



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“What’s Next? Prospects for Iraq’s Democratic Future”

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

September 20, 2010

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) held a panel discussion today to discuss the ongoing political impasse in Iraq. The event was moderated by **Michael Svetlik**, the Vice President of Programs for IFES. The speakers for the event were **Ted Galen Carpenter**, Vice President for Defense and Foreign Policy at the CATO Institute, **Perry Cammack**, a professional staff member for Senator **John Kerry** who focuses on the Middle East, and **Sean Dunne**, IFES Chief of Party in Iraq.

Svetlik began the event by reminding the attendees that while the March elections in Iraq were very close, they were also fair. Since the election, there has been little in the way of movement towards forming a new government, and as Svetlik noted, the drawdown of American troops has corresponded with an increase in high visibility insurgent attacks. **The main question confronting Iraq today, Svetlik said, is whether or not Iraq's democratic institutions are strong enough to weather the uncertainty.**

Carpenter was the first to speak and he organized his analysis into three sections: 1.) An assessment of the current situation; 2.) scenarios as Iraq moves forward; 3.) the American role in Iraq.

He began by saying that the current security situation in Iraq is better, but only when compared to 2006/2007. The sectarian divides are still there, particularly between the Sunnis and the Shiites, which Carpenter described as "boiling" just beneath the surface. He went on to state that **"Iraq is a fractured state", with a dysfunctional political system.** Geographically, he described Iraqi Kurdistan as "independent in just about every meaningful extent" while calling the rest of the country "rump Iraq". Carpenter stressed that Iran was the real winner of the war and that **Iraq was now a "regional weakling".**

Carpenter presented four possible scenarios for Iraq. The least likely scenario in Carpenters estimation was that the Iraqis would work everything out democratically and develop stable institutions. The Kurds would maintain significant sovereignty in the north but still cooperate with the central government, while Iraq's neighbors practiced a "hands off" approach. He called this the "Kumbaya" scenario. The next, and more likely scenario, would be the emergence of a new dictatorship that holds the country together by force. Carpenter said that in all likelihood this dictator would be a Shia, but added that a new "Saddam" like Sunni dictator was not out of the question. This autocratic government would rebuild the Iraqi military and either end or severely curtail Kurdish autonomy. Carpenter then described a scenario he called **"Lebanon Light"**. In this case, violence would increase back to 2006 levels, Iraq's neighbors (particularly Iran) would openly interfere, and the Kurds would likely fight to maintain their stronghold in the north. Finally, Carpenter described what he thought was the most likely scenario, the emergence of an illiberal democracy similar to Russia under **Vladimir Putin**. This Iraq would have a precarious security situation, which he compared to Northern Ireland in the 1970's,

and the Kurds would remain intent on preserving their autonomy. Neighboring countries would still interfere, but not as blatantly as the previous scenario.

As for the American role in Iraq, Carpenter stressed that **the US will have little ability "to determine or even influence" Iraqi politics** in the future and he rejected the idea of a long-term military commitment. He scoffed at the notion put forward by **Paul Wolfowitz** that the American commitment in Iraq be viewed in the same light as the commitment to South Korea. Carpenter argued that Iraqi society is fragmented compared to the more unified Korean society of the 1950's, and that there was consensus in the Korean society that the US was welcome whereas there is no such consensus in Iraq today. Carpenter then posited that American policy makers had placed too much importance on Iraq in US foreign policy. He asked, rhetorically, if Iraq was more important than China, India, Russia, or Japan to overall US interests and, if not, why the largest US embassy was located in Baghdad. He ended by calling for disengagement from Iraq.

Perry Cammack agreed with much of what Carpenter had to say, but looked at Carpenter's fourth scenario, which Cammack called the "muddle through" scenario, as "glass half full" rather than "half empty". Cammack also took issue with Carpenters assertion that Iraq has gained too high a profile in US foreign policy. He argued that **Iraq's "strategic environment", being close to the world's major oil reserves and being home to the holiest shrines in Shia Islam, made it an inherently important part of the world.** Cammack assented that Iran was a major influence, but pointed out that Iranian attempts to force a major consolidation of the Shia parties had largely failed. He went on to say that Turkey is the only other neighbor of Iraq that has significant influence there and that it has used that influence to be a responsible partner with the US. Cammack said that he would be nervous if a new government had not been formed by "November or December" and pointed out that **an "adult conversation" between the Iraqis and the US was not even possible until after the American mid-term elections in November.** Speaking from a congressional standpoint, Cammack agreed with the view that the US role in Iraq should diminish, but insisted that the relationship between Iraq and the US was important and that funding for Iraq would continue, albeit from the State Department rather than the Department of Defense.

Sean Dunne began his remarks with a question; **has US involvement over the past seven years established the necessary foundations for a democratic Iraq?** Dunne said that the answer to this question would "define the role of the US in the region" in the years to come and act as a kind of "acid test" of US commitment and capability. Dunne compared the elections in March to the 2005 elections, where hundreds of candidates were assassinated, and stated that no matter how you look at the numbers, they were still significantly better in 2010 than in 2005. Dunne said that the current stalemate has been caused by a major shift in the internal power structures in the developing institutions of Iraq and the strengthening of the role of the prime minister. Dunne pointed out that it was an improvement that this contest was being fought through the ballot box rather than on the street. He also reminded the audience that **each democracy evolves based on a unique set of challenges and circumstances, not foreign government timelines.** Dunne said that he hoped that state institutions could act as "shock absorbers" should there be unrest as a result of the upcoming census, which could play a key role in the Kurdish claims on Kirkuk. He predicted that **the next 12 to 24 months will determine if Iraq can succeed at being a democracy.** He voiced concerns over the politicization of the judiciary and the role of the military. According to Dunne, the role of the US and the international community in Iraq was to create space for democracy. Now that that had been accomplished, the world needs to let the Iraqis take the lead and not foster "learned helplessness".

Four questions were asked of the panelists: First, what are the smartest, most practical decisions that can be made by the US going forward? Cammack answered that **the Strategic Framework Agreement was as important as the Status of Forces Agreement, if not more so, going forward.** According to Cammack, the Strategic Framework Agreement presents an excellent opportunity for economic and cultural exchange and relationship building. Dunne emphasized that the US must be seen as "strategic, not transactional" and that policy consistency was key to increasing US "soft power" in Iraq. Carpenter pointed out that the US government is "tainted" in the eyes of many Iraqis, and that the key may be NGOs. Carpenter also called for contingency planning in order to prepare if the situation changes rapidly.

The next questioner inquired about the panelist's views on the refugee problem, and the possible effect that Iraqi and US policy could have on the issue. Dunne replied that the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration has dealt with this issue in a way that allowed for some displaced persons to vote in the last elections. He acknowledged, however, that the Ministries numbers have been questioned. He also noted that migrations have been organized intentionally, as with the movements of people to Kirkuk. As for refugees who left Iraq, Dunne claimed that data shows most will not return and said that they had been given a chance to participate. Carpenter pointed out that 30-50% of the Christian population of Iraq has fled. With respect to internally displaced persons, Carpenter said that the map had been "cleaned up". This was in reference to the greater degree of segregation, especially in Baghdad, where there are few mixed neighborhoods left.

The third questioner asked if the panel members were beginning to see a lack of faith in the Iraqi people due to the failure of the government to act upon their will. Dunne half jokingly called the predictions prior to the election "Analyst Bingo" and said that the situation is going to take time due to the intricacies of Iraqi politics. He went on to say that the current situation was not one foreseen by the writers of the constitution and that the people may become frustrated, especially if the caretaker government proves to be unresponsive to their needs. He concluded by saying that **the time taken to reach an agreement is less important than the agreement itself.**

Finally, a questioner asked; in the absence of a constitutional mandate that enforces electoral results, what creates an inflection point that forces government formation? Dunne responded that the responsiveness of the caretaker government was one of the keys to whether or not Iraqis demand a new government be formed. He also insisted that the **negotiations had to deal with checking the power of the prime minister and constitutional reform in addition to the formation of a new government.** He noted that the Kurds, who have acted as "kingmakers" in the past have backed off, complicating matters. Dunne dismissed calls for a new election saying that it would "undermine democratic evolution" and that **the problem has more to do with leaders accepting the results than the results themselves.** He added that polling has shown an increase in support for Allawi and Iraqiya and a decrease in support for Maliki since the impasse began.

Carpenter gave the final response, saying that the Kurd's withdrawal from the situation was troubling and suggested that they may be trying to consolidate their control over Iraqi Kurdistan. He ended by stressing that Maliki was becoming increasingly "illiberal", jailing journalists and tolerating corruption...not unlike Putin.