



Trust the Iraqi People

By Michael Rubin

Iraqis initially greeted U.S. soldiers as liberators, but as the occupation has continued, the paternalistic approach of the Coalition Provisional Authority has bred resentment and stunted the development of responsible local institutions. Democracy in Iraq can only succeed if Iraqi citizens are allowed control over the political process as their country nominally regains sovereignty.

Last August, I participated in a town-hall meeting hosted by the administrative council of Dibis, an ethnically mixed town twenty-two miles northwest of Kirkuk. Locals complained about everything from sporadic electricity to fertilizer shortages to potholes, and their Iraqi representatives listened attentively. It was an encouraging sight, all the more so because the month before, Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) head L. Paul Bremer had proudly announced, in a televised speech, that “all of Iraq’s main cities, and dozens of other towns, now have administrative councils.”

U.S. Paternalism

But there was a problem. Soon after his announcement, Bremer—not wanting to complicate planning for the Iraq donors’ conference to be held in Madrid in October—refused to give the councils budgetary authority. As a result, council members in places like Dibis could listen to complaints but lacked the means to respond to them. Iraqis quickly decided that their local representatives were little more than props.

In many other areas, the story has been the same. Iraqi farmers missed this year’s planting season because the CPA’s senior American adviser for agriculture (later fired) repeatedly refused the Iraqi minister of agriculture’s request to order fertilizer.

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Despite problems restoring Iraq’s electrical infrastructure, CPA electricity advisers never bothered to consult Saad Shakir Tawfiq, who oversaw its reconstruction after the Gulf war in 1991.

In fact, they did not even return Tawfiq’s calls, a tiny example of the paternalism that has characterized the American occupiers’ treatment of the Iraqi people. Iraqis, contrary to what many in Washington now believe, were not anti-American from the beginning. Many troops were greeted as liberators. The *Boston Globe* reported, the day after the fall of Baghdad, that “[j]ubilant Iraqis greeted U.S. troops with cheers, victory signs, and flowers.” Many are anti-American today because the United States has refused, in ways big and small, to give them real control over the country. Unless that changes, the June 30 handover will be a fiasco and a farce.

The paternalism began even before the war did. Fearing it could undermine prewar diplomacy, the State Department resisted efforts to create a “Free Iraqi Force” of exiles committed to fighting Saddam Hussein. On the first night of the war, the Free Iraqi Force huddled around radios at the Taszar Air Base in Hungary, 1,600 miles away from the country they were supposed to help liberate. The United States paid a price. Iraqi cheers turned to stunned silence when, on April 9, 2003, Corporal Edward Chin draped an American rather than an Iraqi flag over the face of Saddam’s statue in Baghdad. The person climbing the statue should not have been an American carrying an American flag, but an Iraqi carrying the flag of Iraq. Unfortunately,

the forces most likely to have realized this were left cooling their heels in Central Europe.

Occupation brought more of the same. Heeding Iraqi pleas, the United States formed the Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003. Unfortunately, Bremer soon proclaimed his veto power: "The CPA still has the ultimate authority here until we have a government in place." The council presidency rotated each month, and no one leader gained the kind of longer-term power needed to negotiate with the CPA. When the council tried to elect a prime minister, Bremer refused, saying it might undercut his own authority. Even the symbolism has been paternalistic. Rather than use Governing Council members to deliver weekly radio addresses, Bremer delivered them himself, and the CPA's "Strategic Communication's Office" focused more on outreach to the *New York Times* than to Iraqis. Many Iraqis are upset that, more than a year after Saddam's overthrow, they still see CPA spokesman Dan Senor and General Mark Kimmitt, rather than an Iraqi, delivering the daily briefing to reporters.

In the U.S. press, the CPA is often portrayed as a force for liberalism, battling Iraqis' instinct for theocracy. But, in truth, liberal Iraqis have been given no more authority than their conservative countrymen. Kanan Makiya, one of Iraq's leading liberal intellectuals, spent the year following Saddam's overthrow developing the Iraq Memory Foundation, a museum that would commemorate the victims of Baathist tyranny and allow Iraqis to reflect on their history. Makiya's team catalogued documents and applied for CPA permits to build a museum accessible to all Iraqis. But, on April 23, 2004, with the stroke of a pen, Bremer undercut Makiya and established his own National Commission for Remembrance. Similarly, when Dr. Raja Al Khuzai, a liberal Shia member of the Governing Council, voiced concerns in a council meeting in February 2004 about some of her colleagues' endorsement of Islamic law, one of Bremer's assistants chided her for risking an impasse in the drafting of the Transitional Administrative Law, which the United States needed to pass quickly. And U.S. forces recently raided the home of council member Ahmed Chalabi, undermining the authority of the council itself. "This is an insult," said council president Ghazi Al Yawar. "It could happen to any Governing Council member."

Success Depends on Iraqification

For the June 30 handover of sovereignty to succeed, the United States must finally get serious about Iraqification.

The White House proposes handing over control of Iraqi ministries to Iraqis, putting Iraqis in charge of crucial tasks like the rebuilding of infrastructure and the restoration of the energy sector. It also plans to replace Bremer with an American ambassador, John Negroponte, whom it says will be an adviser, not a proconsul. And it pledges national elections in 2005.

But this does not go far enough. To make sure the CPA does not morph into a 3,000-person super-embassy, the United States should abandon most of the four-square-mile Green Zone, which it has, so far, not committed to closing. The bridge and road closures resulting from the U.S. cantonment in Baghdad's center are a constant irritant for Iraqis. Driving from Baghdad's Mansour district to its Karrada district took ten minutes before the toppling of Saddam; now it takes an hour. Once sovereignty is transferred, not a single American should remain inside Saddam's Republican Palace. The U.S.-run convention center can suffice.

And Washington must not only give Iraqis power; it must give them the resources to utilize that power, even if it disagrees with some of the choices Baghdad makes. The White House plans to hand control of ministries to Iraqis, but it must also allow Iraqis, and not American "technical advisers," to control the ministries' budgets. The administration has vowed to ensure that international donors fulfill their commitments to Iraq but appears unwilling to allow the Iraqi government to determine where the aid flows. The United States has expressed outrage at the UN oil-for-food scandal but has tried to defund the Governing Council's own examination of the problem so as not to make things awkward for UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. If the United States thinks Iraqis will take more kindly to UN paternalism than American paternalism, it is mistaken. Many Shia and Kurds remember that Brahimi remained silent when, as under secretary of the Arab League between 1984 and 1991, Saddam massacred tens of thousands of Shia and Kurds. And Iraqis have not forgotten UN secretary-general Kofi Annan's February 24, 1998, comment, "Can I trust Saddam Hussein? I think I can do business with him." Iraqis, like most other peoples, are prickly nationalists. After the handover, the Iraqi government must be able to conduct its own sovereign investigation of the United Nations and anyone else. For Iraq to become a stable, peaceful democracy, power must reside with people like Saad Shakir Tawfiq. With a little luck, they will take our calls.