



Today's and Tomorrow's Message

Iraq's Choice of Destinies

Ted Galen Carpenter

4/11/2012

Iraq's Choice of Destinies The final withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq was a watershed moment nearly as important as the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Iraq now has a number of possible paths in terms of its political and economic future. Some of those paths lead to a promising future; others lead to either chaos or a new era of repression. Unfortunately, the course that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki seems intent on following does not lead to a good outcome for the Iraqi people.

One key issue is how much power should reside with the central government in Baghdad. Maliki and his political allies seek every opportunity to expand the power of the national government and reduce the authority exercised at the provincial and regional levels. One recent example is Baghdad's foot dragging about revenue payments to the Kurdish regional government (KRG) for oil sold in 2011. KRG officials charge that the national authorities owe some \$1 billion to the regional government. In addition, the KRG complains that Baghdad continues to refuse to recognize valid contracts that Arbil has concluded with international energy firms.

KRG President Masoud Barzani denounced the actions of the Maliki government in forceful terms. "The officials in the central government who refuse to admit these contracts are failures who could not give to Iraq what we give to our people in Kurdistan," Barzani charged. "They want us to be like them."

President Barzani has a point. Instead of trying to get the rest of Iraq to emulate the Kurdish region, the Maliki regime seems intent on constraining Kurdistan so that it more closely resembles the rest of Iraq. That would be tragedy for all concerned. The autonomous Kurdish region is an indisputable economic success story—in marked contrast to most portions of Iraq. And although the KRG remains an imperfect democratic model, the trend is improving. Moreover, even with its political faults, the KRG's performance on that front is far superior to the national government's record.

Indeed, the Maliki regime's practices grow ever more worrisome. Not only is corruption on the rise, but there is a steady erosion of political freedoms. Journalists who dare to be critical of the prime minister and his allies increasingly complain of harassment and sometimes outright censorship. This past winter, Maliki's security bureaucracy detained

hundreds of former officials, accusing them of supporting a return to Ba'athist Party dictatorial rule. Although some of those allegations may have been true, the government cast a very wide and indiscriminate net.

A recent report by the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War concluded that Maliki seems to be conducting a concerted campaign to stifle dissent and political opposition. "He has made it more difficult for his Shi'ite rivals to dissent," the report stated, "while simultaneously confining his Sunni opponents in a position suitable for exerting pressure and exploiting divisions within their ranks."

Such a strategy does not promote the development of a robust democracy. Rather, it is similar to the methods used by Russian leader Vladimir Putin to undermine the substance of democracy in his country while retaining elections and other democratic facades. Iraq should not want to emulate such a cynical and corrupt model, but it seems to be doing so.

An especially ominous development occurred in December when the Maliki administration charged Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi with treason—specifically with running anti-government death squads. Hashemi, one of Iraq's leading Sunni Arab politicians and a leader of the Iraqiya political bloc, vehemently maintains his innocence. He also has fled to the Kurdish region, claiming that he could never get a fair trial or even be certain of his physical safety in Baghdad. The Maliki government has demanded that the KRG turn over Hashemi, but President Barzani has thus far refused to do so.

There is still time for the leaders in Baghdad to change course, create a genuine democracy, with a vigorous federal system that limits the authority of the national government. The overall goal should be emulate Kurdistan's political and economic successes. Unfortunately, Maliki and his allies seemed determined to pursue the opposite course—one that leads to a new dictatorship, civil war, or both. That is a destiny no one in Iraq should want.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs and serves on the editorial board of *Mediterranean Quarterly*.