Laughter.) This is what the French and the British tried to do in their mandated territories, creating governments in their own images -- the British creating constitutional and parliamentary monarchies, the French creating unstable republics. (Laughter.) All of them have failed and gone.

I do not want to give the impression that I am pessimistic about the Middle East's prospects. On the contrary, I am optimistic because I do not cherish either of the previous two illusions. I believe that there is a basis for institutions to develop that might not resemble ours, that might differ quite considerably from ours, but that will offer decent, humane, and civilized government.

Middle Easterners have long experience of this in the past, before the process of modernization or, as some call it, Westernization destroyed traditional institutions, values, and obligations, and left a kind of moral anarchy in which the only European model that succeeded was the one-party ideological state. The party in this system is part of the apparatus of government and, more particularly, of indoctrination and repression. This is the only European model that has really worked in the Middle East, and it has worked very well, unfortunately.

The time for this model is passing, and there are genuine possibilities for developing free institutions. I am greatly

encouraged by the Turkish example. Turkey has been developing genuine democratic institutions for a long time. The Turkish experiment has established two points. One is that creating democratic institutions in a culture with long traditions of command and obedience is very difficult. The other is that it is not impossible. The Turks are doing it, and others can emulate their success.

The Middle East is a region of great, ancient civilizations with talented and ingenious people, and I have no doubt at all that they can create free societies. We cannot do it for them. The most that we can do is to remove obstacles. Among these obstacles are regimes such as that of Saddam Husayn. One could mention others as well, but I am much too tactful to do so.

Parallels to the Iraq quandary can be found by looking at post-World War II Germany and Japan. Following the end of that war, American and other Allied forces entered both countries, but not with the intention of conquering and dominating them. The Allied intention was, first, to remove a major menace and, second, to give them the opportunity to redeem themselves and to restore or create their own freedom.

I am particularly optimistic that the same can be done in Iraq, which has many positive features upon which it can build. For example, of all the oil-producing countries, Iraq made the best use of its oil revenues in terms of creating a real infrastructure, including a good secondary and university education system. Here I speak from personal knowledge. Earlier in my career, when I was teaching at the University of London, the overwhelming majority of my graduate students came from the Middle East. All of these Middle Eastern students were graduates of Arab universities and, before that, of Arab high school systems. I got to evaluate them well enough to know what sort of education and training they had received and, more particularly, whether their credentials really meant something. In the case of Iraqi students, their degrees were more reliable than those of students from other countries; the students from Iraq had received better training under more rigorous standards.

For this and other reasons, there is genuine hope. The main task is not creating opportunities, but removing obstacles.

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: Abdel Ilah Khatib, **(templateC07.php?CID=115)** David Ignatius, **(templateC07.php?CID=116)** and Saad al-Ajmi **(templateC07.php?CID=117)** ❖

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