



USIPeace Briefing

What Iraq Needs from the Obama Administration: Recommendations from Iraqis Resident in the U.S.

By Elizabeth Detwiler

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Synopsis

This *USIPeace Briefing* discusses the Iraq policy recommendations of six prominent Iraqis resident in the U.S. to the incoming administration of Barack Obama.

Introduction

On October 3, 2008, six prominent Iraqis resident in the U.S. offered advice on Iraq policy to the incoming U.S. administration at an event convened by USIP. The panelists were:

- Qubad Talabani, U.S. representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government;
- Nesreen Barwari, former Iraqi minister of municipalities and public works (2003-2006);
- [Raid Juhi al-Saedi](#), Middle East fellow, Cornell University School of Law, Clark Center for International and Comparative Legal Study, and former USIP Jennings Randolph Fellow;
- Feisal Istrabadi, visiting professor, Indiana University School of Law and former deputy permanent representative of the Iraqi Mission to the United Nations (2004-2007);
- Ghassan Atiyyah, visiting fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy;
- Karim Almusawi, U.S. representative of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.

This *USIPeace Briefing* summarizes the event's main themes of discussion. Despite a few sharp disagreements, the speakers agreed that the next U.S. administration should support Iraq in its transition by 1) maintaining security while respecting Iraqi sovereignty; 2) strengthening institutions; 3) ensuring free and fair elections; and 4) encouraging positive regional engagement.

U.S. troops still needed—within the context of Iraqi sovereignty

Iraq has experienced a notable reduction in violence in the past year, and the Iraqi panelists asserted the need for a continued presence of multinational forces to maintain this progress. However, as Almusawi specified, Iraqis insist that any agreement regarding the presence of foreign troops should not compromise the country's sovereignty. The terms of the agreement must be clear, in Iraq's interests and approved by the Iraqi people. In addition, the posture of foreign troops on Iraqi soil should not make the country "a source of threats and fear for neighboring countries."

Focus on government institutions

In 2003, Iraqi governing institutions had to be completely rebuilt. Barwari recalled the simultaneous challenge of physically reconstructing the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works while trying to restore public services to pre-war levels. After three and a half decades of dictatorship, even the ministry's mission had to be reconstructed: to serve the public, not the regime.

While no longer serving the Ba'athist regime, many of Iraq's ministries became loyal to opposing political parties. The Council of Representatives (CoR) appointment process in 2005 ensured that certain government ministries would be dominated by exclusive political coalitions, which have used their positions for political leverage. The polarization of the CoR has resulted in a war of attrition over important legislation, prolonging reconstruction and reconciliation.

Still, as Istrabadi reminded the audience, "Democracy is a process, not an endpoint." The U.S. can support Iraq's transition to a robust democracy through policies aimed at capacity-building, curtailing corruption and improving respect for the rule of law. To increase overall competency within Iraq's governing institutions, Talabani suggested that the U.S. support more "exchange programs, training programs and partnerships." Atiyyah emphasized that the next administration should work to build the government of Iraq's institutional capacity, rather than tying support to individual politicians or parties. He warned, "One of the mistakes the [Bush] administration has made is pinning its support for an Iraqi government not to the institutions but rather to an individual."

The U.S. should also support Iraqi efforts to curtail corruption and institute the rule of law. A technocratic system is needed to oversee ministerial reform. Iraq's ministries have each developed internal programs to enforce good governance. However, there is no comprehensive agenda for government reform. Al-Saedi noted that current financial oversight mechanisms are disjointed and lack means of enforcement. He described the dismal state of Iraq's legal institutions, which are struggling with a drain of legal professionals. The U.S. should encourage the return and protection of these individuals.

Ensuring free and fair elections

Tensions are high in the lead up to Iraq's provincial elections, likely to occur in early 2009. The Sons of Iraq, a movement of about 100,000 mostly Sunni fighters, who until recently were funded by the U.S. military, poses a significant challenge to the established leadership in many locations. The U.S. should do as much as it can to secure polling sites and encourage the deployment of election monitors. Violence surrounding the election would threaten to render the elections illegitimate in the eyes of the population, spurring resentment. Istrabadi argued that the U.S. must provide enough security that one can be "reasonably certain the vote he casts is his and not the will of the militias. If no attempt is made to secure that much, the election will be meaningless."

Engaging Iraq's neighbors

The next U.S. administration should use its leverage to positively influence regional behavior toward Iraq. A successful drawdown of U.S. troops will not be possible without the support of Iraq's neighbors. Each country in the region desires to see an outcome that benefits its strategic priorities. Such priorities are not inherently at odds with American

interests. The next administration should pursue bilateral or multilateral agreements with Iraq's neighbors to invest in a secure and stable, sovereign Iraq. Atiyah emphasized that the next president should not wait until January for this initiative, but in fact "start from the 5th of November."

Conclusions

American interests rightly drive U.S. policy in Iraq. But imposing a foreign agenda could destabilize an already fragile emerging democracy. Iraq needs to be treated as a sovereign country. Iraqis themselves will set the pace of progress in Iraq. But with appropriate policies focused on strengthening governance, ensuring free and fair provincial elections and engaging Iraq's neighbors, the Obama administration can help facilitate that progress.

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