

## Don't Write Off the United Nations

### Why the United States still needs international help with Iraq.

BY TOBY T. GATI

**A** Turkish diplomat supposedly said at the 1945 San Francisco conference creating the United Nations that it is an organization in which something is always disappearing. If two small countries have a conflict, he noted, the conflict will disappear. If a small and large country have a conflict, the small country will disappear. And if two large countries have a conflict, the United Nations will disappear.

Certainly there are some in the current administration who hope that this apocryphal diplomat was right, at least about the latter point. Having brought about regime change in Iraq without the blessing of an 18th Security Council resolution, they have no use for the United Nations, either as a political institution or a reflection of international opinion.

At their most recent meeting, however, U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that the United Nations should play a “vital role” in Iraq. This formulation appears to be deliberately vague about how large the role will be and whether it will extend much beyond humanitarian assistance to participation in political decisions about Iraq’s future. Having papered over the differences between the United States and the United Kingdom, the French and Russians may yet take a sharply different position once the Security Council begins to consider who will be in charge of reconstructing Iraq.

Before writing off the United Nations’ future, though, it is important to look to its past. Its historical record, both during and after the Cold War, shows that when the permanent members of the Security Council cannot agree on common action,

the result is always the same: the United Nations gets bypassed or ignored. Debating the relevance of the United Nations is nothing new.

#### NOT IRRELEVANT YET

To be sure, it is conceivable that in some crisis of the future, the United Nations will indeed “disappear,” either by losing its political importance or, perhaps, literally. But that is unlikely to occur as the post-Saddam era unfolds. There are several reasons for this.

1. For 13 years—since the first Bush administration got a U.N. resolution authorizing member states to “use all necessary means” to re-establish peace and security in the region—the basis for action against Iraq has been U.N. resolutions. These set out obligations binding on all members of the international community, and these obligations do not automatically lapse just because U.S. troops are in Baghdad. These obligations include enforcing the sanctions regime, disarming Saddam, and monitoring the destruction of the weapons of mass destruction, establishing humanitarian obligations to protect Iraqi citizens, and allocating oil revenues under the Oil for Food program. Before a transitional authority or the new Iraqi regime can resume its place in the international system, the Security Council will have to reaffirm the U.N. secretary general’s primary responsibility for administering the Oil for Food Program, and then decide under what conditions it will extend the program beyond its June 3 expiration period.

2. After victory on the battlefield, the most complex reconstruction program since the Marshall Plan will begin to unfold in Iraq. Iraqi oil revenues will not be sufficient to rebuild the country, and U.S. taxpayers are unlikely to volunteer to fund universal health care for the Iraqis at a time of massive deficits and budget cuts at home. But at the same time, many of the same countries that opposed the military intervention in Iraq have said they will be more inclined to contribute to reconstruction if the United Nations is given a (or the) central role in shaping the

**Points of  
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institutions of post-Saddam Iraq. Chris Patten, the European Union commissioner for external relations, said last month, "It will be that much more difficult for the E.U. to cooperate fully and on a large scale in the longer term reconstruction process, if events unfold without proper U.N. cover and if the Member states remain divided."

3. Even as the U.S. military continues to provide security functions and a postwar authority, the arduous task of disarming Iraq will continue. This will involve both verifying the locations of weapons of mass destruction and also monitoring and dismantling the sites. U.N. inspectors—who cannot and will not want to be seen as working for the U.S. government—have the skills to undertake these responsibilities. And they should be invited back in part because they can provide legitimacy to U.S. discoveries that might otherwise be greeted skeptically by the public, especially in the Arab world.

4. There are functions the U.S. military and government will not want to assume over the long term in order to avoid being seen as an occupier rather than a liberator. These include the management of humanitarian relief programs, the care of refugees and reconstruction, as well as civilian administration and policing. The U.S. government has announced that the prosecution of war criminals will be an internal Iraqi function, but it is not inconceivable that the Iraqis will want to draw on the international experience of other tribunals.

5. The United Nations continues to be actively involved in dealing with other crises around the world. At the behest of the United States, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported to the Security Council on North Korea's lack of cooperation with the agency and its noncompliance with the Nonproliferation Treaty. The resolutions that form the basis of the Middle East peace progress are U.N. Resolutions (242 and 337). Indeed, our European allies have indicated they may want to return to the U.N. Security Council to press hard for implementation of the "road map" for restarting Middle East peace negotiations. And the U.N. role in Afghanistan continues to be substantial, with the possibility that additional international security forces will be needed.

6. The United Nations' Counter-Terrorism Committee continues to collect reports from each member state on the efforts they have undertaken to prevent terrorist activities, cut off terrorist funding, and destroy terrorist networks. At the present time, the committee is working on new international agreements to control access to nuclear, chemical, and biological materials—a major priority of the U.S. government, as well.

When all is said and done, the U.S. government has the power to decide that it will not bring serious political issues to the United Nations unless (or even if) it can be assured that the outcome is acceptable to the United States. And a military victory in Iraq gives it the power on the ground to decide the postwar structure of Iraq without reference to the wishes of those who did not join the fight.

#### VOICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

But the almost universal unease over U.S. unilateralism is likely to find expression both within and outside various international forums, including NATO and the United Nations. There are many venues for doing so at the United Nations—through General Assembly debates, perhaps over time through a General

Assembly resolution calling for quick removal of troops from Iraq, or at meetings of the various specialized agencies.

In late March, a resolution to convene an emergency meeting of the Human Rights Commission to discuss the situation in Iraq failed to win a majority of votes, but was supported by some of America's coalition partners and closest allies in the war on terrorism. The IAEA is likely to reassert its right to inspect Iraqi nuclear facilities under Resolution 1441. So, too, the return of Hans Blix's U.N. inspectors—to search for weapons of mass destruction and hidden missiles—may again be put on the table. Each of the United Nations' specialized agencies will be looking for some signal from the Security Council or the U.N. secretary general before it decides how much it will cooperate with the U.S. military, or with a transition authority. Mark Malloch Brown, administrator of the U.N. Development Program, acknowledged earlier this month the need to work with the U.S. military. But he cautioned that the United Nations could not be "subordinated" to "military occupiers" or be "a subcontractor" to U.S. companies.

The common theme of all these cautionary messages: It will be much harder for the United Nations to be engaged in "peace work" on reconstruction if it is not engaged in "peace work" to build the postwar Iraqi nation.

During the Cold War, the veto was used to prevent U.N. intervention on any issue of national security importance to the Soviet Union or the United States. In the Iraq crisis, the Security Council wanted to put a brake on U.S. military action. In both cases, United Nations gridlock resulted.

Instead of applauding the demise of the Security Council, the United States should be seeking to overcome the gridlock, not exacerbate it. It should do so because the financial requirements of Iraqi reconstruction are huge and because, for other countries, a multilateral umbrella will make any contribution to financial participation and reconstruction more acceptable to their publics. No one is asking the United States to "hand over" Iraq to the United Nations, least of all those who know the United Nations' shortcomings. But surely it is important that the reconstruction effort not widen the rift between the United States and its allies.

It is unlikely that the United States will want to handle every international crisis like it is handling Iraq. Certainly, in some future situation, the U.S. military would welcome allies who can share the dangers of the battlefields. And the American public certainly would welcome partners who can share the burdens of reconstruction. In many ways, then, the debates in the United Nations reflect in no small measure the domestic debates about U.S. foreign policy and the role of the United Nations.

We should be careful about creating precedents now that we can live with in the future. ■

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