

National Reconciliation Conference: prerequisite for national elections

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Iraqis are well aware that the credit for bringing down Saddam Hussain and his regime is due principally to the US administration, and specifically to President Bush.

Accordingly, many Iraqis welcomed the coalition forces as liberators rather than occupiers. The emphasis they themselves placed on their liberating role added an extra dimension to public expectations of the post-war period. Iraqis thought they could look forward not only to economic and social improvements, but also to exercising their long-denied political rights. But after year of American rule, Iraqis have seen their fear of Saddam Hussain and his repressive agencies replaced by fear and terror of a different kind: due to the widespread anarchy, violence, killing, theft, and abduction of children and women (there have been during the first six months some 400 cases of girls being kidnapped). In addition, they have been deprived of the few basic necessities of daily life they used to enjoy (electricity, fuel), not to mention employment opportunities.

Although the country's infrastructure had been damaged by years of sanctions and war, the most damage was inflicted by those Iraqi elements who exploited the post-war breakdown of order and security to wreck what remained of it.

The Breakdown of Order and Security

The question that troubles many Iraqis is why didn't the occupation authorities anticipate the post-invasion anarchy, and once it happened, why didn't they take decisive measure to stop it? They protected some sites, such as the oilfields and the oil ministry, but neglected others. As a result, it was not just the regime that collapsed, but the entire state and its institutions too.

Yet no provision was made for workable alternatives. Consequently, the occupation authorities today face a major reconstruction problem. And Iraqis wonder how come the US managed to oust the all-powerful regime in three weeks, yet failed to restore the electricity in 12 months?

The occupation authorities could have made use of the Iraqi police and army, after purging them of Saddamist elements. To its credit, the army did not fight, thus helped reduce the number of Iraqi, American and British casualties during the fall of Baghdad. Nevertheless, the Pentagon decided to dissolve the Iraqi military, instead of reconstituting it in a manner that would have made use of some of its components, or at least prevented them from turning into a hostile force of hundreds of thousands on

unemployed and disaffected men. The subsequent attempt to correct this mistake by paying soldier's salaries did not address the problem of the wounded pride of these thousands of trained servicemen, which makes them potential recruits to sabotage under the guise of waging an "anti-colonial" struggle as the case in Faluja.

Iraqis may have been the victims of their high expectations. But the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) has been the victim of power-struggles between decision-making centers in Washington. The preconceived ideological "visions" of some of them have helped create new enemies for the US in Iraq and unite them, via short-sighted policies such as dissolving the defense ministry and army, so-called "de-Baathification", and according minority treatment to the Sunnis.

This has aroused their fears and united them in suspicion of Washington's motives, if not driven some of them to take up arms against it. The sheer numbers of people discharged illustrates the scale of the damage: 400.000 soldiers, 100.000 policemen, and 22.000 information ministry employees. Ironically, while the information ministry was dissolved, the minister of information was allowed to leave the country and the ministry of culture, with Baathists in senior posts, was retained. That decision was taken in Washington without consulting Iraqis. The CPA promptly realized it was a mistake, and is now considering how to rectify it.

Violence and terrorism cannot be combated without a measure of support and cooperation from the communities that harbor and abet the perpetrators, namely former soldiers, Baathists, and disaffected inhabitants of the 'Sunni triangle'.

De-Baathification: the enemy is Saddamism

The decision to "de-Baathify" was taken under the influence of preconceptions in Washington that certain Iraqi elements helped promote. In dealing with the Baath Party, the choice is between adopting what could loosely be called the Soviet model after the fall of communism, or the German model after the fall of Hitler. Iraq's experience bore a far closer resemblance to the Soviet case. In post-war Germany, moreover, the process of democratization took years, and was accompanied by huge injections of funds from the US treasury. Neither the time nor the money are available today. But despite the unsuitability of the German model to Iraq, it was the one chosen by the dominant policymakers in the US. This served to unite thousands of Iraqis, many of whom would otherwise have been prepared to cooperate with the new dispensation, against the interim administration.

Some ministries were virtually stripped of staff, as most were former Baathists – naturally enough in a country that was subjected to 35 years of one-party rule. The party reserved important jobs exclusively for its members, and until the late 1980's only allowed party members to complete their higher studies or gain admission to

university. Inevitably, during those 35 years, many of the people who graduated, were appointed to important state jobs, and rose to leading positions in the various ministries, didn't believe in the Baath's ideas let alone Saddam's. Party membership was merely a career necessity for them. Now they find their careers terminated, while the new ministries search for new staffers who may lack their predecessor's expertise and skills. It would not be feasible to rely on skills of returning expatriate Iraqis. Conditions in Iraq deter exiles and expatriates from returning at present.

Most of those who have returned, other than for visits, have done so on highly-paid short-term contracts to the CPA or private companies. Their privileged status causes resentment among locally-recruited staff, understandably when someone is paid \$10,000 per month for doing a job which earns an equally qualified compatriot \$300-500. Thus, "de-Baathification", insecurity and unemployment are combining to drive more qualified Iraqis out of the country at a time when they are most needed.

The Governing Council

Instead of enabling the Iraqi people to govern themselves, the CPA assumed rule of Iraq itself. It could argue that the formation of an Iraqi interim authority had to be deferred because of the failure of Iraq's political forces and elites to agree on a common formula. Indeed, they wouldn't have even reached agreement on the formation of the Governing Council (GC) without CPA pressure.

Sixteen of the Council members had not been living under Baathist rule, so had ample time to develop a joint political program capable of filling the vacuum resulting from Saddam Hussain's downfall. But even at their last pre-war meeting in Arbil in February, they failed to unify their efforts. They treated the impending change in Iraq as an American effort from which they would profit.

The CPA formed the GC in June, after a succession of resistance attacks and acts of sabotage and terror, and at the urging of friendly Iraqi political forces. .

However, the majority of the GC members were, as individuals of high standing, but they failed to work as a team.

The composition of the GC was based on the ethnic and confessional makeup of Iraqi society, thereby inaugurating a sectarian approach whose potentially dangerous consequences cannot be overlooked. This same sectarian approach was reflected in the two most important decisions taken by the GC: those concerning the formation of the Constitutional Committee and the Interim Government. As a result, relatives and partisans of GC members were appointed, and the Council's composition was mirrored in the distribution of cabinet portfolios. Some ministries were abolished and others were created, not on practical grounds but principally to conform with the share-out of posts along ethnic and sectarian lines. Moreover, the GC did not reach out to any of

the political forces that had been excluded from it.

The adoption of an ethnic and sectarian formula is understandable as a temporary measure, given the failure of Iraqi political elites to reach agreement on an alternative mechanism. But it threatens to become established and institutionalized, and this is alarming. Those who might cite the Lebanese case as a model for Iraq should note that Lebanon suffered a succession of civil wars due to this kind of sectarian set-up, and that it continues to threaten to blow the country apart.

Drafting the Constitution

If democratic principles are to be respected, an elected body should assume the responsibility for composing a draft constitution and then putting it to the people in a general referendum. That is what the Iraqis did under the British rule eight decades ago. In 1924 they elected their first Constituent Assembly, which undertook the task of adopting a draft constitution after putting it to a popular referendum.

Thus the manner and way the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) was drafted and announced to the Iraqi people, without even putting the draft for public debate, led to the difficulties that we are encountering now. By the time it was announced eleven members of the GC declared their reservations, and now the two Kurdish parties, members of the GC threaten to boycott the central Iraqi government if TAL is not adhered to and complained in a letter to President Bush their dissatisfaction that the TAL was not mentioned in the UN Security council resolution.

The CPA and the GC failed to conduct general elections when the situation was more conducive six months ago, and now they agreed to have general election not later than January 2005 when the situation is far more worse than six months ago.

Need for national reconciliation conference before general elections

After a year of the downfall of the Saddam's regime in Iraq, it has become clear that the Coalition Authority, specially the US administration, needs to review and reconsider its policy in Iraq. If it insists on following its present policy it would be very difficult to get out of the present crisis.

Iraqi extremists and advocates of violence utilized the CPA and Governing Council mistakes and shortcomings to promote armed resistance in the name of ending foreign occupation. The threat to stability becomes greater when Sunni elements cooperate or co-ordinate with dissatisfied Shii ones.

On the other hand use of excessive force by the Coalition (as the case in Fallujah) without clear political vision about how Sovereignty will be transferred and by what

mean renders it fruitless if not counter productive. What is needed is decisiveness coupled with political clarity.

The CPA and GC decision to hold elections –although late- could be the key for political settlement and stability, and the formation of the new cabinet is the right step in the right direction, but it is imperative to provide an environment conducive to free and fair elections and that could be achieved by holding a national reconciliation conference.

The purpose of such a conference is to involve wider circles of Iraqis including those who took arms (but not terrorist) in matters related to the transitional period and up till the end of the. It is basically an ad hoc framework for exchange of opinions and dialogue among Iraqis and between them and the coalition forces with the aim of furthering national reconciliation and creating political atmosphere conducive for free and fair election.

If the establishment of such conference under UN auspicious is approved, the mechanism for choosing its members -taking into account the limited time available- should be based on certain criteria: representation of all governates, the political parties, civil society –elected unions, women, youth, tribal areas, religious establishment etc. The selection of the participants in the consultative body could be shared by the present Iraqi government and coalition forces and the UN representative.

The role of the UN and need for American review of policy

The role of the UN must be clear and specific. Refusing any role for the UN is not acceptable even by the US administration, at the same time using the UN as mere rubber stamp or cover for the US Government is rejected. However, asking the UN to take full responsibility for Iraq is not feasible or practical, thus the role of the UN (in addition to humanitarian role) should be in the nature of a catalyst and facilitator in convening the national reconciliation conference and supervising the elections.

Lastly, a major review of American policy in Iraq should take place taking into account that failure is not an option for the USA or Iraq but lack of courage and wisdom from both sides could make it our fate.

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