April 4, 2004

Iraqi Democrats Feeling Sidelined

By Michael Rubin
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WASHINGTON — Last summer, as Iraqis sweltered outside, the Coalition Provisional Authority met in the marbled corridors and air-conditioned offices of one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces to hash out how to fund political parties. The State Department was adamant, insisting that the CPA should maintain "an even playing field" and should not favor one party over another. Parties affiliated with the Iraqi Governing Council's militant Islamists and liberal secularists should receive the same treatment. There should be no special consideration given to groups seeking to unite Iraqis rather than dividing them by ethnicity or sectarian affiliations.

This may sound like the way to ensure fair elections. But while the CPA has maintained its neutrality, our adversaries have shown no such compunction.

Until recently, I worked for the CPA, living in a nondescript house outside Baghdad's Green Zone. I traveled the country with Iraqi friends, paying spot checks on borders, political parties, shrines and markets. Because I was not in a convoy or traveling with heavily armed guards, Iraqis could easily approach me. Professionals, politicians and religious figures telephoned at all hours for meetings, knowing they would not have to wait at the fortified gates of the palace complex. I quickly learned that most political business in Iraq happens not at Governing Council sessions, but in private homes between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m.

One February evening, a governor from a southern province asked to see me. We met after dark at a friend's house. After pleasantries and tea, he got down to business. "The Iranians are flooding the city and countryside with money," he said. "Last month, they sent a truckload of silk carpets across the border for the tribal sheikhs. Whomever they can't buy, they threaten." The following week, I headed south to investigate. A number of Iraqis said the Iranians had channeled money through the offices of the Dawa Party, an Islamist political party, led by Governing Council member Ibrahim Jafari. On separate occasions in Baghdad and the southern city of Nasiriya, I watched ordinary Iraqis line up for handouts of money and supplies at Dawa offices. The largess seems to be having an effect: Polls indicate that Jafari is Iraq's most popular politician, enjoying a favorable rating by more than 50% of the electorate.

The CPA's evenhandedness may be well-intentioned, but to a society weaned on

conspiracy theories, the United States' failure to support liberals and democrats signals support for the Islamists. Equal opportunity may exist in Washington, but not in Baghdad. Why, Iraqis ask, would the CPA ignore the influx of Iranian arms and money into southern Iraq if it had not struck some secret deal with Tehran or did not desire the resulting increase in militancy? Why would the Iranian border be largely unguarded a year after liberation?

Iraqi liberals are especially sensitive to signs of support for Shiite politician Abdelaziz Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, whose visit official Washington welcomed in January. Students affiliated with the Badr Corps, Hakim's militia, roam Basra University, forcing women to wear the veil. Signs proclaiming the supremacy of Hakim are affixed to doors across the university, and professors say they are afraid to remove them. In Nasiriya and Karbala, Iraqis lament they can no longer speak openly, lest they become the subject of retaliation by Iranian-funded gangs.

While Sens. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts and Carl Levin of Michigan demand yet another government audit of the Iraqi National Congress (previous audits have found no wrongdoing), radical clerics find their pockets full, their Iranian sponsors more interested in mission than political cannibalism. Last month, I visited a gathering of urban professionals in Najaf. They repeatedly asked why the CPA stood by while followers of firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtader Sadr invaded homes, smashed satellite dishes and meted out punishment in ad hoc Islamic courts. We may dismiss Sadr as a grass-roots populist, but his rise was not arbitrary. Rather, his network is based upon ample funding he receives through Iran-based cleric Ayatollah Kazem al Haeri, a close associate of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In signing the bill authorizing $87.5 billion for reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan in November, President Bush called the massive campaign to rebuild both nations "the greatest commitment of its kind since the Marshall Plan." There is daily progress. Shops have opened. Roads are repaved. But, the CPA remains hampered by a strategic communications strategy geared more toward Washington than Iraq. American newspapers may report our $5.6 billion investment in Iraq's electrical infrastructure, but what Iraqis see are signs such as a billboard of Hakim, the radical politician, affixed to a newly refurbished Ministry of Electricity office in Baghdad.

On March 26, a team of United Nations election specialists arrived in Baghdad to prepare the country for elections following the scheduled June 30 transfer of sovereignty. Iraqis may welcome elections, but it would be an abdication of American leadership if we do not support our allies, especially as Iraq's neighbors fund proxy groups and radicals with goals inimical to democracy.

We should not be more willing to help our adversaries than our friends. Democracy is about not only elections, but also about tolerance, compromise and liberty. Twenty-five years ago, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, declared "the first day of God's government." In a rushed referendum supervised by armed vigilantes, Iranians voted for theocracy. For a quarter century, they have struggled to undo their mistake. It would be a betrayal of Bush's vision as well as 24 million Iraqis if we replicate it in Iraq.