

New Iraq opts for democracy and strategic partnership with the US

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LONDON -- The question worrying most Iraqis at the moment is not whether war will break out or not, but whether Saddam Hussein will continue to rule over them. Iraq, after all, has been in a continuous state of war ever since Saddam Hussein seized power in 1979 in a bloodbath in which he killed off most of his erstwhile comrades. Scarcely a year went by before he launched a futile eight-year long war with neighboring Iran. Two years after that conflict ended, Saddam invaded Kuwait and Iraq has been paying the price of that folly ever since.

The only way this nightmare (both for Iraq and the region) can be brought to an end is by overthrowing the regime -- and definitely not by giving it a new lease of life under the pretext of allowing UN inspectors more time to search for weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein used means other than WMDs to destroy Iraq and its people. This is not a call to wage war per se.

After all, both the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war and Operation Desert Storm in 1991 failed to dislodge Saddam from power. The Iraqi people do not need new lessons about the catastrophes of war. What they need is help to rid themselves of this long and cruel nightmare.

Some people say that only the Iraqi people have the right to change their government. That is only correct if Iraq were a normal country. Calling on the Iraqis to change the regime under present circumstances is like telling a drowning man to rescue himself.

Some Arab intellectuals justify the continued suffering of the Iraqi people by saying America is only interested in the country's oil, not in its people's freedom, as if Saddam has been using Iraq's vast oil resources for the benefit of the people, and not purely as a means of keeping himself in power through bribes and buying Arab and foreign support -- not to mention obtaining WMDs and waging wars on his neighbors. Iraqis feel particularly bitter when they hear other Arabs and Moslems criticize them for cooperating with the United States in getting rid of Saddam's tyranny, just because America supports Israel -- as if their suffering somehow redeems the Palestinians. Several Arab columnists (writing in newspapers owned or supported by states that far from being democratic) say America does not want Iraq to become a democracy, since that would mean giving power to the Shiites and handing a victory to Iran.

Besides demonstrating a breathtaking level of ignorance about the Shiites of Iraq, citing the Shiite threat, which was used to prolong the Iran-Iraq war, is now being revived in an attempt to stem the tide of democratic change that threatens to engulf the entire region. What these columnists fail to mention is that most Arab countries -- and especially those of the Gulf -- maintain excellent relations with Iran. In order to maintain the status quo (both in Iraq and in the region generally), some Arabs have been using the Sunnite card, bemoaning the fate of Iraq's Sunnites at the hands of their Shiite compatriots should the Saddam regime fall.

Yet these people conveniently forget that the Kurds and Turcomans of Iraq (who are predominantly Sunnite) are among the strongest supporters of democratic change in the country. The former editor-in-chief of a London-based newspaper wrote recently that, Regime change, as opposed to replacing Saddam Hussein only, would target Iraq's Sunnite Arab community. Another prominent Arab journalist summarized the Iraq Question by saying that demands by the Shiite and Kurdish minorities can be ignored so long as power remains in Arab hands -- ignoring the fact that the minorities in question make up more than two-thirds of the country's population.

Iraqis are angered at their Arab brethren when they hear them speak of Iraqi Kurds as posing a threat to the country's unity. As a matter of fact, the Kurds -- who have enjoyed de facto independence for many years -- are keen to return to their motherland's fold under a democratic federal system of government. Nevertheless, many Arabs (and non-Arabs) suspect that federalism is a step towards Kurdish secession. What should the Kurds do to prove that they are in fact Iraqis? Federalism is an Iraqi -- rather than an exclusively Kurdish -- demand, and is in the interests of all Iraqis.

If federalism serves well the interests and aspirations of Germans, Brazilians, and even UAE citizens, why should the Iraq of the future not benefit from a similar system? In order to keep them within the Iraqi fold, the Kurds have to be treated as equals. They should enjoy the same rights and privileges as other Iraqis, and must have an equal stake in government and citizenship. Otherwise, the Kurds are fully entitled to secede and form their own independent state. Cooperation with the United States All Iraqis -- Iraqi democrats especially -- are well versed in the errors and sins of American policy.

After all, they were the ones who had to pay the price for US support for Saddam in the 1980-1988 Gulf War, Washington's abandonment of the Kurds to the tender mercies of the Iraqi regime after Saddam and the Shah of Iran signed the infamous Algiers Agreement of 1975, and most recently America's betrayal of the Iraqi people's uprising in 1991. After World War II, US foreign policy lost its democratic

dimension based on the principles of Woodrow Wilson in favor of a McCarthyite fear of communism. Washington took to backing dictatorships in many parts of the world under the banner of fighting communist encroachment.

According to a report recently published in the Christian Science Monitor, the United States was instrumental in overthrowing 81 regimes around the world -- yet it only established democracy in five countries (Germany, Japan, Italy, Panama and Grenada). But it seems that American foreign policy, at least where the Arab world is concerned, has changed recently undoubtedly due to the catastrophe of 9/11. The attacks on New York and Washington exposed the dangers inherent in putting too much reliance on oppressive regimes to contain the threats of nationalist and religious extremism.

Those who commandeered the doomed airliners on that fateful day were overwhelmingly nationals of countries whose governments cooperated with the United States in oppressing their own citizens, thus turning these countries -- and the Arab Middle East as a whole -- into a fertile ground for breeding extremism and fundamentalism. From that moment onwards, the policy of maintaining the status quo in the Arab east -- which Washington had pursued for decades on end -- became a source of threat rather than security to United States interests. This made openness and democratization seem like acceptable alternatives.

It was at this point that the interests of the United States converged with those of anti-dictatorial Iraqi forces. Their mutual goal became the establishment of a democratic Iraq. Nevertheless, there are still those who doubt American motives, pointing to Washington's alliance with the Musharraf dictatorship in Pakistan as an example. Yet it has to be appreciated that democratic change cannot be undertaken by decree.

Democracy is not a commodity that can be exported. It is a long drawn out process that might take years to accomplish and might well require factors beyond the capability of the Americans to deliver. But at least the US has ceased to be an obstacle to change -- and in fact is calling for it, even in Pakistan.

The main obstacle to democratic change in Iraq is domestic -- in addition to unaccommodating regional and global circumstances. The lack of democratic traditions and representative institutions in Iraq, especially after more than three decades of Baathist rule, will make it extremely difficult to build democracy in the country. It is highly unlikely that Iraqis, disunited as they are, would be able to accomplish the task without outside help.

One only has to look at the Iraqi opposition to see how fragmented Iraqi society is. That is why the current US-led confrontation with the Iraqi regime is being seen by many Iraqis as an opportunity not only to free the country of weapons of mass destruction, but also to rebuild Iraq along democratic lines with the US acting as a catalyst for consolidating democratic practices. Democracy in Iraq cannot possibly take root and grow without protection from outside interference.

Regional powers must be dissuaded from exploiting the power vacuum that will arise after the Saddam regime is overthrown. The United States, in cooperation with European nations, is best placed to help rebuild the Iraqi economy in order to facilitate and consolidate democratic change. Nation-building in Iraq will take time. That is why Iraq must enter into a strategic partnership with the United States similar to existing arrangements between America on the one hand and Turkey and South Korea on the other.

Most Iraqis look back with fondness to the days when their country was allied to Britain after World War I. Thanks to that alliance, Iraq managed to delineate its borders with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and enjoy peace, security and economic development. An alliance with the United States would obviate Iraq's need not only for WMDs, but also for the massive expenditure necessary to maintain a large standing army.

The money saved could then go into rebuilding the country. Such an alliance would also ensure that Iraq finally shakes off the shackles of sanctions and other measures that have robbed the country of its sovereignty. We are not calling for an American mandate, for history does not repeat itself.

We are calling for a relationship (with the United States) that would save Iraq both from itself as well as from its covetous neighbors through cooperation with the greatest democracy in the world. The most precious gift Iraq can present to the region is by turning from a cause of instability to an example of moderation and political openness. Iraq can also take part in creating a new regional economic order that strengthens cooperation between different states.

Extremism and fundamentalism cannot be defeated by oppression, but by presenting acceptable alternatives. The Iraq of the future, with its rich human and material resources, can, in cooperation with the US, become such an alternative. The new political and economic climate that will be created will help solve many conflicts -- including the Palestine Question, which the status quo has demonstrably failed to solve.

But there are still many obstacles to overcome. The weakness of the Iraqi opposition is one, but more important is that many regional countries have grown accustomed to the status quo and will find it very difficult to acclimatize themselves with a new democratic and open Iraq. They will therefore try to restrict the process of change such that it only involves Saddam Hussein but not his regime -- in other words, Saddamism without Saddam.

If they have their way, the process of change would only be a detour after which everything goes back to where it was before. The opportunity for change might also be thwarted by rivalry between Europe and the US, which could distort the issue, making it seem like a war for oil, a personal Bush vendetta, or other such slogans that conceal the fact that the adversary is a dictatorship that has gassed its own people. It is really ironic that the most vociferous opposition to war is coming from Germany, a country that could never have been freed from the Nazis were it not for the United States of America.

The US could still take the easy way out by making do with disarming Iraq, calling that a victory (like Saddam himself did after his defeat in Desert Storm). This way, Saddam could conceivably stay in power -- or be replaced by a Saddam clone. One can only imagine what the situation in the region and the entire world -- not to mention in Iraq proper -- would be like