

Iraqi holdovers could derail Bush's policy plan

Feud among Iraqi council members could stymie President Bush's plan to institute an Arab democracy

By Tom Lasseter
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

BAGHDAD — A fight brewing within the U.S.-appointed Iraqi government could sabotage the Bush administration's dream of building a secular Arab democracy in the heart of the Middle East.

As the July 1 date to dissolve the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council draws nearer, some council members are pushing to remain in office even after a new national assembly is created to replace the council.

Under the proposal, which has been discussed only in private meetings, the group might advise the new government or, some argue, cast deciding votes on legislation passed by the assembly.

"The danger is that the general assembly would make a decision and the governing council would disagree," said Baghdad University political science professor Hamid Shihad. "There would be political chaos."

It's not clear how many council members are behind the push, but a series of interviews points to a coalition of Sunni Muslims, who dominated Iraq under Saddam but are a

minority in the country and on the council. They're apparently being joined by Iraqis such as former exile leader Ahmed Chalabi, a Shi'ite Muslim who doesn't have much support from average Iraqis but remains the darling of some officials in Vice President Cheney's office and civilians in the Pentagon.

Opponents of the idea say it's a ploy by council members who fear they don't stand a chance in local elections for the assembly. Some also fear the Bush administration might quietly support the notion as a means of maintaining U.S. influence in Iraq.

"They want (the council) to have some special status and some power," said Adnan Pachachi, the governing council's current president, a rotating position. "I think it's probably a reluctance on the part of some who have power to let go."

A battle over an attempt by the council to continue past July could tear apart a nation already wracked by violence, said Hajim al Hassani, a spokesman for council member Mohsen Abdul Hameed. A series of bombings in the last few weeks has killed dozens and wounded hundreds in apparent turf battles among sectarian and political groups.

An unelected senate of people appointed by the American occupation administration could only exacerbate the situation, al Hassani said.

"There would be no democracy in Iraq — that's the danger when you

put yourself into power instead of the people putting you in," al Hassani said.

While no one has taken responsibility for the violence, the motivation is obvious, said council member Abdul Karim al Muhammadawi. Those who want control, he said, are going to play on sectarian divisions to lead Iraq to civil war.

The situation, some say, points to what average Iraqis have known all along: In creating the governing council, the Americans foisted a group of politicians on a population that, at the very least, dislikes them. Many of the council members were exiles during Saddam Hussein's reign, and many Iraqis think they left when times were hard and have returned to grab a piece of the nation's wealth.

In a country where many lack electricity or running water, council members are carted around in Lexus sport utility vehicles and Mercedes coupes with dark windows. They rarely make public appearances and are surrounded by armed guards, even behind the walls of the compounds where many of them live.

Ali Nasser, a salesman at a downtown Baghdad electronics shop, said the council is pointless. "They cannot control the situation in Iraq," Nasser said. "Saddam is gone, and now we have 25 Saddams."

The top American civilian in Iraq,

L. Paul Bremer, announced in November that both his Coalition Provisional Authority and the council, which he hand-picked, will cease to exist on July 1. In their place, he said, will be a national assembly of some 270 Iraqis chosen through a caucus-like process in the country's 18 provinces. That body will begin setting up a new Iraqi government that's to remain in place until open elections are possible.

After Bremer made the plan public, many observers took it as a sign that he'd caved to pressure from a Bush administration that was eager to begin withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq before November's elections and a religious edict issued earlier in the year by Shi'ite Muslim Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. That edict, or fatwa, proclaimed that the framers of the Iraqi constitution should be elected officials.

Bremer's original plan had been to get a new Iraqi constitution written before ending the U.S.-led occupation, but when he revealed his intentions to a November meeting of the governing council, several members came close to walking out, according to one of the members who was there. Shortly thereafter, some council members began talking about staying past July 1 in small, and then larger, meetings.

Asked about the implications of the council staying on, Sheikh Jamal Nasir al Ta'ae, whose tribal group numbers around 100,000 in central

Iraq, responded: "If they stay, we will use politics to ask them to leave. Or, we will get our guns and fight them."

Those who favor the idea say they're just trying to ensure a peaceful transition to the new assembly.

"There is a practical reality that there will be some time before the national assembly can (put together) a government," said Entifadh Qanbar, spokesman for governing council member Chalabi. "A continuity must be there between the governing council and this new period."

Others go further.

"We should not hand all of what we've done to people we don't know, to people who have goals we don't know," said council member Naseer Chaderji.

An American spokesman said that as far as the coalition is concerned, the council will be dissolved on Nov. 15.

Qanbar's face darkened slightly when he heard that.

"The Americans are not part of this discussion; it is a conversation amongst governing council members," he said, sitting at a table in a Baghdad country club, his pinstripe suit neatly pressed and his hair slicked back. Two young men holding AK-47 rifles flanked him.

The future, Qanbar said, belongs to Iraqis and to those willing to lead them.

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Bush to aim NASA agenda at flights to moon, Mars

The President's program will emphasize exploration by cutting funding in other areas of NASA's budget

By Gwyneth K. Shaw
The Orlando Sentinel (KRT)

WASHINGTON — President Bush will announce his much-anticipated new vision for the American space program Wednesday afternoon, outlining a revamping of NASA aimed at sending people back to the moon and, eventually, on to Mars.

While many of the long-term details will be filled in later, the proposal's main purpose is to refocus the agency on the exploration of space with humans and robots.

Sources say the plan includes retiring the aging space shuttle fleet by 2010 — if not sooner — and effectively ending American participation in the International Space Station Project by 2013. The first manned

lunar missions could happen as soon as the middle of that decade, with Mars being the ultimate goal many years later.

It is the clearest agenda for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration since President John F. Kennedy's 1961 speech promising to put a man on the moon by the end of that decade. It is also expected to be a tonic for the agency, battered by the Feb. 1, 2003 loss of the space shuttle Columbia and its seven-member crew.

The president will also call for relatively modest budget increases for NASA, although firm details are unlikely to be revealed before Bush's 2005 budget proposal is released Feb. 2. The majority of the money for the new initiatives, however, will come from within NASA's existing budget, which is supposed to be roughly \$15.5 billion for 2004.

Mothballing the shuttle fleet will free up roughly \$4 billion each year, and scaling back NASA's role in the station project will release at least an

additional \$1.5 billion annually.

But there will have to be cuts in other programs, and some difficult choices, said Howard McCurdy, a professor at American University and the author of several books on the space program.

"I think now we're going to find out how much people in NASA and the space community really want to go to Mars," McCurdy said. "Do they really want to go to Mars to the extent they transform the space program, and stop doing a lot of things that are very nice to do?"

During a news conference Tuesday at the Summit of the Americas meeting in Monterrey, Mexico, Bush was asked whether the U.S. can afford a major shift in the space program.

"Yes, I'll be saying that tomorrow," Bush answered. "I really don't want to give you the details because I want you to pay attention to what I have to say. But I will tell you that the spirit is going to be one of continued

exploration . . ."

In fact, the president has already been criticized by lawmakers and budget hawks for proposing such an ambitious program at a time when the nation is facing the fiscal repercussions of the Iraq invasion, a growing deficit and the prospect of funding a new prescription drug benefit for Medicare recipients.

But one key lawmaker — U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat and a staunch supporter of the space program — repeated Tuesday his mantra that space exploration can't be done on the cheap.

"It's unrealistic to think we're going to be back on the moon with 5 percent-a-year increases," said Nelson, who flew on board the shuttle Columbia in 1986 while serving as a U.S. representative. "But that's where leadership is called for."

McCurdy said that with the money from the shuttle and station programs, going back to the moon is achievable from a financial perspective. But it will take more than

money to make the program work, he said.

"It calls for a massive concentration of both technical and organizational skill," he said. "Both were necessary to get to the moon the first time, and both will be necessary, in different ways, to get there again."

For Nelson, who has consistently called on the White House to weigh in with its ideas before Congress tackles NASA's future, the president's will to make his vision a reality is the key ingredient.

"There was a major initiative proposed in 1961, and it was successful because it had the full and consistent support of the president," Nelson said. "The next major, bold initiative was by (President) Bush the first, and it fizzled because it did not have the full support and consistent support of the president."

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