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## Iraq's Good Example

By Jim Hoagland  
Sunday, February 8, 2009; B07

A new Iraq is emerging from five years of American invasion and occupation, and at first glance it looks distressingly like the old Iraq: Its people are still bound by the barbed wire of suspicion and hatred as much as by any sense of common purpose and history.

But the new Iraq is clearly a nation in ways that the old Iraq -- long considered by experts as an artificial creation that would fly apart under the pressure of outside intervention -- was not. It did not fly apart and has in fact undergone significant, positive mutations as a result of a soon-to-subside U.S. presence.

The provincial elections held a week ago were far from perfect, and personal relationships among the country's Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds still range from malignant to murderous. In Anbar province, disgruntled Sunni sheiks didn't ask for recounts or fire their political consultants. They unleashed threats of new mayhem unless they were immediately declared the winners. Old habits die hard in Iraq, too.

But by the standards of the past -- and of the rough neighborhood in which Iraqis still live -- the two general elections that Iraq has held in four years stand as paragons of progress and adaptation that others in the region should aim to emulate. That development should not be ignored or minimized, particularly as the United States and Europe wrestle with analogous problems that confront a newly besieged Afghanistan. Even more important than shifting troops from Iraq to Afghanistan may be shifting counterinsurgency lessons learned.

Another signpost suggests that Iraq is closer today to being a source of regional stability than it ever was in its pre-American era, when Saddam Hussein repeatedly threatened (and at times tried) to annihilate Iraq's Arab and Iranian neighbors as well as Israel. That signpost is the growing acceptance by the region's Sunni Arab regimes of the central Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose Shiite-based State of Law coalition scored the biggest victories in the election results released Thursday.

Just a few years ago, Jordan's leaders were ominously warning that they would not accept Iraq's becoming part of a "Shiite crescent" of subversion. Today, Amman leads the way in establishing improved diplomatic relations, economic cooperation and security ties with Baghdad. Abu Dhabi and other Gulf states, as well as Egypt, have also upgraded their relations with Iraq, as Maliki and his aides have established some distance from both the United States and Iran.

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"President Bush made many mistakes in occupying Iraq," one Arab official told me recently. "But he did the right thing in staying with the surge and giving the Iraqi government time to show it could sustain itself. The results of the past 18 months have persuaded many of us that Iraq's civilian government is here to stay, and it is time to cooperate" with Baghdad, rather than push for a return to domination of Iraq by the Sunni Arab minority.

Saudi Arabia is the most notable holdout from this trend, in part, it seems, because of poor personal relations between Maliki and the royal family. But the Saudis should not feel comfortable in remaining isolated on this issue in the face of Maliki's solid electoral victories last week over his more religiously minded rivals in Iraq's southern provinces.

A continuing argument here over whether the surge worked misses the significance of the broader, still-unfolding historical changes brought by the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein. The internalizing of Iraq's strife -- as horrible as that strife can be on any given day for Iraqis -- makes the region less of a global tinderbox than it was. That the country's Kurds no longer live under the threat of genocide directed from Baghdad and that the Shiites no longer have to submit to state-organized mass murder on a routine basis constitutes real progress for them and for humanity.

For too long, Bush resisted letting the Iraqis find their own way -- however messy or even brutal -- to reconcile their differences. President Obama should reflect on that as he develops a new approach to the conflict in Afghanistan, another "new" country that looks very familiar as corruption, drug dealing and Taliban control mount.

Reflect on this part of the Iraqi example as well, Mr. President: American power was able to shock Iraqis. But it did not awe them. They are returning quickly to old habits, to their own moral and social compasses. But they do not return unchanged by the experience. Nor do their neighbors.

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