

**Pugwash Meeting no. 293**  
**11th Pugwash Workshop on the Middle East:**  
***Prospects for the Peace Process***

**4-7 March 2004, Amman, Jordan**

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**Situation in Iraq: Concerns of Neighboring States**

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As the US confronts the realities of Iraq with focus on transfer of power on June 30, 2004 the US is compelled and is obliged to seriously ponder over intricate domestic issues and complex interests of all of Iraq's neighbors. There is a real danger that any ill-conceived move favoring one ethnic group against the other in Iraq will provoke one neighbor to press advantage against the other. Fearful of each other, Iraq's neighbors have met several times in the year or so to take stock of the situation and reiterating the usual positions on territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iraq. Their strong interest in territorial integrity of Iraq can be harnessed to promote harmony and consultations within Iraq.

For reasons of space and time, I am not touching upon the security situation and shall confine myself to interests of the major domestic and neighboring players.

***Kurds***

With nearly 12 years of de facto independence the Kurds do not hesitate to stake their claim to determine their own future in the Kurdish controlled areas. The recent Kurdish proposal to establish an ethnic based federal structure in Iraq has alarmed many, both within and outside Iraq. They claim that Saddam Hussein carried out ethnic cleansing of the area by expelling Kurds to the north and bringing in the Arabs. The movement seems to have reversed now. Kurds meanwhile describe Kirkuk as "Kurdish Jerusalem" and their future capital. They are determined to restore what they claim, their natural majority in the region. The Kurds are uncomfortable with the prospect of a single Iraqi army, which could mean allowing Arab troops back in Kurdish areas. The Kurdish 'peshmerga' militiamen, who fought alongside the US, now expect a political payoff for that support.

After an apparent failure to persuade the Arab colleagues in the Governing Council, the Kurdistan Democratic Party paper recently published an article by Massoud Barazani claiming that Kurds who enjoyed 12 years of de facto independence would

not accept anything less than a federal status for Kurdistan. Adnan Pachachi says that Kurds can get what they want as long as they show patience.

In a country used to one-man rule, federalism demanded by the Kurds is not properly understood. Many suspect that this reflects Kurdish aspiration to split from Iraq.

### ***Turkmen***

The Turkmen and the Arabs are suspicious of Kurdish demands for federalism, which they fear, is the precursor to separatism. The Iraqi Turkmen claim Kirkuk as their city. The Turkmen leaders say that they have no desire to live in Kurdistan. Some have even hoped that Ayatollah's call for early general elections would mean Shia majority rule that will automatically vote down Kurdish separatism. Such a trend will encourage natural partnership between the two groups against Kurds. Turkmen are economically powerful in the region.

### ***Shias***

Iraq's Shias, who are generally believed to constitute about 60 per cent of the population, see an opening for them in a democratic dispensation. One of their powerful voices Ayotullah Sistani demands that the assembly that is due to choose the government should be elected rather than selected by the caucus. Frankly, most Iraqis do not understand the proposed caucus system. Demand for democratic elections has now been boosted by the findings of the UN Secretary general's team. Noticeably, the Shias have not said that they want a ethnic or a sectarian based state structure in Iraq.

### ***Sunnis***

A democratic dispensation without guarantees for smaller communities will mean an end to Sunni domination of political and economic life in Iraq. It is naturally difficult for them to reconcile with any arrangement that shadows them completely. It seems inevitable that they will not return to the same power and influence in Iraq.

Many Iraqis, Arabs and Muslims believe that this is an engineered fragmentation of Iraqi society, which happily existed without these fissures before. It is argued that this is done to manipulate smaller groups by outside powers to promote their interests in the larger context of Middle East. Dividing Iraq within itself that could pose one potent threat to Israel, they argue weakens the Palestinian struggle for independence.

### ***Governing Council / CPA***

Amidst all these currents and crosscurrents most members of the Governing Council no longer support the US plan to choose an interim government through caucuses and instead want to assume sovereignty till elections can be held. This poses a challenge for the CPA that still needs to be resolved.

Notwithstanding the resolution of the process, Paul Bremer, favors a situation, as it existed before the American invasion of Iraq. This would allow considerable autonomy for Kurdish areas minus Kirkuk. Following two days of rioting early in the year the CPA announced that Iraqi Kurds would continue to enjoy the autonomy in their northern half even after power is handed over to the sovereign Iraqi government. Such a step naturally arouses a lot of suspicions amongst Iraq's neighbors especially Turkey. Many however, doubt that an independent but landlocked Kurdistan could survive amongst foes, even if they had Kirkuk.

In addition to the ethnic dimensions Mr. Bremer's reported opposition to Islamic clauses to the draft constitution prepared by the Governing Council has sparked another crisis. He has reportedly threatened to veto any provision making Islam the basis of all laws made by the Iraqi parliament.

### ***UN Secretary General's Report***

The UN fact-finding mission's report lays out some broad agreements within the Iraqi stakeholders. At the same time, the report draws out certain contentious issues in the backdrop of the current environment in Iraq. The Secretary General in his letter to the President of Security Council has again emphasized that a, "precondition for the UN to succeed in Iraq is the clear and unambiguous support of a united Security Council and the establishment of a stable environment". The main points of the report are:

- a. There are many indications of fragmentation of the political class in Iraq. Sectarianism is becoming entrenched and inter communal politics more polarized.
- b. The November 15, 2003 agreement between the Iraqi Governing Council and Coalition Provisional Authority meets the wishes of Iraqi people for a quick transition that will lead to a provisional government
- c. The date of June 30, 2004 for transfer of sovereignty to Iraqis must be respected.
- d. The caucus style system proposed for Iraq, is not practical and is not a substitute for elections.
- e. Credible elections cannot take place by June 30, 2004, for which at least eight months are required. If legal framework can be secured by May 2004 and other conditions met, elections could be held by early 2005 or shortly thereafter.
- f. A single elected assembly should be created through elections with the dual function of drafting the constitution and acting as a legislature simultaneously. The provision of a selected national assembly and a subsequently elected

constituent assembly under November 15 agreements, both running concurrently creates a potential for political strife.

Sistani, who challenged the Americans calling for a direct vote, has said that he would accept a short delay in elections. He argues that any non-elected administration must only have limited powers. Ahmed Chalabi, head of Iraqi national Congress, one of the exiles so openly promoted by the US, contends that elections are still possible by June 30.

Reported discussions between Iraqi politicians and the CPA are proving contentious and inconclusive at least for now. The ideas on the table include: calling a national conference to choose a caretaker government, partial elections or handover of powers to the Governing Council.

Despite this political jockeying the US Administrator insists that the CPA is obliged to leave behind a democratic government in Iraq and that June 30 was immutable. If the US is compelled to abandon the complicated caucus plan, he favors handing over power to an expanded Governing Council.

The Secretary General's team under much respected Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, has correctly assessed that different communities in Iraq reflect a grave sense of history attached to the current situation. The Sunnis and the secular elite suffer from the fear of losing power, the Shia's want to correct their previous powerlessness, the Kurds are determined to maintain or even enhance their autonomy, and minorities want to avoid a system in which they drown permanently.

Since most of the local players, in one way or the other, are aligned to or seek support from outside powers, there is a need to build consensus and develop joint stakes in the maintenance of territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iraq. The good thing is that all of Iraq's neighbors have together publicly vowed to maintain Iraq within the existing boundaries. How the internal structures are built will eventually depend on compromises made within Iraq and amongst other interested powers.

### ***Concerns of Neighbors***

Iraq's neighbors, both opponents and supporters of the war on Iraq are concerned at the far reaching consequences of the US occupation and dangers it poses for the Arab world's stability in general. All are concerned that the US accusations of cross-border infiltration into Iraq could widen the conflict. The Foreign Ministers of all the neighboring states rejected accusations of meddling in Iraq's internal affairs at their Damascus meeting in November 2003.

The neighbors, all hope that a broad-based representative Iraqi government will soon be formed that, "coexists peacefully with its neighbors and respects international conventions and agreements." Successive Foreign ministers meetings have also emphasized the need for Iraq to decide its own destiny and remain in control of its resources.

Amidst this confusion there is a French proposal to call an international conference on Iraq modeled on the Bonn conference on Afghanistan. The idea first mooted by the Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov in an CNN interview on November 19, 2003, proposed that apart from the various Iraqi groups, the UN, the Coalition partners and the neighboring states may attend this conference. The US, is not favorably disposed to this idea fearing that focus and control may shift to a body not directly under the US.

While Turks are reportedly not averse to the proposal; the Arabs and Iranians will also find it attractive. As a group of neighboring countries that have already held five meetings on Iraq they will draw strength from a larger group essentially aiming at the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. But unless the US comes on board the idea may not take off.

### ***Kuwait***

Kuwait's claim on Iraq in the aftermath of 1990 invasion is \$69 billion. In addition, Iraq owes \$16 billion to Kuwait. Mr. Baker's visit to the Gulf in the recent past has softened Kuwaiti claims on Iraq yet, substantial debt is owed by Iraq to Kuwait, which they are interested to reclaim from the Iraqis. Kuwait is mainly concerned with the security and economic situation and is generally gearing to exploit trade and oil sector development opportunities.

Iraq's historic claims over Kuwait have always led to suspicion and troubled relationship between the two states. The recent reported statement by the current Governing Council President Mr. Mohsin Hameed that Iraq could consider territorial claims over neighboring Kuwait and Jordan have exacerbated Kuwaiti fears of Iraqi intentions. Following these provocative statements the Kuwaiti academicians have warned that Kuwait must not rush into forging ties with Iraq.

### ***Syria***

Syria worries that contrary to the American expectation presence of US forces in Iraq and in the wider gulf region will strengthen radical Islamic forces instead of strengthening the democratization process. Syria fears that if US stationed troops for longer period and with a pliable regime in Baghdad it will be easier for them to put pressure on Syria. The US presence they believe will be a setback for the possibilities of the democratization for the region. Syria is ostensibly interested in a broad based

democratic government in Baghdad because such a government will be able to resist US pressures and would establish close ties with neighboring countries like Turkey, Syria, Jordan and others.

### ***Jordan***

Jordan too is interested in the earliest possible establishment of indigenous Iraqi authority. Because of its close ties with the United States, Jordan supports lending legitimacy to any interim arrangements that the Americans leave behind. According to them this is almost inevitable and then manageable in a democratic context.

Like many other countries in the region and elsewhere, Jordan considers the Palestinian Israeli peace process as directly connected to the situation in Iraq. The more the situation deteriorates in Iraq, the more difficult it will become to resolve the Palestinian conflict.

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Saudi interests are expressed in their stated desire that US role in Iraq is shortened and there is no American military presence. Saudi Arabia as part of the larger Arab community wants Iraq to be managed by Arabs and not by any outside power. With a strong Sunni/Wahabi tradition, Saudi Arabia wants to limit the Shia influence in the political and social structures of new Iraq. Saudi Arabia is also worried that Shia Iraq might team up with Iran and will thus jeopardize Sunni influence in the region.

Saudi Arabia therefore, wants Iraq return to its sovereign status as quickly as possible. They have repeated that Iraq's territorial integrity be respected by all parties concerned. Saudi Arabia because of its significant capacity to assist in reconstruction efforts would like to have a substantial stake in the reconstruction process.

### ***Iran***

Iran's basic worry relates to the continued US presence in the Gulf region. With Americans stationed in Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics and Iran's own history of estrangement with the Americans they fear that the US is determined on encirclement of Iran. Iran is also concerned at the US accusations of Iran meddling in Iraq's internal affairs of Iraq.

With the possibility of majority rule emerging in Iraq and Shia majority population, Iran hopes that Shias will eventually assume predominant position in Iraq. Tehran is also interested that the Kurdish aspirations for a loose federal structure are contained so as to prevent its germination in the Iranian Kurdish areas.

Most of the holiest Shia cities are in Iraq. Iran on the other hand is seen as a center of Shia political and theological role in the region. With relative freedom coming into

Iraq, some Iranians are worried that Shia theological centers might reemerge in Iraq, independent of Iranian influence. A further cause of worry is that these centers, if they grow in status, might even provide leadership and shelter to the Iranian Shia dissidents and may ultimately weaken the Islamic republic.

Considering Saddam's removal as an improvement in regional situation, Iran has taken some highly visible steps to extend legitimacy to the Governing Council. They are one of the few Islamic countries to host the President of the Governing Council and sign a number of agreements with the interim administration in Iraq.

Peace and stability in Iraq has serious religious, economic and security implications for Iran. Iran would obviously want a Shia dominated government. A government based on ethnic majority elected on one man one vote basis predominantly Shia will exactly suit the Iranian interests at least in the short run. Iran therefore supports Sistani's demand for direct elections.

### ***Turkey***

With a substantial restless Kurdish population, Turkey is concerned at the status of Iraqi Kurds. Fearing unrest and fermenting independence aspirations among Turkey's own Kurdish population Turkey is vehemently opposed to grant of substantial autonomy to Iraqi Kurds. Fearing that federal structure based on ethnicity carry seeds of eventual destabilization, Turkey believes that restructuring of Iraq on ethnic lines would keep Iraq unstable with a possible spillover into the neighboring states. Turkey therefore favors seven to eighteen federating units for Iraq based on administrative requirements only.

Turkey is actively engaged in diplomatic efforts to seek support from other states against US attempts to acquiesce with ethnic based federal structure in Iraq. Due to its traditionally strong opposition to expression of Kurdish statehood the Turks openly stand by and support the Turkomen who they consider as their ethnic cousins.

Turkey's offer to send 10,000 troops was withdrawn amidst serious opposition from the Governing Council and specially the Kurdish leadership who are as much suspicious of Turkish intentions as Turks are of theirs.

Turkey is equally worried at reported attempts by Iranians to promote a Shia government in Baghdad, which will then promote Iranian interests against the other neighbors. Turkey claims Kirkuk as Turkomen city and dismisses any counter claims by the Kurds.

### ***Foreign Minister's Meetings***

The Foreign Ministers of all of Iraq's neighboring states have met five times since the

US forces have occupied Iraq. Last time they met in Kuwait in February 2004 when the Iraqi Foreign Minister Mr. Hoshyar Zuberi participated for the first time. In every one of their meetings they have emphasized the territorial integrity, together with respecting the sovereignty and independence of Iraq. They have reiterated the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of Iraq and have invited all parties to respect these principles.

The Kuwait communiqué has reaffirmed the role of the UN, "so that it assume its central responsibilities throughout the transitional process in Iraq." They want UN involvement in preparing grounds for withdrawal of occupying powers as soon as possible and help facilitate transfer of power to Iraqi people by June 30 as agreed between the Governing Council and the Coalition Provisional Authority.

The Ministers have once again drawn attention of the occupying powers of their responsibilities in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and specially the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

The Iraqi Foreign Minister reaffirmed at the Kuwait conference that Shia Iraq and Iran will not team up and asked neighbors to leave Iraq alone.

### ***Conclusion***

Given more than three decades of despotic rule, with state structures destroyed, distrust, absence of political will to reconcile, the conditions in Iraq are daunting. Yet, despite these challenges, if common stakes are built both domestically and amongst neighbors, this might lead to evolution of an all-inclusive system.

Iraq and its surrounding region cannot be studied apart from each other. There are strong undertones that Iraq, and whatever has been done to it is directly connected with conflict in Palestine. Notwithstanding differences with Saddam Hussein, leaders of all neighboring states warned against military intervention in Iraq. Failure to find weapons of mass destruction belies US claims and reasons to invade Iraq. Common Iraqis and Arabs are not sure of real US intentions. Each of Iraq's neighbors seems to be watching the other. With suspicions running high, they have all stood together calling for respect of territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iraq. Each of them wants the UN to play an effective role in restoring normalcy in a highly charged environment. With geography a dynamic force all of them worryingly understand that continued chaos and anarchy could mean further breakdown of Iraqi structure leading to redrawing of Middle East boundaries. There is a common belief that US, and its coalition partners have created this mess. They need to get out quickly and let the collective will of the international community represented by the UN help Iraq's and the region's return to a civilized state.

*Note: The views and findings of this paper are purely my own and in no way reflect the views of my employers.*