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Sectarian Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Iraq

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The Hussein regime over the years has exploited tensions between the diverse religious and ethnic communities within Iraq for its own political gain. How have Saddam Hussein's policies affected relations between Kurds, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and other religious and ethnic groups within Iraq? How can the United States and the international community prevent sectarian violence in the wake of a conflict there?

On February 11, 2003, the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted a briefing to examine the challenges of [ethnic reconciliation in a post-Hussein Iraq](#). Moderated by Institute Middle East specialist and Research and Studies program officer [Tamara Wittes](#), the briefing featured former Institute senior fellow [Amatzia Baram](#) of the University of Haifa; **Rend Rahim Francke**, executive director of the Iraq Foundation; **Hatem Mukhlis**, chief of political section, Iraqi National Movement; and **Jihan Hajibadri** with American University's Program on International Peace and Conflict Resolution.

From Outcast to Opportunity: Integrating the Kurds into a New Iraq

Exploring the historical relationship between Kurds and the central government, Iraq expert Amatzia Baram emphasized that Kurds have been excluded from positions of influence in both the Iraqi government and military service since the 1930s. While efforts were made during the late 1940s to better integrate Kurds into Iraqi society, according to Baram, tensions have steadily grown worse since 1958 when the monarchy in Iraq was overthrown. Under the Hussein regime, with extremely violent responses to Kurdish uprisings in both 1975 and 1991, relations between the Kurds and the government have reached a historic low, he said.

Baram nevertheless expressed optimism that a post-Hussein Iraq might provide a unique opportunity for reconciliation and integration of the Kurdish people into mainstream Iraqi society. In particular, he outlined three facets of any new regime's efforts to achieve further integration:

1. A regime whose decisions are transparent and based on consensus;
2. A government that represents the ethnic and religious diversity of the Iraqi people; and
3. A state where revenues from oil and other natural resources are more equitably distributed to all Iraqi people.

In closing, Baram stated that the challenges facing a post-Hussein regime in Iraq should not be underestimated and that the desire of various religious and ethnic groups such as the Kurds or the Shi'a

for revenge for past wrongs is a danger to Iraq's future. "A new regime can defuse much of the tension, much of the fear, but not all," Baram cautioned.

Ethnicity and Identity in Iraq

Is a post-Hussein Iraq likely to see an emergence of virulent ethno-religious conflict as seen throughout the former Yugoslavia after the fall of the "Iron Curtain"? According to the executive director of the Iraq Foundation, Rend Rahim Francke, while ethno-religious tensions in Iraq today are at a historic high, Iraq is unlikely to experience the level of ethnic and religious strife seen in Bosnia and throughout the Balkans. However, Francke noted, current statements from leaders of various Iraqi ethnic and religious groups do show a continued growth of identity-based politics and sectoral polarization in Iraq.

Pointing to a recent call by members of the Iraqi Shi'a community for "affirmative action" programs to address discrimination by the current regime, she cautioned that such demands could pose a serious threat to stability in a post-Hussein Iraq. Francke also stated that it was important for the Iraqi Sunni Muslim community to be open to change in a post-Hussein Iraq and accept that any new regime must share power and represent the interests of all Iraqis.

Francke presented three keys to success for minimizing ethnic and sectoral tensions in Iraq:

1. The new Iraqi government must have a secular base;
2. A sense of citizenship as Iraqis and not ethnic or religious based identities must be fostered and encouraged among all Iraqis; and
3. Iraqi political parties must not become proxies for ethnic and religious groups.

In sum, Francke suggested that the primary question that any regime needs to answer to combat ethnic balkanization in a post-Hussein Iraq is: what does it really mean to be an Iraqi?

Hope and Fear: Prospects for Ethnic Reconciliation

Describing the state of tensions and mistrust between religious and ethnic groups in Iraq, Hatem Mukhlis, political section chief with the Iraqi National Movement, stated that "the blame [for the current atmosphere] must be placed solely on Saddam [Hussein] and not other ethnic groups." After a brief overview of some of the measures the Hussein regime has taken against the Kurds, Mad'an or Marsh Arabs, and other groups in Iraq, Mukhlis outlined four main "fears" about a post-Hussein regime:

1. A repeat of the violence and oppressive actions directed at the Kurds and other ethnic groups seen in the wake of the Gulf War;
2. A wave of ethnic-based riots, revenge killings, or related personal, religious, and ethnic-based violence;
3. Political fragmentation of Iraq along geographic, ethnic, or religious lines; and
4. The rise to power of another Hussein-like dictator.

To combat these fears, he stressed, it was "important that all Iraqis feel change, and feel change quickly, from [no longer] feeling Saddam's wrath to sharing the riches of Iraq." Mukhlis also stated that the establishment of law and order and a commitment to the rule of law without respect to religious or ethnic background were crucial to legitimacy and stability in a post-Hussein Iraq. To accomplish this, any post-Hussein regime must embrace the principles of building a professional base of technocrats and civil servants and the creation of a parliament that is reflective of Iraq's diverse population.

The Test of Time: The Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post-Hussein Iraq

Jihan Hajibadri, a two-time refugee from Iraq and a current student in American University's International

Peace and Conflict Resolution Program, opened her presentation with a reminder that the Kurdish people were not the only ethnic group in Iraq to face persecution under the Hussein regime. Describing the array of actions directed against the Ma'dan (or Marsh Arab) people of Iraq in addition to policies pursued against the Kurds, Hajibadri pointed out that the Hussein regime was guilty of carrying out "ethnic cleansing" campaigns against an assortment of ethnic and religious groups throughout Iraq.

Looking ahead to the challenges of building a stable and vibrant multiethnic society in Iraq, Hajibadri suggested four main precepts that should be embraced by the Iraqi people in forming a viable post-Hussein regime:

1. The identity and beliefs of any one group must not be imposed upon all of the Iraqi people;
2. Freedom of religion must be guaranteed;
3. A new social contract between the people and the state must be established that facilitates trust between Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious groups; and
4. The new central government's power must be restrained through a series of checks and balances between federal and local control.

Hajibadri also proposed that third party mediation by the United Nations or another credible party be used to help develop consensus among various ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. This system, she added, would give the transition an added sense of legitimacy and would be a vital tool in both assuring stability and creating a foundation for much-needed ethnic reconciliation in a post-Hussein Iraq. "A new Iraq," Hajibadri noted, "must be a multicultural, multiparty state where ethnicity, sects, and tribes play a role in the democratic process."

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This USIPeace Briefing reflects the presentations and comments from "[Sectarian Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Iraq](#)"--a Current Issues Briefing held at the U.S. Institute of Peace February 11, 2003. The views summarized above reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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