For War or Peace

Issues of war and peace in the twenty first century

Iraq Policy: D Bonnie Bricker and Adil E. Shamoo

Foreign Policy In Focus » Article / **Commentary**

Iraq Policy: D

February 5, 2010 · By Bonnie Bricker and Adil E. Shamoo

The Obama administration's policy toward Iraq largely continues the policies of the Bush years.

Recent suicide bombings in the heart of Baghdad have sent a message to Washington: Maintaining the Iraq policy of the past administration does not inspire hope.

Iraqi insurgents linked to al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the bombing, which hit hotels frequented by Westernjournalists. The attacks followed the government's banning of 511 parliamentary candidates for the upcoming election this March. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government banned a large number of independents, nationalists, secularists and current opponents of the government, including Sunni and Baathist politicians. Obama campaigned for the presidency as if he understood the damage done to Iraq by the U.S. invasion. Both the progressives who supported Obama, as well as the Iraqis who embraced the promise of a free and fair Iraq, sought a foreign policy grounded in moral values of fairness and respect for other nations.

To Iraqis, current American policy is a mere variant of Bush's policies. Bush was planning to pull all U.S. troops from Iraq as long as a compliant government in Baghdad met our needs (not Iraq's). Under the Obama administration, current Iraqi Vice President Abdul Mehdi was compelled to come to Washington recently to urge the president and policymakers to give Iraq more respect as a sovereign nation. Whether our current policy is perceived as Bush or merely Bush-Lite, Iraqis cannot yet see fair governance in their future.

Obama dispatched Vice President Joe Biden to Iraq following the banning of the candidates. But Biden's persuasion cannot change the Iraqi perception, that the current government in Baghdad is highly sectarian and subject to competing foreign influences. The Bush administration's original pick to head Iraq, Ahmed

Chalabi, is the head of the Accountability and Justice board in Iraq. It was Chalabi's recommendation to ban the 511 candidates; it's Chalabi's current close ties with former foe Iran that has many Iraqis worried.

As our policies towards governance in Iraq evolve, American policymakers must continue to heed the current status of post-war Iraq. The numbers tell a devastating story. Several hundred thousand Iraqis died as a result of the war; an estimated one half-million were wounded. Tens

of thousands of Iraqis are disabled, physically or mentally. There are over two million refugees outside Iraq and more displaced refugees inside Iraq. Twelve thousand physicians and thousands of intellectuals and engineers — a large percentage of the professionals in Iraq -— left the country, and many will never return. Fifty percent of Iraqis are unemployed.

In order to break with the failed Iraq policy of the past, Washington must acknowledge the misery the invasion of Iraq inflicted on the Iraqi people. While welcoming any progress Iraqis have made post-invasion, we must not conflate the rebuilding of Iraq as a success of the neoconservatives. Rebuilding Iraq has occurred in spite of the neoconservatives' policies, not because of them. The neoconservatives' enthusiasm for Obama's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan provide fair warning that without a clear break from the past, Iraq's future is in doubt.

The current administration continues to support a sectarian constitution, as well as sectarian military and police forces. These imposed sectarian divisions further divide Iraqis instead of uniting them. The Lebanese example demonstrates that an Arab government based on sectarian divisions instead of non-sectarianism has little chance of success. Further, corporate U.S. interests are evident everywhere, especially in Iraq's oil fields. Hundreds of laws written by the United States and imposed on Iraq during the initial invasion remain in effect.

How can Obama break from the past and provide Iraqis with hope for their future? He must embrace policies that serve to unite Iraqis by embracing nonsectarianism. He must resist threats of punishing consequences if Iraqi policies do not neatly match our own, demonstrating respect for their sovereignty. He must plan for a minimal American footprint reducing both troops **and** contractors. Instead of leaving 35,000-50,000 American troops in Iraq, Obama should work with the UN to help with forces beyond 2010 if continued military support is needed. Finally, Obama should direct our policy toward the resettlement of Iraqis back into their homes, both ending the misery of refugee status and helping Iraq to regain the many citizens needed to rebuild their country.

Obama needs to anchor his rhetoric in actions. Hope is a powerful force when it is allowed to bloom. But when it withers, its power turns in a devastating direction. Now is the time to demonstrate that there is still reason to hope.

Adil E. Shamoo is a senior analyst at Foreign Policy In Focus. He is a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, and writes on matters of ethics and public policy. Bonnie Bricker is a contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus. Both can be reached at ashamoo@ umaryland.edu.

http://www.ips-dc.org/articles/iraq_policy_d