

Beat: Politics

Trump must take Iraq policy in a new direction

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Iraq, 22.12.2016, 01:07 Time

USPA NEWS - My country of Iraq has suffered enormously under the tenures of American presidents. For over a quarter of a century, Iraqis have had to bear the burdens of their misguided policies, enduring America's sanctions, invasion and foreign occupation.

However, the extraordinary election of Donald Trump offers a rare opportunity to reset U.S.-Iraq relations. But he mustn't make the same mistakes in Iraq committed by his predecessor.

Barack Obama came into office campaigning to end the war in Iraq. When elected, he handed over the portfolio to his vice president. This signaled to us that the United States now considered Iraq of secondary importance, which strengthened Iran's leverage across the political landscape.

Obama could have corrected this perception among Iraqis, but he only confirmed his disinterest and disengagement when he appointed Christopher Hill as his ambassador in 2009.

Unlike his well-regarded predecessor, Ryan Crocker, Hill did not speak Arabic and had never served in the Middle East. He neither understood Iraq's politics nor wanted to understand Iraqis.

Given Iraq's complexities, it's important that President-Elect Trump seek advice from individuals that understand Iraq "" its culture, history and its people. Unfortunately, Obama has relied on poor advice and advanced the perception that the U.S. practiced a Shiite-centric approach to Iraq, which envisioned Shiites as the "critical" community. Sunnis were treated as a junior partner, and one that needed to be divided and co-opted so as to disguise the government to look like a national institution.

Under Hill's tenure, the U.S.

Sought to prematurely normalize bilateral relations, despite Iraq not having developed reliable democratic institutions to check against authoritarian behavior. This empowered Nouri al-Maliki, then prime minister, and legitimized his behavior and authority.

When the Iraqi people went to vote in 2010, they cast their votes for change. Ayad Allawi, a secular nationalist who headed a cross-sectarian coalition, had defeated al-Maliki. But the prime minister redefined the constitutional rules through his influence with Iraq's judiciary, giving al-Maliki a clear path to salvage his position.

Allawi and his bloc were never given a chance to form the government. Instead of voicing opposition to this legal coup d'état, the White House remained silent, thus tacitly approving in the eyes of Iraqis. Even worse, U.S. officials privately worked to help al-Maliki secure a second term by pressuring others to back his candidacy, which ironically mirrored Iran's actions.

The United States hailed the 2010 government as "inclusive," stating that it represented a "national partnership." However, by denying the electoral winner a chance to form the government, the U.S. helped to undermine the development of democracy in Iraq.

During his second term, new grievances emerged as al-Maliki continued to consolidate his power and marginalize his coalition partners. The prime minister empowered pro-Iranian militias; purged the security forces of professionals; cracked down on Sunni political leaders and peaceful demonstrations; and unilaterally took control of the central bank, elections commission, and anti-corruption body from the oversight and authority of parliament.

Despite all the warning signs, it was Washington's naive and constant support for the prime minister that allowed sectarian and political tensions in Iraq to build up and rupture into another civil war.

The White House protected al-Maliki as the only realistic option for prime minister "" until it was too late. Only when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) overran the city of Mosul did the U.S. finally withdraw their coveted support.

Unfortunately, there are indications that Trump might fall into the same entrapment. "In my telephone call with President-elect Trump," said Iraq's prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, earlier this week, "he assured me that U.S. support will not only continue, but it is going to be increased."

My advice to Donald Trump is this: Don't give anyone in Iraq a blank check "" or even make them think as if they have one "" especially those that wield coercive power.

Any U.S. support must be conditioned to an adherence to democratic values and human rights. Too often the White House unwisely gave unconditional support to the prime minister, leading to reckless overconfidence and unwillingness to compromise with political rivals.

Indeed, Abadi is weak now, but so too was al-Maliki once. Trump shouldn't give his support to the prime minister; he should have him earn it.

Today, the focus of American engagement and outreach in the campaign to defeat ISIS tries again to convince Sunni leaders to unilaterally lend support to Abadi, with no assurances or compromises. This is unacceptable. It's a different prime minister in Baghdad, but it's the same, repeated mistake that favors authoritarian tendencies.

From 2006-2008, Sunni tribes fought and ultimately defeated al Qaeda in Iraq with the expectation that Baghdad would integrate them into official civilian and security roles. Instead, once the U.S. military withdrew from Iraq, many of these heroic tribal fighters faced imprisonment, intimidation and even death at the hands of the Maliki-led government.

The Islamic State will eventually lose its territorial control in Iraq. But it won't be eliminated without winning the hearts and minds of the Sunni community. This can't be achieved without national level initiatives that push for reforms, reintegration and reconciliation at the local level.

Today, Shiites and Kurds represent the bulk of the liberation campaign over Sunni territories instead of the indigenous tribes. The Sunni tribes have requested the United States to provide them with the military arms to liberate their lands from ISIS's occupation. Unfortunately, they've been continuously turned away by U.S. officials at the Defense and State departments and instead asked to cooperate either through the Kurdish regional government in Erbil or the central government in Baghdad.

With no direct access to the West, the Sunnis are cut off from acquiring the resources to fight ISIS. And then, they are conveniently "" and inaccurately "" blamed for supporting the terrorist group.

This has given the Kurds and Shiites both the capability and political cover to grab territory through their liberation campaign, while prohibiting many of the millions of displaced Sunnis from returning back to their homes "" a tragedy that will have long-term repercussions for post-ISIS stability.

The United States invaded Iraq under false pretenses and unraveled its institutions. It's morally obligated to help us rebuild our country. But this requires the United States to develop a comprehensive policy toward Iraq and not only a counterterrorism policy fixated on security.

Trump's goal to defeat ISIS is not what his administration should prepare for when developing its Iraq policy. The problem isn't how to defeat ISIS, but rather how to confront the challenges of post-ISIS governance so that an insurgency does not reemerge in the future. This represents a political problem. Of course, we need to rebuild professional security institutions devoted to serve all Iraqis. But we also equally need to develop good institutions of governance, of checks and balances and of accountability. These are as essential to stability as soldiers and policemen. Without them, corruption and sectarianism will continue to poison our nascent democracy and empower the worst of our elites.

I hope Donald Trump offers a new and positive direction for U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, and I stand ready to work with him. But he mustn't build his policy on the same empty promises and poor advice that stem from Washington and that have failed to address our legitimate grievances.

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Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-10364/trump-must-take-iraq-policy-in-a-new-direction.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDSIV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Zayad Alshaiikli

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