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## The Puzzle of Iraq: Do We Have All the Right Pieces?

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Friday, April 11, 2003  
By Hillary Kramer

### FOX NEWS

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**ADVERTISEMENT** "If Americans came to invade Iraq and occupy Iraq, they would be more enemy than Saddam Hussein." – Representative of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)

What is the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq? Judging by the rhetoric, it would make a nice bedfellow with Al Qaeda. Yet things are more complicated than that. SCIRI is regarded as a potential ally by Washington, and was approached by our administration in the planning stages of the operation Iraqi Freedom. Why? The answer is simple: SCIRI is perhaps the most vehemently opposed group to Saddam Hussein. It represents Shiite Muslims – which make up 60% of the population of Iraq – and boasts up to 15,000 fighters ready to die for its cause.

A more important issue is this: why does such anti-American rhetoric come from our "potential ally" and what does it mean for our campaign in Iraq? Will our troops, who are fighting courageously against the tyranny of Saddam, be "rewarded" with sneers from a hostile population and potentially attacks by Islamist guerillas in the aftermath of the war? Should we move out from Iraq promptly after the ousting of Hussein? Was our military intervention misconceived from the beginning?

Absolutely not. The threatening statement of the SCIRI should not be interpreted as their outright refusal to work together with the United States. Rather, Iraqis of many ethnicities dread the thought of an arrogant occupying authority or – possibly – a puppet government, composed of pro-Western émigrés that would govern the country without regard for the Iraqi people.

The fears of ordinary Iraqis can be easily understood. For the last 30 years these people have lived under an extremely brutal regime, which in many ways mirrors the despotism of Joseph Stalin. If Iraqis associate their own government with oppression, exploitation and genocide – why should they think any better about an external authority?

Of course, we are promising freedom and well-being to the Iraqi people. But they have heard such promises before: following the first Gulf War in 1991, Washington encouraged an uprising against Saddam Hussein. Initially Iraqis responded enthusiastically and rebelled hoping for American military assistance. The lack of political will in Washington, however, quickly turned Iraqi visions of freedom into a bloodbath at the hands of Hussein's loyalist forces. Given such experiences it is not surprising that ordinary Iraqis feel ambivalent about the American campaign.

The leaders of the main Iraqi ethnic groups also have good reasons to think twice before throwing in their lot with America. Why? Here is a simple explanation. On the one hand opposition leaders know that operation Iraqi Freedom will oust Saddam Hussein. This means real opportunities for them to claim control of the country. On the other hand, the United States could decide to install a puppet government and keep it in power by continued military presence. In the latter case the leaders of the local opposition would be relegated to inconsequential advisory positions.



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Given such circumstances, the angry rhetoric of some Iraqi opposition groups is basically an attempt to make sure that Washington includes them in the post-war government of Iraq. Unfortunately, in the past several months Washington has sent mixed signals to the Iraqi opposition, which has increased its concern and its angry rhetoric.

One such signal was support of Ahmed Chalabi – the leader of the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Until a few months ago it was widely rumored that the Pentagon insisted on seeing Mr. Chalabi at the helm of the post-Saddam government. Indeed, the Israel-friendly leader of INC would be a convenient president, except that the INC has very limited support inside Iraq and Mr. Chalabi has been a persona non grata in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1995.

Today, after a good deal of bickering between the Pentagon and the Department of State (which is far less fond of Mr. Chalabi) it seems that the United States will not throw its lot with the wrong man. Yet the question remains: whom should Washington tap for the post-war administration? Iraq is an ethnically diverse country, but three sub-national groups stand out as essential to the success of any post-war reconstruction. They are the Kurds, the Sunnis and the Shiites. Let's take a closer look at their interests in the ongoing conflict.

The non-Arabic Kurds are represented by two political organizations – The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Historically the two factions have not shared much brotherly love. The British periodical Observer reports that "during the 10 years of the no-fly zone the two groups have actively cooperated with each other only in 1992 and 1994." Nevertheless in the face of Saddam's demise the two Kurdish groups have stopped squabbling and have made peace. Together the Kurds represent about 20 percent of the Iraqi population and can muster up to 100,000 guerilla fighters, known locally by the name of Peshmerga. Clearly the Kurds will be the force to reckon with in the post-war Iraq.

Next are the Sunni Arabs. They inhabit central Iraq, and also represent 20 percent of the country's population. Although Sunnis do not boast a large militarized organization, they will be an important player in the post-war Iraq due to their association with the current regime. According to Professor John C. Hulsman of the Heritage Foundation "Iraq's Sunni Arab minority long has dominated the state and controlled its disbursement of oil revenues, even though the predominantly Sunni central region accounts for little of Iraq's oil revenues." Given the favorable situation of some Sunni elites under the Hussein regime it is reasonable to expect a degree of reluctance on their part towards the new Iraq. Due to their sheer numbers, as well as geographic location, however, it is impossible to ignore the Sunnis in the reconstruction effort.

The largest of all groups in Iraq are the Shiite Arabs. Concentrated in the south of the country they comprise around 60 percent of the total population. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) – an organization of exiled Iraqi Shiites – claims to speak for this vast group of Iraqis. It is estimated to have 7,000 to 15,000 armed guerillas and has vowed to use its military power in the case of long-term American involvement in Iraq.

Yet, despite of its few hostile statements, SCIRI is no Hezbollah. In October of 2002, The Washington Times quoted Ayatollah Sayed Mohammad Baqir al Hakim – the leader of SCIRI and a celebrated Islamic scholar – as saying: "we want a democratic republic that takes all the people into account. The rule of law should be obeyed. [Iraq] should be an independent country. And Iraqi people must be given the real role in running the government." Upon reading these words one might think that they came from the White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, and not a conservative Shiite cleric. The United States would be wise to make every effort to get SCIRI on board for the post-war reconstruction.

How should our government approach the leaders of Iraq's three ethnic groups? What could entice them to cooperate in the democratic transition of Iraq? The answer is surprisingly simple – America should grant all Iraqis the right to real self-government and a promise of a fair distribution of money from oil and tax revenue. Indeed Ayatollah Hakim's plea for democracy and self-government is not a bluff. Taking charge of their own affairs would assuage the fears of the largest Iraqi factions and satisfy the ambitions of their leaders.

Submitting the north of the country – including the city of Kirkuk – to the self-rule of the Kurdish minority, for example, would take the wind out of the sails of separatists who want to establish an independent Kurdish state. Moreover, it would allow continued growth of the civil society and prosperity that has sprouted in the region over the past decade. An effective self-rule would also benefit the Sunnis and the Shiites. The Sunnis, for example, might see local autonomy as an insurance against vengeful retribution from other Iraqi groups. The religious leadership of the Shiites, in the meantime, would enjoy real cultural autonomy in southern Iraq.

The local self-government of the Kurds, and the two Arab sects should be integrated at the national level by creating a two-house parliament, with the upper house representing the interests of the three largest sub-national groups in Iraq. The

bi-cameral model, which was proposed by Professor John C. Hulsman of the Heritage Foundation, would serve as a powerful check on the central government in Baghdad, and guarantee a high degree of autonomy and freedom for their respective regions.

In addition to the equitable distribution of political power, the United States should guarantee a fair division of the economic wealth from Iraq's oil and tax revenues among the largest groups of the population. In this way the leaders of different Iraqi factions would gain a stake in the new system – the money from Baghdad would help regional leaders to legitimize their rule at home, at the same time strengthening their dependence and allegiance to the new federal state.

With assurances of political self-rule and equal distribution of oil revenues, Iraq's leaders will be more likely to embrace a federal political system with the enthusiasm necessary for its success. By demonstrating such intentions our government would curb ambivalence within the major Iraqi groups and secure greater cooperation following the war. It is only with the cooperation of the major Iraqi groups that United States will be able to leave Iraq knowing that it poses no threat to its neighbors, wields no weapons of mass destruction, and enjoys a representative and pluralist government open to political and economic cooperation.

**Hilary Kramer** serves as a business news contributor at FOX News Channel. She joined the network as a regular guest on **Cashin' In** in May 2001.

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