Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

See a sample reprint in PDF format.

Order a reprint of this article now

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

REVIEW & OUTLOOK | FEBRUARY 5, 2009

Iraq's Latest Progress

Political compromise follows security, not vice versa.

One sign that Iraq's local elections went well on the weekend is that there's been so little reporting of the event. Mayhem in the Middle East always gets attention, but a democracy growing in Baghdad is apparently a snooze.

The result is nonetheless worth noting because it showed several encouraging trends in Baghdad while settling some old debates in Washington. While complete results won't be known until the end of the week, the vote itself was peaceful and early returns suggest a victory for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's coalition and other secular parties at the expense of more religious Shiite parties.

This isn't surprising considering that Mr. Maliki is getting -- and deserves -- credit for rescuing Basra, Baghdad's Sadr City and other parts of Iraq from sectarian violence in the last year. Mr. Maliki's coalition ran on a nationalist platform, in contrast to a couple of the religious parties more closely identified with Iran. The theory that a democratic Iraq would inevitably fall under the orbit of the radical mullahs in Qom has taken another blow.

Iraqi Shiites in particular seemed to favor a strong central government in Baghdad, rather than a splintered nation of the kind favored only a couple years ago by sectarian politicians -- not to mention then-Senator Joe Biden. Iraqi Sunnis also participated this time, unlike in 2005, which shows that they too believe they can get their share of power from the still-largely Shiite government in the capital. Ethnic tensions haven't vanished -- especially in Mosul and Kirkuk in the North, where Arabs and Kurds mix uneasily -- but we are a long way from the fragmenting Iraq of famous prediction.

The peacefulness of the election is also noteworthy. When provincial elections were last held in 2005, terrorists attacked more than 100 polling stations, and U.S. and Iraqi military leaders were girding this time for a macabre reprise. But al Qaeda and other terrorists were a no-show, and we'll wager that isn't because they made a strategic decision to be nice. Rather, it's evidence both of al Qaeda's weakness in Iraq, along with the growing effectiveness of Iraq's security forces.

The election is further evidence that President Bush and proponents of the 2007 surge were right on another point as well: to wit, that security would precede political reconciliation. Recall that Senator Jack Reed, Mr. Biden and for that matter Barack Obama insisted in 2007 that a political agreement was needed before the killing would stop. But such an accord was impossible until Iraqis began to feel safe enough to be able to make compromises. The surge brigades (Iraqi and American), the new U.S. counterinsurgency strategy and above all the demonstration of sustained U.S. commitment improved security so much that democratic deal-making became possible.

All this amounts to a huge strategic gift to the Obama Administration. Iraq now stands as a democratic and pluralistic model for other Arab states, and as proof that Iranian-style theocracy isn't in the Shiite political DNA. If the "smart power" that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton likes to talk about has any meaning, it's to capitalize on developments like these.

1 of 2 2/5/09 11:10 AM That's why we're puzzled by media reports that Mr. Obama intends to name Christopher Hill to replace Ryan Crocker as America's ambassador in Baghdad. Part of the puzzle is that retired Marine General Anthony Zinni -- a straight-shooter if ever there was one, with long experience in Mideast diplomacy -- claims he was tapped for the job, until the White House withdrew the offer without notice or explanation.

But the greater puzzle is why Mr. Hill -- who has spent the better part of the last few years making unreciprocated concessions to North Korea and whose previous stints included postings in Macedonia, Poland and South Korea -- is qualified to be the ambassador. Unlike Mr. Crocker, Mr. Hill has no real diplomatic experience in the Middle East and is not an Arabic speaker, no small point since Prime Minister Maliki is not an English speaker.

Especially with U.S. troop levels going down, Iraqis need the assurance of someone both more knowledgeable and sympathetic. Plenty of Iraqis -- especially Sunnis -- remain suspicious that the U.S. will bargain with Tehran by conceding Iranian interests in Iraq. As ambassador, Mr. Crocker held talks with the Iranians but emerged with a sober view of Tehran's malignant role in Iraqi politics. The elections were another notable sign of Iraq's democratic progress, and the U.S. needs an emissary who won't lose the Iraqi trust so painstakingly won by so many.

Please add your comments to the Opinion Journal forum.

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit

www.djreprints.com

2 of 2 2/5/09 11:10 AM