

► Forget the UN: an Iraqi solution for Iraq

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The future of the Middle East was at stake last week when intensive meetings were held between US President George W. Bush, members of the Iraqi Governing Council, representatives of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and United Nations officials. The meetings sought to define a role for the UN in the post-war nation-building process in Iraq. However, does the international body have a major role to play? Considering its silence during Saddam Hussein's 30 years of tyranny, I believe not. The solution in Iraq lies within the nation's borders, not at the UN.

This became clear to me last month when I visited Iraq and met with the leadership there. To spend a day watching the Governing Council is to learn that the most representative of all Middle Eastern governments sits in Baghdad. With all its shortcomings, the council represents a broad spectrum of Iraqi society. Both within the body and outside in the rest of the country, freedom reigns supreme. It may sometimes look and sound messy, but a fledgling democracy often does.

No one in Iraq, no matter where in the political debate he stands, is afraid to speak his mind. At Baghdad airport, for example, an employee expressed regret that Saddam had been caught, and hoped that the anti-American resistance would continue. Conversely, when I asked Iraq's interim oil minister, Ibrahim Bahr al-Uloum, about how Baathists within his own ministry had criticized his close ties to the United States, he dismissed the possibility of silencing them, even though he lost several family members to the former regime's repression.

I visited the Bahr al-Uloum home in Najaf, and there dozens of tribal leaders from the Middle Euphrates Valley sang of their attachment to Iraq, Shiism and to national unity. The family's patriarch, Sheikh Mohammed Bahr al-Uloum, a Governing Council member and an old friend, was optimistic about Iraq's future. However, he was also upset at what he perceives as American mismanagement of his country. The scene in Iraq remains one of intermittent electricity and phone service, no airport service and long lines for gas in a country that holds the world's second largest oil reserves. However, security is a fleeting concern. If basic services are restored, and if the national political process takes root, armed resistance to the new order will have no chance of success against the new spirit of freedom. This is the dual challenge ahead, and Iraqis rightly feel that they are in the best position to run their own country.

The way forward is simple. The 10 members of the Governing Council whom I met with agree on this: The council, as a national unity government, should be unconditionally recognized as in charge of Iraq's destiny, with the support of the CPA and whoever else wishes to join in a democratic course of reconstruction. As such, the council would be deemed the official interim government of Iraq, making the US plan to select a National Assembly by July 1 unnecessary. The council would then draft a new constitution and set the parameters for what a new government would look like and when and how it would be elected.

Strengthening the power of Iraqis over their own affairs can come with the proviso that any contender who furthers his political agenda by violent means should be punished by either being banned from a leadership post or being brought to trial by an international court for those crimes. Human rights monitors, supported by the UN or the CPA, should be deployed to further ensure international commitment to the cause of democracy and nonviolence.

Is this so far-fetched? Not at all if we consider that last week, following the meeting in New York between the US civilian administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, it was revealed that the senior Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani would accept investing sovereignty in the Governing Council as a means of ending the standoff with Bremer on whether to hold elections during the transfer of power process. Council member Muaffaq al-Rubaie declared that Sistani "is ready to accept a delay of the elections for three or six months. Handing powers to the Governing Council until a general election is held is an acceptable formula to his eminence ... He will not object to this."

However, the United States remains reluctant to engage in such a process. When I met in Baghdad with Naseer Chaderji, a liberal Sunni Arab member of the Governing Council, he was skeptical of the US reaction to a request for an acceleration of Iraqi self-governance. While Bremer was a good listener, Chaderji remarked, he was not following suggestions made by Iraqi leaders.

Yet after reading about Sistani's reaction, and after having discussed the matter with other council members, such as Ahmed Chalabi and the Islamist Daawa Party leader Ibrahim Jaafari, and with US officials committed to Middle East democracy, including US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, I remain hopeful. I sense that Iraqis and Americans are far more in agreement on Iraq's future than many assume. It is clear that any solution to Iraq's woes must come from within the country, not from without. This is a fact that a growing number of Iraqis recognize and agree upon.

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