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Director of Central Intelligence

DCI Red Cell

A Red Cell Report

Number 90

29 October 2002

Central Asia's Autocrats: Model for Iraq's Transition? []

In response to the events of 11 September, the Director of Central Intelligence commissioned CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence to create a "red cell" that would think unconventionally about the full range of relevant analytic issues. The DCI Red Cell is thus charged with taking a pronounced "out-of-the-box" approach and will periodically produce memoranda and reports intended to provoke thought rather than to provide authoritative assessment. Please direct questions or comments to the DCI Red Cell []

A post-Saddam regime confronting Iraq's legacy of authoritarianism, deep social and ethnic divisions, and a shattered economy will need to win legitimacy by rebuilding the economy and improving living conditions. Central Asian leaders have already faced many such issues in the post-Soviet era. Their experience suggests a strong Central Asian style leader who can maintain stability while sustaining US influence may provide the most realistic model for transition from dictatorship to a stable and democratic order. []

Given the broad interest in post-Saddam scenarios of governance in Iraq, we offer a speculative assessment on how Central Asia might provide a model for thinking about an Iraq that is stable and receptive to US influence. []

Through A Central Asian Prism []

We see similarities between Iraq and the post-Soviet Muslim states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, which to us suggest that the last decade of Central Asian state building may hold lessons for Iraq after Saddam

- **Suddenness of change.** As with breakup of the USSR, political change in Iraq is likely to come abruptly, with little or no internal preparation for a new order. And impending changes in Iraq, like in Central Asia, will be provoked by external factors.
- **Weak national cohesion.** Iraq and the Soviet Muslim states were created by 20th century colonial occupiers and lack any deep sense of nationhood or historical traditions as a state. Borders are artificial and cut across ethnic and tribal lines. Identity is defined more by allegiance to ethnic groups, clans, and tribes than to the state. Rival groups—in Iraq, the Kurds, Shia, and Sunni—have long histories of conflict and mistrust.
- **Authoritarian legacy.** Iraq and the Central Asian successor states have long traditions of autocratic leadership and few elements of "civil society" on which to build democracy. Only strong leaders have overcome deep divisions within these regions and prevented civil war. As with the Communist system, stifling Bath Party ideology leaves no room for alternatives, and opposition is ruthlessly suppressed.
- **Military debilitation.** Like the post-Soviet Muslim states, Iraq in defeat will have a weakened military that will be an insufficient prop for an authoritarian leader. Like the Central Asians, a new Iraqi leader will need to rely on other sources of power.
- **Secular Muslims.** The populations of both Iraq and Central Asia are not deeply religious. Neither have shown much receptivity to Islamic extremism. Muslim culture is more important than the Islamic religion.
- **Picking winners.** Like several of the post-Soviet states—Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan—Iraq will be able to draw on energy wealth to reconstruct a

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political and economic order. The new regime in Baghdad similar have to make tough political choices over distribution of state-owned resources.

- **Elite continuity.** The old Communist elites largely stayed on in positions of power following the collapse of the USSR. Disruptions to the government and bureaucracies were minimal. Were the current Iraqi ruling group to depose Saddam in a coup, the US might face an entrenched elite expecting, in reward, to be masters of the new order. [REDACTED]

We also see two significant differences between a post-Saddam Iraq and the Central Asian states. These differences might give the US greater scope to drawn on Central Asia's experience in promoting a more effective transition to participatory forms of government in Iraq.

- **Favorable geopolitical orientation.** Iraq is much more a part of the Arab world than are the Central Asian states, which looked to the US to offset Russian domination. No comparable peer will rival the US in Iraq's neighborhood, although Iraq's need for legitimacy among Arab states will require Baghdad to manage its affairs with little ostensible US string-pulling once Saddam is gone.
- **Stabilizing foreign presence.** The likely presence of US forces in Iraq will be seen as both a critical factor giving a new regime stability and in tilting the political playing field. While Russian forces remained in Central Asia—and still do in some cases—they have not played a significant role in domestic politics. [REDACTED]

The Virtues of "Central Asian Autocracy" [REDACTED]

To us, the striking similarities between Iraq and Central Asia suggest the post-Soviet Muslim states as possible models for Iraq. Without a strong leader, Iraq—riven by deep regional divisions and a history of bitter hatreds—might prove ungovernable and disposed to chaos, with major risks for US occupation forces and impairment to any plans for movement toward more temperate democratic forms. [REDACTED]

Given such risks, a Central Asian style post-Saddam regime might hold key advantages for the US:

- **Stability.** Only a strong leader is likely to be able to manage the sharp differences among key Iraqi ethnic groups—for example, preventing the Kurds from seceding. Such disputes could degenerate into civil war and force the US military to put forces between competing groups.
- **Predictability.** A strong leader bodes to be a more reliable interlocutor in Baghdad, one who can make decisions and get them implemented—and do so without seeming too obviously a US appendage.
- **Western orientation.** A Central Asian style regime is likely to be friendly toward the US. While it would still tend to side with the Arab world on issues like Israel, it might share Western—and Central Asian—concerns about the spread of radical Islam and cooperate willingly with the US to dismantle WMD—as in Kazakhstan—and prevent Iraq from being used as a safe haven for al-Qa'ida. [REDACTED]

Absent a strong military, a post-Saddam regime would need to rely on other means to gain legitimacy and hold onto power. Here too, there are lessons from the Central Asians.

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- **Oil for legitimacy.** As in the Caspian energy states, post-Saddam Iraq will to rely on oil revenue to build support. By controlling the distribution of revenue, the regime can visibly improve living conditions to win legitimacy and use oil wealth as a lever in dealing with elites critical for stability and future political development.
- **Lifting the pall.** A new regime will also gain legitimacy by ending the repressive methods used by Saddam—an easy piece in comparison, even for an authoritarian regime—thus giving most of the population a greater sense of personal security.
- **Patronage networks.** As in the post-Soviet states, an Iraqi strongman could build patronage networks dependent on him, using his power of appointment and removal to key positions as well as control over oil money. This might strengthen the ability of a US-backed leader to implement sensible policies without having a big visible US stick waving in his face.
- **Media.** An autocratic government might marshal its media to promote a post-Saddam domestic agenda but also to counter anti-US media in other parts of the Arab world.
[REDACTED]

Learning From Central Asian Mistakes [REDACTED]

The experience of Central Asian successor states also points to areas where a post-Saddam Iraq and the US might hasten democratic transition by avoiding mistakes.

- **Property.** Corruption in the distribution of Soviet property got out of control, with new leaders scrambling to enrich themselves. In Iraq, such risks might be reduced by having a neutral board (supervised by the US) oversee the process.
- **Oil wealth.** Instead of enriching a small circle, Iraq's oil wealth might be used to give a wide range of stakeholders a share in the new regime. A well thought out plan for the use of oil revenue would help Iraq avoid Central Asian problems, where other economic sectors suffered as a result of a skewed dependence on oil wealth. A post-Saddam petroleum board under US oversight might help achieve this goal.
- **Ethnic relations.** One of the biggest challenges for the regime will be promoting good relations among the Sunni, Kurds, and Shia. Kazakhstan, which has effectively managed the competing interests of Kazakhs and Russians by giving them both a stake in the post-Soviet polity, could be a positive example.
- **Building democracy.** While strong leadership has helped build stability in Central Asia, the suppression of alternative ideas has led to support for extreme views, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Democracy would have a better chance of emerging if Central Asian excesses—like the suppression of opposition, the extension of leaders terms beyond the constitutional limits—are avoided. [REDACTED]

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