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PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH DEMOCRATIC IRAQI GOVERNMENT GATHERS STEAM

“Preemptive Democracy instead of Preemptive War”: discussions in New York, Davos (Switzerland) and Porto Alegre (Brazil)

Poll will ask American people

NEW YORK. The proposal of a small democracy think-tank to establish an alternative democratic government to Saddam Hussein's via a broad-based constitutional convention open to the world's media is gathering steam, and is being discussed in New York, at the World Economic Forum in Davos and at its counterpart the World Social Forum in Brazil. The organization will commission a national poll to ask the American people about the proposal.

According to Troy Davis, President of the World Citizen Foundation, this proposal has something in it for everyone, from President Bush and Don Rumsfeld to Muslims and the antiwar movement. The proposal aims at helping all the Iraqi opposition in immediately creating a Transitional Democratic Government of, for and by the people of Iraq, as part of a two-step process to restore democracy to Iraq. The second step will be the convening of a second constitutional convention in Iraq once Saddam is gone.

“The creation of a Transitional Democratic Government will make it easier for President Bush to fulfill his aim to bring democracy to Iraq, it will make it easier to turn over Iraq to the Iraqis which is what M. Rumsfeld wants, and it will take off the pressure that Bush feels because he is trapped by a U.N. process he believes is mere theatre. In general, Bush should like it because it restores moral clarity and separates the issues of disarmament and regime change which should never have been amalgamated in the first place.” says Davis.

“But it also is good for those against the war, because it probably is the only chance of solving this crisis without war. The mere existence of this more legitimate Transitional Democratic Government will set in motion events that will ratchet the political pressure on Saddam so much that the chances of him losing power without a preemptive war rise dramatically” affirmed Davis.

This view is confirmed by Iraqis: "Lack of legitimacy is the weakest spot of Saddam's regime. I agree with the analysis and the project, because it delegitimizes him. It is a brilliant idea because it is based on peaceful means, and because it hammers at the root of the problem -the legitimacy of the regime- instead of trimming the top of the tree. It reminds me of when people delegitimized Milosevic and he lost power." Muhanned Eshaiker, Vice-President, Iraqi Forum for Democracy.

And activists also agree this is a better way: "This government would be the most legitimate entity to decide whether and how to indict Saddam and his circle for crimes against humanity. It would be better to avoid the impression of victor's justice, which a new democratic Iraqi government could do, even if it were transitional." says Lucy Webster, one of the group's supporter and a retired official of the U.N. Department for Disarmament Affairs.

According to the plan of Preemptive Democracy, the birth of the new government will be very public, via a constitutional convention attended by all Iraqi opposition groups, in addition to representatives of the Iraqi Diaspora, and completely open to the world's media. The aim is to create a transitional Iraqi government as credible and representative as possible under the circumstances, and to create the maximal trust from global public opinion. It is hoped that the broad-based and open nature of the process will create overwhelming public support, and help the new government quickly achieve recognition from other countries.

"By opening up the convention to CNN, Al-Jazeera, BBC, TF1, ZDF, NHK and all the world's TV, radios and print media, this will make it nearly impossible for any group to manipulate the outcome, and will create the needed global trust" says Davis.

During personal interviews, several Iraqis commented favorably about the idea:

Rend Rahim, Director, Iraq Foundation: "We are on the same wavelength. We cannot do politics in the old way; we must do it in a new way. We want public impact, public demonstrations of support. I completely agree that this convention should not be behind closed doors, that we need to take the case to the public, and that a broad transparent process is needed to create a democratic transitional government.

Hussain Sinjari, former Kurdish Minister, President, Iraq Institute for Democracy (Northern Iraq): "I support the idea of a transparent constitutional convention. Democracy is the solution for Iraq."

Laith Kubba, democracy activist, National Endowment for Democracy, Washington D.C.: "We are on the same wavelength. The future of Iraq and its stability hinges on political stability and the key is political trust. The people of Iraq must have confidence in the transition of power. We should start a process now; we should not wait for the day after.

Mohamed Sabir, US representative, Kurdistan Regional Government (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan): „We agree to a broad-based transparent constitutional convention

and that Iraq should be unified, federal, democratic, secular, with free elections and a Bill of Rights.”

Rubar Sandi, Chairman, US-Iraq Business Council: “This is a great idea which as a businessman, I like because it is out-of-the-box, innovative, and it maximizes the benefits while minimizing the risks. The job of the Iraq Business Council to help reconstruct Iraq will be much easier if we can get rid of Saddam Hussein without a war, so we should try this alternative first. Having a transitional democratic government right now avoids a power vacuum whenever Saddam falls.”

The proposal has been presented in private meetings to several governments, including the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany, Belgium, Canada, Sweden, Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait, and to top U.N. officials. The general consensus is that this is a good idea but no country has had the courage yet to take a public stand.

Why hasn't this simple and obvious idea not been suggested before, i.e. by the U.N.? As Davis explains: “The U.N. has no mandate for democracy or regime change. Because of its doctrine of equal state sovereignty, dictatorships have as much standing at the U.N. as democracies. That is the unfortunate dirty secret of the U.N. which liberals never dare say, but which makes Bush's U.N. stand so convincing to many people”.

In a private conversation, Danilo Türk, Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs, United Nations admits: „This is worth trying. The UN has no mandate for regime change and cannot initiate this or host it, but if the Iraqis initiate this process, we might get involved at a later date. It is important that the process be as representative as possible. The suggestion that the establishment of a transitional government perceived as legitimate can only be achieved via a broad-based transparent constitutional assembly seems obvious.”

The World Citizen Foundation is in the process of informing other countries via their U.N. missions, including Russia, Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland (which offered to Colin Powell to host peace talks with Iraq) and Greece, as President of the European Union

They also hope that some of the antiwar groups, who have long complained that they have no alternative to Bush's war plans, will understand that here is the practical, logical and principled alternative that they have been looking for.

Charles Sheehan-Mills, Gulf War Veteran (Army, 4-64 Armor Battalion, 24th Infantry), and Founder of Veterans for Common Sense, one of 5 antiwar activists recently featured in Time Magazine, says of Preemptive Democracy: “This is a real good idea; it needs to be heavily explored”.

“If the antiwar groups and the Democrats are really smart, they will jump on this concept, push it and ask that Bush, Powell, Rumsfeld and Rice hold true to their words that all alternatives have to be exhausted before a war” says Davis. “and it fits with the idea that the world should help the Iraqis to help themselves. This

process of empowering Iraqis to free their own country in legitimate ways also means that a major risk, that of Saddam Hussein unleashing weapons of mass destruction as his regime comes under full fire is minimized.”

No official reaction has yet come from the Bush administration, but once it became clear that the whole process is planned to take only a month or two, informal reactions from several officials (from the Pentagon and the White House) were positive.

So far, most of the comments by Iraqi leaders have been positive as well, though Davis warns that some are not yet reconciled with the idea because of the repeated State Department orders to the Iraqis to not even think about it !

And it could potentially solve the major problem of the precedent of a preemptive war, because as Davis says “Peace groups have a dilemma. Most simple-mindedly say “Let the Inspections Work” as if a U.S. war with a U.N. rubber stamp was much better. With our idea, antiwar groups could more coherently demand that no military action should take place before this new government has had the chance to oust Saddam Hussein via other means, and not unless they explicitly asked for it”.

Since the new Iraqi government would have the task of running the country after Saddam leaves, it has a much greater incentive to get rid of him without war, without massive bombardments, without depleted Uranium shells and without launching hundreds of Cruise missiles on their own families and friends.

“If there should be any military intervention at all, it should be the provisional representatives of the Iraqi people who have a vested interest in avoiding wanton destruction of their own country who should decide its extent, and not any foreign power. The contrary would be a mockery of democracy,” stated Davis.

This view was confirmed by Dr. Hussain Al-Sharistani, former Chief Scientist of the Atomic Energy Commission of Iraq: “We must find another way to get rid of Saddam without a US war that might destroy the country and inflict heavy civilian casualties. Saddam’s regime is very weak, to the point that if the Americans simply enforced in the South what they enforce in the North -not allow Saddam to move his tanks and heavy artillery or use his WMD against the population- it would not take more than 2 weeks for him to fall. People in South and central Iraq would rise up and free themselves as they did in March 1991.”

But Davis warns: “If Bush does not support this idea, he can be accused by Democrats and others of not being true to his own word, and of recklessly endangering the American people because of possible retaliatory terrorism, when he should have tried a much less risky option. This is the best option for Bush in terms of domestic politics as well. He can easily sell this idea both to conservatives and at the same time satisfy liberals. If he does not back this idea, he endangers his legacy needlessly, because more things can go wrong now than if the US implements Preemptive Democracy together with other countries of course.”

The only defense Bush has is to blame the CIA and State Department who have systematically tried to tar the Iraqi opposition. But now they are trapped in a problem of their own doing because by systematically emasculating the opposition, and by accusing them of not being credible, this became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Therefore, the CIA has managed to artificially create a situation where they can claim that "There is no credible alternative to Saddam Hussein". The problem with that is that the unintended consequence is that this is the perfect excuse for war, since according to the idealists at State, only a "perfectly" democratic government should be supported.

Davis said: "The CIA and State Department have succeeded in brainwashing the entire world in believing that the Iraqi opposition are a bunch of incompetent corrupt exiles. This lie has been repeated so many times the world media cannot write an article about the opposition without prefacing it by the words "divided" or "fractious". Even peace groups who should know better have bought this lie and therefore have not been able to imagine any alternative to Saddam Hussein. My experience with the Iraqis is that they are no better, nor worse than anyone. As everywhere, there are competent and less competent people. But let's not forget that many countries, including the US, were created by people who were at the time seen as traitors or even terrorists."

Other ideas of the World Citizen Foundation to maximize the independence and credibility of the new government is that representatives of major governments be invited as observers, and that a high-level Independent Advisory Committee for Democracy in Iraq be created, with Americans, Europeans, Arabs and Africans, and hawks and doves, to advise the new government.

"We have already started to invite people, including former Presidents Mandela, Havel, Ahtisaari, and Clinton, former Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, former High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson and former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard and former German Presidents Dr. Richard von Weizsäcker and Dr. Roman Herzog."

The convention could take place in Northern Iraq, for political reasons, but for reasons of safety it should maybe take place elsewhere. This could be for example Turkey, the first Muslim democracy in the region, and would help to reassure the Turks about the unity of Iraq. Or it could take place in Europe, Germany for example, where the first meetings for the Afghan government took place. This would probably be popular with the German public and give Germany a chance to do something practical to avoid war, instead of saying no without presenting an alternative.

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