What Do Iraqis Think about Life after Hussein?

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Articles & Testimony

Newspapers are making public possible war plans should the United States decide to attack Iraq while Bush administration strategists consider timing. Aid workers, academics and experts debate what comes after a war. Last week, witnesses testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee estimated that rebuilding a stable Iraq could take a 20-year commitment and cost American taxpayers billions of dollars. In all the debate, however, one thing is forgotten: What the Iraqis themselves say about their post-Saddam Hussein future.

I taught for nine months last year in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, a region has been partially protected by American and British aircraft for the past decade and has been outside Saddam Hussein's control. I had 500 students. Some were children of the local elite, others were children of political dissidents. Many were Kurdish, but some were Turkoman, Arab or Assyrian.

Many students had families living under Saddam Hussein's control in southern Iraq whom they would visit regularly. Some of my colleagues at the university in Dohuk would even commute from Mosul, a city still under Baghdad's control. One of my housemates was an Arab from Baghdad who said he once helped arrange spontaneous demonstrations for the Iraqi government. Shopping in well-stocked markets in Erbil, a major city of northern Iraq, I met Sunni and Shiite Muslims visiting from all over Iraq.

The Iraqis I know would shed few tears if Saddam Hussein were to go. As one university professor in Sulaimaniya, in northeast Iraq, asked me, "Why do people in the West think we want to live under Saddam any more than they would?" Others I talked to were suspicious of Washington's ability to match its rhetoric with action.

Nevertheless, the debate in Washington has caused Iraqis to consider their post-Saddam Hussein future. Despite wars and dictatorship, Iraqis remain cosmopolitan, and they do not fear that the country itself will break up. Sunni or Shiite, Arab or Kurd, Iraqis are proud of their heritage. "During the Iran-Iraq War, we didn't flee," one Shiite war veteran at a refugee camp in northeastern Iraq told me. "Why would we stop being Iraqi now?" Most Kurds recognize that independence from Iraq is not an option, and they want a say in Iraq's futurewhich is why Iraqi Kurds and Arabs are talking seriously about federalism.

To Iraqis, federalism is not a new concept. Iraq flirted with the idea prior to its independence in 1932. Saddam Hussein himself endorsed federalism in 1970, while serving as vice chairman of the ruling Baath party, though as he consolidated his power he undercut the autonomy accords he had negotiated with the Kurds in the north of the country. In 1995, King Hussein of Jordan described Iraqi federalism as the optimal solution to ensure stability.

But federalism has many variations. Many Kurds wish federalism to be tripartite: A northern Kurdish state, a central Arab Sunni state and a southern Arab Shiite state. Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Iraq's neighbors to the north and south), many Iraqi Arabs, and minorities like the Turkomans and Assyrians find such a vision unacceptable. Iraqi Arabs say they will endorse federalism so long as it is not configured along sectarian lines, a view voiced as early as 1996 by Ayatollah Muhammad Bakir al-Hakim, head of one of the leading Iraqi Shiite opposition groups, and reiterated just last month by Mudar Shawkat, leader of the predominantly Sunni Arab Iraqi National Movement.

A federalist future could insure against sectarian strife and make post-Saddam Hussein reconstruction less daunting than many policymakers in the West fear. Federalism would not have to devolve into provincialism. A central Baghdad government would still control defense, foreign affairs, oil fields and national infrastructure.

The economic basis for federalism already exists. Under terms of the 1996 United Nations oil-for-food program, the three northern provinces of Iraq receive 13 percent of Iraq's oil revenue, a figure proportional to their population. The economic progress in that region offers a workable model for post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.

Reconstructing Iraq will not be simple, but if policymakers listen to Iraqis, it will be easier. My Baghdad University-trained translators consistently stumbled over words like debate, tolerance and compromisegrowing up under Saddam Hussein made it harder for them to grasp these concepts as real. But after 34 years of Baath Party dictatorship, Iraqi civilians want freedom and better lives. Helping Iraqis attain freedom will be costly; first America needs to listen to them.

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