How to Build a New Iraq after Saddam

by **Ellen Laipson (/experts/ellen-laipson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

On September 3, 2002, Ellen Laipson and Rend Rahim Francke, contributors to The Washington Institute monograph **How to Build a New Iraq after Saddam, (templateC04.php?CID=140)** addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum. Ms. Laipson is president and CEO of the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington. She also served as vice-chairman of the National Intelligence Council from 1997 to 2002. Ms. Francke is executive director of the Iraq Foundation; she has written extensively on Iraqi politics and is coauthor of The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims (2000). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ELLEN LAIPSON

Judging whether or not regime change in Iraq is desirable depends in part on forecasting what is likely to occur afterward. The international community cannot expect to determine the success or failure of regime change in the few months after it is initiated; this is the responsibility of the Iraqis themselves. By intervening, the international community would be entitled to set some terms regarding the basic principles of a post-Saddam government, but the details of such a government -- in the social, political, and economic realms -- must be meaningful and credible to Iraqis.

Timing Is Essential

The generation with the skills and experience needed to rebuild Iraq is aging and will soon be retiring from active political life. The high caliber of the Iraqi opposition-in-exile reflects the investment in manpower that was made in Iraq during the years before the current regime took over. In contrast, Iraqis who have undergone their professional formation in Iraq over the last two decades are less educated, have had fewer opportunities to study abroad, know fewer foreign languages, and have come of age in a period of enormous political stress and oppression. Citizens of free societies cannot fully understand the toll that Saddam's rule has taken on Iraqis and their confidence about the future. Although many Iraqis favor democracy, they also want a government that can provide valuable services, establish law and order, relieve their economic burden, and build new institutions soon after assuming power. Because the decisionmaking process can be slow in democratic governments, it will be necessary to make tradeoffs between democracy, efficiency, and security during the transitional period of a post-Saddam Iraq.

The diversity of the Iraqi opposition-in-exile should not be viewed negatively, but rather as a harbinger of pluralism

in a heterogeneous society. The international community should work with as broad a range of Iraqis as possible following Saddam's ouster, not merely with the successor government. Enriching civil society in this manner would help to create a sense of national identity, which could fill the vacuum left by the removal of Saddam as a national symbol.

U.S. Occupation

Iraq's weapons capabilities must be limited in some way, but it is important to remember that national security interests often drive weapons-of-mass-destruction programs. Iraq's case is unique, of course, because Saddam has used such weapons against neighbors and Iraqis alike. Nevertheless, following a U.S. invasion, U.S. forces would be required to ensure Iraq's security and territorial integrity until the Iraqi military could be rebuilt in an appropriate manner. There would be no political support for an extended U.S. occupation, but such an occupation would not be the best means of ensuring stability in the first place. On the contrary, any signs of instability in a post-Saddam Iraq would require the United States to work behind the scenes, minimizing its role, exaggerating local involvement, and emphasizing that Iraqis have authority over -- and control of -- the situation. Moreover, Iraq could pay for much of its own reconstruction, given that its annual oil production could reach 6 million barrels within a decade, bringing in roughly $30 billion per year and a great deal of foreign investment to support nation building.

REND RAHIM FRANCKE

The Iraqi military has been an important national institution throughout Iraq's history and therefore must have a role in the country's post-Saddam reconstruction. When the time comes for regime change, a large number of Iraqi officers (along with their troops) would likely join American forces. In the past, the overriding sentiment in Washington favored a military regime in a post-Saddam Iraq, largely because preserving the country's territorial integrity and maintaining law and order on the streets were seen as paramount. This sentiment is changing quickly, however, as it becomes apparent that Saddam has encouraged clan rivalries in the Republican Guard in order to decrease the clans' power relative to the presidency. Without an acknowledged hierarchy among these clans, a post-Saddam military regime could succumb to successive coups, reviving the "government of the month" phenomenon seen in Syria during the 1950s and 1960s and in Iraq between 1958 and 1968.

Other Options?

Iraq does not have a political class separate from the high echelons of the Ba'ath Party or the military. Hence, toppling the current regime could cause a collapse of the administrative chain of command. The resulting vacuum would cause a deterioration in law and order and the humanitarian situation; in this scenario, the international community would require Iraqi help in rescuing the collapsed state. Many in Washington discount the potential value of the Iraqi opposition (in exile and in northern Iraq), but these elements should be considered as serious candidates for immediate succession following Saddam's removal. Some object that the Iraqi opposition-in-exile lacks legitimacy, but surely it has no less legitimacy than the current regime. Moreover, members of the opposition-in-exile are familiar to Washington and accessible in a way that the opposition in Iraq proper is not. As for accusations that this opposition is American-made, many exiled opposition elements have been active since long before the United States took interest in them. Therefore, they could play an important role in a successor government, ensuring security, justice, public health, food distribution, and other vital services. Some technocrats and civil servants within the current regime would surely be brought into the fold, but this would take time. Washington must seriously examine how it can begin to work with the accessible factions of the Iraqi opposition to ensure continuity of vital public services. These issues must be considered before the bombs begin to fall.

Democracy in Iraq

Many say that the Middle East is inhospitable to democracy, but there is no reason to think it is any less possible

there than in Southeast Asia or South America. If authoritarian rule (benevolent or otherwise) were established in post-Saddam Iraq, the new government would be less likely to succeed, and keeping the country together would be more of a challenge. Despite their ethnic, religious, and ideological diversity, all Iraqis have shared the experience of oppression and disenfranchisement and would regard Saddam's fall as their opportunity to begin political life in earnest. The only way to bring the country together is to give its citizens a vested interest in a new Iraqi identity and state. Participation in central government as well as political and cultural pluralism would be the principal tools for maintaining the integrity of a new Iraq.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Katherine Weitz.

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