

Engaging Europe

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WASHINGTON - How are European governments willing to help in Iraq? Does it make any difference which party wins the U.S. election?

The questions are live ones during the election campaign. But judging from recent discussions in Europe by an Atlantic Council group, the answers candidates give, or hope for, are not always well-founded.

Europeans recognize that success in Iraq is critical for both Europeans and Americans. But they will not merely underwrite U.S. preferences going forward. The French and Germans, in particular, see little benefit for themselves or the situation in Iraq from subordinating their policies to U.S. policies that are widely regarded as the source of many of Iraq's current problems.

Many Europeans question whether a democratically elected government in Iraq is sustainable. They accept that the transitional government must be supported. But they are not sanguine that this government will be able to survive or manage legislative elections.

They fear that the absence of an agreed constitutional structure for sharing power and resources among the Shiites, the Sunnis and the Kurds and continued jockeying for power among these groups, all of which control armed militias, will require the government to use its recently acquired martial law powers.

This prospect, and the fact that Iraqis are accustomed to, and might welcome, a strongman in government, makes Europeans think that Prime Minister Ayad Allawi will soon face a power moment. Many see January 2005 as too soon for coherent elections, especially as the underpinnings of a credible democratic system are lacking. Political parties are weak and lack solid public support. Faced with a pervasive insurrection, would Mr. Allawi, with his background in security affairs, resist the temptation to assume direct control and postpone the implementation of any real democratic system?

Most Europeans could live with a moderate, secular Iraqi strongman like Mr. Allawi. They are not convinced that, after the long night of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraqis are ready for a fully democratic system. And, looking at U.S. public opinion, many suspect a new administration of either party will seek an early withdrawal of U.S. troops and question how much more the U.S. public will pay for a democratic Iraq.

For these reasons, European governments that did not support the war are reluctant to become more directly associated with U.S. policy, especially following the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. But they are willing to assist the reconstruction on a national basis and at the request of the Iraqi government.

For example, for training Iraqi security forces, they would prefer national programs to the larger NATO program that the United States has been pushing. And a greater European Union role in reconstruction is also possible, if the security situation improves.

Even those countries, notably Britain, that support U.S. policy are concerned about U.S. management of the postwar period and hope that future decisions will be more collegial so that British and other reasonable European perspectives can be accommodated. Senior British officials warn that any new U.S. administration would be ill-advised to think a more cooperative approach to Europe will result in additional military help.

The new U.S. president should therefore consult early with his European allies and the Iraqis on what the Europeans are prepared to do in practical terms. Such consultations should be based on the premise that most, if not all, European countries either are not politically or logistically able to send significant numbers of military forces to relieve U.S. forces in Iraq. But they are certainly willing to assist in other ways in both re-establishing security and rebuilding the economy and the national institutions.

The U.S. approach should be pragmatic. NATO is undoubtedly the most qualified institution for inter-allied cooperation, especially in the security area. But the United States should not insist on greater NATO involvement if this obstructs practical action.

A re-elected President Bush most likely would find that an open hand to Europe will be reciprocated, provided he recognizes that Europeans have no interest in a failed Iraq but that they have experience there that should be exploited and interests that must be accommodated. For example, continued U.S. pressure will not achieve a much greater write-off of Iraq's debts, which would affect European countries disproportionately and be inconsistent with their policy toward other debtors.

Iraq owes European countries, including Russia, about \$15 billion, excluding interest.

Likewise, an over ambitious approach to Europe by a newly elected President John Kerry will not succeed. The reason: It would be based on the theory that, with President Bush gone, Europeans would happily assume a significant part of the burden of what many of them consider a mistaken and mismanaged U.S. policy.

But an open-minded consultative process, designed to extract the maximum practical cooperation in areas Europeans believe would promote successful reconstruction, including debt relief, should elicit considerable support.

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