

Let the Iraqis represent themselves

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The draft UN resolution currently being prepared for Iraq and the speech of US President George W. Bush last Monday to the Army War College leave a taste of continued uncertainty, and the anxiety of certain trouble. It is not surprising: Iraqis are not the central actors in shaping the draft resolution or the US plan. As Edward Said wrote in a different context in his book "Orientalism," they have been made to feel that they "cannot represent themselves. They must be represented."

That is the structural flaw that needs to be corrected before a final text comes to a vote before the Security Council. The draft resolution is yet another defining document on the future of Iraq, and it is being tabled without the Iraqis taking the lead in drafting it. This was also the case with previous resolutions just before and after the Iraq war. While Bush in his speech and the wording of the draft resolution stress the need for a return to "Iraqi sovereignty," Iraqis remain shadowy figures in a process served to them by a double tier of outside decision-makers.

This pattern of two-tiered neocolonialism is becoming a worrying feature across the globe. In Iraq it is bound to lead to further tragedies by fueling extremism on the back of foreign occupation.

There is no need to ignore the Iraqis. With all its shortcomings, the Iraqi Governing Council is the best thing that has happened in Iraq's modern history. It is untrue that it was "hand-picked." Most of its members were long known as leading opponents of Saddam Hussein's regime. More importantly, and with the exception of the two Kurdish factions (until they overcame, remarkably, their differences in 1997), there is no record of violence between the personalities and groups in the Governing Council. This is a unique achievement in a country where violence is frequently used to advance one's political agenda (and which explains why the assassins of foreigners in Fallujah, foreign extremists and Moqtada al-Sadr should be shunned politically). Moreover, in less than a year the council has lost three of its members, including its temporary president and the first woman in a prominent political position in modern Arab history.

Despite its representativeness and courage, the Governing Council has been constantly undermined and ridiculed by segments of the US government and the international community. In less than a year the US civilian administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, has signed over 200 legislative decrees with little or no Iraqi input. Last December, I attended a tense meeting of the Governing Council's legal committee, where a young adviser of the Coalition Provision Authority sought to force Bremer's agenda on a group of leading Iraqi jurists. The international community, represented by the UN, appears no less steadfast in minimizing the participation of Iraqis in decisions affecting the future of their country.

For the past year, the UN bureaucracy has maneuvered to forge "a leading role" for itself in Iraq - to quote from the draft UN resolution. Yet why should it play such a role when it has had such a controversial record in Iraq? It failed to address the dismal human rights situation there during the Baath dictatorship. Even the oil-for-food program, which the UN Secretariat allowed Saddam's regime to undermine, is

now tainted with a scandal that might have involved senior UN officials and, according to some reports, their family members.

The UN representative in Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi, is a person whom I have appreciated over the years, particularly for his role in Afghanistan. I have also expressed this publicly (though I privately told him of my misgivings about his actions on Lebanon's Taif Accord when he was an Arab League envoy in 1988-90). The man has undeniable qualities. However, he is mistaken in his handling of Iraq. By telling the Governing Council members to go home despite the sacrifices they have made and their record of nonviolence, he is unnecessarily sowing the seeds of resentment, while ensuring that whoever follows them will have even less legitimacy.

By placing the UN at central stage in Iraq, Brahimi is missing the point that it is now time for the Iraqis to represent themselves and be responsible for a future that will demand sacrifices from them long after he and the UN have left the scene.

This structural flaw can still be corrected: The Governing Council must be left in place come June 30 and entrusted with Iraqi sovereignty. Formulation of a Security Council resolution is a task that the Iraqis must carry out. The Governing Council should mandate a representative, or a group of representatives, to lead the discussions in New York in a way that best allows Iraq to be truly represented.

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