

America Must Let Iraq Rebuild Itself

By Iyad Alawi

BAGHDAD, Iraq — No Iraqi will ever forget the momentous April day when a crowd of hundreds of cheering Baghdadis, helped by an American armored vehicle, pulled the huge statue of Saddam Hussein to the ground. With this act, we tore down three decades of tyranny and repression and began building in its place a foundation for freedom, democracy and a better future for our children.

To see that this goal is achieved, the Bush administration has challenged me and my colleagues on the Iraqi Governing Council to draft a permanent constitution within six months and to move as quickly as possible to hold internationally monitored, free elections. We gladly accept that challenge, and welcome the vital assistance of the United Nations, through the Security Council resolution passed on Thursday, to see through to completion the enormous task ahead.

Iyad Alawi is serving as president of the Iraqi Governing Council this month.

But we also realize that there are obstacles on Iraq's march toward democracy. In the months since Iraq was liberated, jubilation has given way to insecurity and chaos. When my fellow Iraqis finally go to the polls to elect their government, they must have confidence that state institutions are not only legitimate and independent, but robust enough to guarantee safety and civil rights. That is why the coalition and the council must take several immediate steps to establish these necessary conditions for the constitutional process to succeed.

First, it is vital to call up the Iraqi Army and the national police force, at least up to mid-officer level. The coalition's early decision to abolish the army and police was well intended, but it unfortunately resulted in a security vacuum that let criminals, die-hards of the former regime and international terrorists flourish. And the coalition's plan to build a 20,000-member lightly armed force mostly responsible for security and border control would make poor use of a valuable resource: the 300,000 Iraqi soldiers who simply went home with their weapons in the face of the American-led invasion.

Most of these soldiers are Iraqi patriots who chose not to fight for Saddam Hussein. Americans should not confuse the Iraqi Army with the hated

Republican Guard, which Saddam Hussein created precisely because he distrusted the legitimate military. In one simple process, the coalition authority can support the governing council to call the army back to its barracks for retraining and, ultimately, for redeployment. Most soldiers and

**We need our army
and sovereignty —
right now.**

their officers will proudly return to their units and contribute to their country's future.

The coalition and the Iraqi Interior Ministry can vet officers to remove those who committed crimes under the old regime, and then rapidly redeploy the most capable units to work with, and progressively relieve, American troops of security duties. Iraqi Army units have an established chain of command and esprit de corps. Not only can they be recalled to barracks immediately, but it would be much easier and quicker to retrain and re-equip

them within their existing organizational structure than to start from scratch.

By supporting the recall of army units, the United States would not only speed the process of relieving the burden on its troops, it would also gain substantial good will in Iraq. In contrast, any American-led military presence, even if complemented by the United Nations, will never have the credibility and legitimacy that the Iraqi Army has among the people.

In addition, the Iraqi national police must also be recalled. Most Iraqi policemen — as opposed to Saddam Hussein's feared intelligence and security organs — are dedicated to law and order. The United States does not have the time or money to create a police force from the ground up, nor is it necessary, because we have a large, organized force that is ready and willing to serve.

Many other Iraqi governing institutions should also be reactivated by the governing council, with the support of the coalition authority. Special priority must be given to the Ministries of Interior, Justice, Finance, Oil and Education. The Iraqi bureaucracy must also be called back to work, although of course after screening to disqualify serious offenders of the former regime. Together, the council and the

coalition leaders can modernize the state apparatus, phase out obsolete policies and practices, and encourage a new mindset of transparency and efficiency.

Finally, as security improves, Iraqi institutions are re-established and the constitutional drafting process is completed, the United States should support international recognition of Iraqi sovereignty. Then a recognized interim government could quickly present a popular referendum, under United Nations monitoring, on the new national constitution. It would be a grave mistake for the United States to hold out sovereignty and international recognition as the reward for passage of a constitution. Rather, making Iraqis once again a part of the international system is the prerequisite of successful reconstruction and a durable democratic system.

Iraqis are grateful for the tremendous efforts and sacrifices the United States is making on our behalf. Yet, ultimately, only Iraqis themselves can restore security, rebuild national institutions, enact a constitution and elect a democratic government. America must not rebuff Iraqis who are eager to have a stake in this intimate national process. Like any free people, we want to ensure that we are in control of our own destiny. □