

Testimony  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Wednesday, September 24, 2003

Iraq's Reconstruction: Where is it Going?

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Even before the occupation of Iraq there was considerable debate in policy circles on what "regime change" in Iraq should mean. Some advocated modest change--removing the head of the regime--the Saddam family and its support system--but leaving the rest more or less intact to run the government. This would have meant a smoother transition at less cost to the US. But it would have left much of the Ba'th and military apparatus in tact and, in the end, brought only minimal change to Iraq.

A second choice, the one ultimately followed, opted for more radical change--a thorough dismantling of the system, the better to create something new in its place. This had the virtue of clearing the field for new construction, but, as is now apparent, it has come with a high price tag. Radical change has created a political, military and psychological vacuum that has to be filled--by us--or by others we can hastily assemble from abroad or inside Iraq. This policy has had several unintended consequences. I would like to address two of the most important of these.

1. Destruction of the Central Government: The first is the destruction of the central government in a country overwhelmingly dependent on it. As a counterbalance--and a welcome one--there has been significant decentralization of administration, with the development of municipal councils and governance at provincial levels. This is a positive development, but it cannot substitute for the role of a central government in a relatively advanced country like Iraq, and too much decentralization, if left unchecked, can be counterproductive. It can lead to renewed factionalism; the development of party militias and increased control by local potentates. A balance has to be reestablished--and soon. There are several reasons for this, which can be demonstrated by a few statistics.

First, demographics in Iraq show that over the last several decades much of the population has shifted to the central region. The Kurdish population in the north has undergone drastic uprooting and resettlement as well as gassing. The shi'ah population in the south has been oppressed, neglected and pushed out of the country. This has left the "center" top heavy. (See Annex 1) By 2003 half of Iraq's population lived in its five central provinces. (Baghdad, Ninewah, Anber, Salah-al-Din and Diyala). Almost a third of these live in Baghdad. Only 13 percent of Iraq's population lives in the three northern provinces of Dahuk, Irbil and Sulaymaniyyah; and only 32 percent in the nine southern (mainly shi'ah) provinces, including Basra. In part because of decentralization, the northern and southern provinces have, for the most part been quiet. With the exception of violence against shi'ah clerics in Najaf--emanating from outside--there has been minimal

violence in these two sections of the country. By contrast, it is the “center”, with the bulk of Iraq’s population, that is giving us trouble, including a persistence guerrilla insurgency. While Baghdad is not the center of the insurgency, it is not yet under control and its governance, is a problem.

Second, Under Saddam, a large percentage of the population--especially its educated middle class--worked for the central government directly or indirectly. They were employed in the military, the police and the security services; they worked in the civil service, educational institutions and the media. Much of the industrial sector was also under government control. (See annex 2) According to one set of statistics, almost 17 percent of the entire work force, some 826,000 was working for the government in 1990, exclusive of the military. If the military is added, (over 400,000) over a quarter of the population was supported by the central government. This group is now out of work while the government cannot function without them..

Third, not surprisingly this situation reinforced a culture of dependency on government and starved individual incentive and initiative. The political culture, as well as the reality on the ground, fostered the notion that the government was the provider of benefits, services and “perks”. The role of the population, especially those employed by government, was to “obey the law” and follow the government’s lead. These principles are clearly spelled out in fifth and sixth grade “civics” textbooks, written simply so children can understand them. One or two quotes may illustrate the point:

“The revolution provides services to citizens--housing...land... buildings and modern villages, ...and services such as water and electricity....We provide books and magazines...television broadcasting and cultural programs...and also guidance to the public....

All loyal citizens [should] protect the revolution and maintain stability, prevent crimes, uphold the sovereignty of the law...and cooperate with the internal security forces and help them perform their duties...”(N.Y. Times, April 20, 2003)

The US occupation has entirely reversed this situation. First, it has empowered local communities for the first time in Iraq’s history. Municipalities, provincial capitals and local regions are now under local authority, often through a rough and ready election process. This has worked well in the north, which has been governing itself for over a decade, and in the south, eager to exercise some self government. It has not worked well in the center.

Second, the US has demolished much of the central government and its pillars, thereby weakening the center. Chief among these actions was abolishing the Iraqi armed forces. While it is true that the occupying powers found an army already dispersed and disbanded, it made no attempt to reconstitute this force at any level. On the contrary, it made it clear that the “old” army would not be reassembled. Instead, a new one would be built from the ground up.

Third, Iraq’s notorious security services were disbanded, including special forces and various units of the Republican Guard. These presumably included the police. While

no one would suggest reviving or maintaining Saddam's intelligence and security forces, the absence of these forces, as we saw during the looting, left a huge security void the coalition was not able to fill.

Fourth, the Ba'th Party was outlawed and all members in the top three levels of the party were banned from public employment. This may have involved 25,000 to 30,000 members who had manned the key positions in the massive public bureaucracy. While most party members at lower levels, including much of the educated middle class--possibly over a million--were in the party for career reasons and not for commitment, many may have felt uncertain about their future. They may also have been intimidated by the Ba'thists who were fired but threatened to return. In any event, the bureaucracy at lower levels did not come back to work or take charge of a new administration as apparently anticipated. Once again, the gap has been difficult to fill.

Much of Iraq's educated middle class, the group that we need to run the bureaucracy, to fill the security gap and to direct its education system, is located in these central provinces, especially Baghdad. Much of this population is now unemployed and sees little prospects of future employment in its previous profession. Its expectations of a better future (like our own expectations for a smooth transition, far too high to be realistic) now are badly damaged. Will this large and important class of Iraqis--its "moderate, silent majority" cooperate with the US in building a better foundation? Or will it become alienated, passively resist cooperation or worse, turn against us as the militant minority is urging? There is a strong strand of nationalism and a long tradition of anti-colonialism in Iraq stretching back to the British mandate. This often creates strong peer pressure to demand immediate self government. Such demands, from militants, will be increasingly difficult to resist. But most of this middle class in the center knows that it needs the help and support of the US--and wants it--until it has a government that can stand on its feet and meet the challenge of the extremists. It is the center--not the north nor the south--yet--which is giving us trouble. We must address this problem2. A Radical

2. A Radical Change in the Distribution of Power. The second consequence of the occupation has been a radical change in the distribution of power. Again, there is much that is beneficial about this change. The new Governing Council--and the ministers-- are now representative of the ethnic and sectarian distribution of the population. They represent a wide diversity of political parties ranging from religious, to nationalist to leftist. And they have brought to power a number of exiled Iraqis with political experience gained outside Iraq, a new phenomenon in Iraq. The most important shift, however, is in the ethnic and sectarian balance on the Council. By contrast, a snap shot of the Ba'thist government in 1998 showed that at upper levels (RCC and Regional Command of the Party) at least 61 percent were Arab sunnis; only 28 percent Arab shi'ah and 6 percent Kurds or Turkman. (See Annex 3). This imbalance has characterized most periods in Iraq's history which has substantially underrepresented the shi'ah, who constitute about 60 percent of the population, and the Kurds who constitute about 17 percent. Arab sunnis are a minority of only 15 to 20 percent, yet they have always had twice their number in political posts and a hugely disproportionate number at the top.

The new Governing Council has reversed this distribution of power. Of the 25 members, 13 or 52 percent--a slight majority--are shi'ah; and five each--about 20 percent are Arab sunnis and Kurds. There is one Christian, one Turkman and three women. At least half are exiles, not including the Kurdish parties which had been functioning in the north; only a minority had been living in Iraq under Saddam's rule, giving them a smaller voice. While this change will bring fresh air from outside and experience in dealing with more open political systems, it may cause some resentment from insiders.

While the make-up of the council is representative, it has also caused some trouble--mainly from those left out or whose fortunes have been reversed. Some of this is obvious. The supporters and beneficiaries of Saddam's regime in the sunni triangle are the most disaffected and this area is the source of much of the continuing insurgency. The regular army which probably expected to play some role in the new regime is also unemployed and reportedly disaffected. The Baghdad middle class, many of whom were nominal party members and are used to entitlements are also unhappy with their reversal of fortune as well. While some of these individuals are irredeemable, most need to be given a stake in the new regime and not left out in the cold.

The heavy emphasis on religious and ethnic background in the Governing Council also points to another change from past regimes--the open emphasis on ethnic and sectarian politics. While always a subtext, these affiliations are now front and center, pointing to cleavages in society which are more pronounced today than at any previous time. Unless they are reconciled--and reduced in importance--they could spell trouble ahead. In any ensuing struggle for power--and there unquestionably will be one--these factors will now be more important. The Arab sunni community is not the only one to watch.

The shi'ah, as a whole, have accepted the new order because they understand that they have a chance to become a political majority for the first time in Iraq's modern history. In the past, rejectionist policies from the shi'ah have resulted in a permanent reduction in their political influence, an outcome most shi'ah leaders do not want to risk again. But the shi'ah community is hardly homogeneous; even the minority of shi'ah who want to see a more religious state are divided among moderates, conservatives and radicals. Much of the shi'ah community is uncomfortable with occupation and wants an earlier, rather than a later, end to it. The shi'ah risk a political split over this issue, particularly from militants like Muqtada-l-Sadr, a radical young shi'ah cleric who has mobilize thousands of poor, unemployed followers from "Sadr City" in Baghdad. The killing of shi'ah clerics (Abd al-Majid al-Khu'i; Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim) has increased tensions within the community and turned the attention of some to the "sunni" opposition. A further decline in the security situation--and more killing of shi'ah luminaries--could split the community, erode support for the Governing Council and exacerbate communal tensions. These eventualities must be avoided at all cost.

The Kurds also represent another future fault line in the system. Though the north has been very quiet and the Kurds are supportive of the coalition, one reason is that the Kurdish parties have made substantial gains in achieving their future goals. They have the dominant voice in Kirku's municipal council, and they have also expanded their

influence--though it is not a controlling one--in Mosul. They, of course, are anxious to preserve their gains in the new constitution and can be expected to drive a hard bargain on self-government in the north.

As the constitutional process proceeds, there are likely to be two key issues that have to be resolved, and will require difficult bargaining among Iraqis. The issues are real, and only Iraqis can resolve them. The first is the role of the shi'ah in the state. Even if shi'ah representatives maintain a majority of seats on any governing body, the role of religion in state and society remains to be determined. This is a key issue for several important shi'ah parties--especially SCIRI and the Da'wah. Those shi'ah politicians who want a greater role for religion will have to face many shi'ah secularists; who do not; even more significant, they will have to face a large sunni community, Kurd and Arab, that views religious precepts differently.

The second issue is the role of the Kurds in the state and how much self-government Kurds will have under the constitution. While Kurds themselves want "federalism", they define this as an ethnic Kurdish area--Kurdistan--in the north, other Iraqis prefer a federalism defined on administrative terms, eg. based on provinces. If the former is adopted, where and how will the boundaries of "Kurdistan" be determined, particularly in mixed districts like Kirkuk? And if there is an ethnically defined Kurdistan, does that open the door to self-governing units in other areas, such as the shi'ah south or the "sunni triangle"? What happens to Baghdad and the center? What happens to the cohesion of Iraq as a country?

Constitutional deliberations, however they come about, and the drawing up of an electoral law on which representation will be based, will open these issues. I believe that they will be difficult to resolve and that the Iraqis need a reasonable time period, in a relatively secure environment, to resolve them. They also need some deadlines, however, to work toward without which the process will not move to a conclusion. Since various committees of Iraqi exiles have already examined these issues, six months ought to be ample time to come up with a draft. If the constitution is to be discussed, modified and ratified by an elected assembly--and to be legitimate it should be--that could take some time. (The British ran into difficulty when they went through this process in the 1920s and it took two years). Once this task is accomplished, a new election and the establishment of an assembly--and a government--should not take too much longer. About eighteen months seems a reasonable time frame to me to accomplish these processes. But any new government will need support, especially in the security area, for a longer period of time, while Iraq's new army and police take shape. Any foreign role after the new Iraqi government is set up, however, should be low profile and subsidiary, and would be helped by the umbrella of international support.

#### What does the US need to do?

What does the US need to do, both to address the consequences of the changes that have taken place in Iraq since the fall of the regime, and to facilitate a sound and effective constitutional process?

1) Reduce and Neutralize the Insurgency. First, as all have noted, it needs to reduce and neutralize the insurgency, easier said than done. It seems likely, even under optimal conditions, that some level of armed opposition will continue for some time, and if other problems are not addressed (jobs, crime, electricity) it could grow and spread. Dealing with the insurgency should be turned over to Iraqis as soon as a capability can be developed, with due supervision exercised to make certain vengeance is not enacted and old scores settled. The units of the army that were disbanded, including some of its officer corps, can be hired back, with proper vetting. They should be put under civilian control. Local tribal leaders can also be used, judiciously, not only to provide intelligence but to keep order in their regions in return for benefits. Iraqis are far more likely to know how to identify insurgents, to vet reliable Iraqis, and to deal with their own region than are Americans who do not know Iraq or speak the language. Even the idea of using local militias, under central government supervision could be tried. However, these should be regarded as short term solutions, to deal with a problem that is seriously threatening Iraq's reconstruction and its constitutional future. They should not be allowed to derail the development of a national army, a national intelligence service and a police force, all under civilian control. Care must be taken that these solution do not empower tribal leaders once again; legitimize party and private militias; empower the "outsiders" in the Governing Council at the expense of the insiders and, in short, leave the new central government weak and ineffective.

2) Strengthen the Central Government and the "Center". The gap left by the collapse of the central government and the decline and weakening of Baghdad and the center as a whole is part of the problem of restoring law and order. While decentralization is necessary, the process needs rebalancing, particularly in a country used to "taking orders" from a central government. A restored, and healthy center, will help prevent unraveling in the provinces. Staffing shortages need to be filled. The new government needs to rehire Iraqis, including the military and the bureaucracy faster, and to streamline the vetting process. (This will also help put the population back to work). If some unregenerated Ba'athists slip through the net, they can be weeded out in the course of time and replaced by a new generation.

Better and closer links need to be established between the new provincial administrations, and the central government, which should, once again, begin to knit the country together by providing services. However, these links should not simply function from the top down, but the bottom up. While central government representatives need to get out of Baghdad to the provinces, the reverse is also true. Mechanisms must be found to bring the new provincial administrators into contact with the central government, making certain the central government understands their priorities.

3) Strengthen the Middle Class. The US should use its reconstruction money to strengthen the middle class--both an independent business class free of government control and an educated professional class--both of which are the backbone of any democratic state. In Iraq, this class generally cuts accros all ethnic and sectarian boundaries and has, in the past, been the glue which has held Iraq together and encouraged a common and more progressive Iraqi vision. That class and that vision are

still present in Iraq, but the middle class has been weakened through Saddam's oppression and sanctions. Spurring economic activity and small and medium business will help employment and develop an independent economic sector. We should keep a level playing field while we privatize and prevent the emergence of a new economic mafia. Opening the country to outside influences--in education, through think tanks; through professional exchanges--will help the educated class which is the backbone of government and civic society. The stronger this class becomes, the less will be heard of ethnic and sectarian differences. Accompanying the transformation must be an attractive, practical vision of the future for young Iraqis-- in new careers and new opportunities.

This vision and these opportunities must come soon--especially in Baghdad and the center--or ethnic and sectarian tensions; rising opposition to occupation; and a deepening and spreading insurgency will end any hope for a stable, much less a democratic Iraq.