

Iraq in the mind of Seymour Hersh

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Although I have always held Seymour Hersh in high regard, I found his Oct. 26 talk at the Student Center's Multi-Purpose Room on the College Avenue campus deeply disturbing. Mr. Hersh has performed many valuable services through his investigative reporting of numerous government attempts to undermine our democratic system and civil liberties. However, his analysis of Iraqi politics and society was not only sorely lacking, but verged on the irresponsible.

In his talk, Mr. Hersh offered the same list of simplistic and pejorative stereotypes of Iraqis and Iraqi society for which he so roundly criticizes the mainstream American media. His portrayal of Iraqis as captives of ethnic sectarianism contradicted his arguments that President George W. Bush's administration should immediately withdraw American forces from Iraq and let the Iraqis negotiate their political differences. Mr. Hersh cannot have it both ways. He cannot portray the Iraqis as prone to violence, fanaticism and on the verge of civil war and in the same breath argue that United States forces should pull out "by midnight tonight or midnight tomorrow evening," to use his phrase and let the Iraqis negotiate their differences. People who are about to engage in a civil war do not make good negotiators.

Mr. Hersh portrays Iraq's Shiite majority as religious fanatics under the control of Iran, asserts that Kurds selfishly seek to seize Arab land in northern Iraq around the city of Kirkuk and characterizes the Sunni Arabs as violent-prone insurgents belied by the reality on the ground in Iraq. Mr. Hersh should follow his own advice - namely that more Westerners should read the Middle Eastern press. If he had read the Iraqi press the morning of his lecture he would have discovered that Iraqi political leaders from the country's three main ethnic groups - the Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs and Kurds - have been involved in continuous meetings to solve the problems related to the new Iraqi constitution which was approved by 78 percent of voters on Oct. 15. If Mr. Hersh had read "al-Sabah" newspaper, he would have learned that 71.5 percent of Iraqis - in a survey of 1309 people - feel that the approval of the constitution will bring greater stability to Iraq - contradicting his argument that the ratification of the constitution will have no positive effect on the country.

The Bush administration pressured Iraq's political leadership to write a new constitution by Aug. 15 of this year - a deadline designed to serve Bush administration, not Iraqi political interests. This constituted a period of only several months after Iraq's National Assembly elections of Jan. 30, 2005. Was the United States able to write its own constitution in less than 6 months?

Realizing that this was not enough time to reconcile political differences - many of which are the result of 35 years of sectarian rule by Saddam Hussein and his ruling Baath Party - Iraq's politicians cut a deal in which the Sunni Arab leaders would urge their followers to vote for the constitution and in return, Sunni objections to the constitution would be negotiated with four months of its approval.

Contrary to Mr. Hersh's portrayal of Iraq as "ethnically challenged," and on the verge of civil war, Iraq's politicians are struggling to resolve their differences so the country can move ahead towards democracy - a model of democracy very different from the Bush administration's neo-conservative vision for Iraq. These efforts at overcoming ethnic differences reflect the views of the Iraqi public which -in numerous public opinion polls since the fall of Saddam - has adamantly rejected sectarianism, knowing that this was the method by which Saddam and the Baath Party exercised their "divide and rule" strategy with such disastrous consequences for Iraq.

Is it true that some Iraqi politicians are currently trying to manipulate ethnic differences? - Absolutely. But when has our own country been devoid of politicians who have played the racial and ethnic card to gain votes? Have these efforts meant that the United States has not been able to sustain its own democracy? While there are sectarians in Iraq, as in any other country, they are not in the driver's seat, nor do they reflect the will of the people as Iraq struggles to create a democratic polity.

In discussing Iraq's majority - 60 percent - Shiite community, which has been excluded from political power for centuries, Mr. Hersh fails to mention that the Shiites are largely secular. The current strength of the religious clergy stems from the fact that the Shiite religious hierarchy was the one institution of Iraqi society that Saddam was never able to smash - largely because of the respect with which it is held by many Shiites, and the independent source of income it receives from Iraqis Shiites and foreign pilgrims to Iraq's Shiite holy cities of Karbala', al-Najaf and al-Kathimayn. Historically, Iraqi Shiites have provided the cadres for the Iraqi Communist Party and other secularly oriented political parties and have worked closely with other Iraqi minorities - such as the Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Christians and Jews.

Mr. Hersh never mentioned the role of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in preventing the U.S. occupation authority from deciding who could, or could not, be a candidate in last January's National Assembly elections. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is not only the most powerful religious figure in Iraq, but he has played the most prominent role in promoting democracy. In addition to assuring that all Iraqis, not just Shiites, could become political candidates and vote last January, he has issued religious edicts banning clerics from holding office in the National Assembly and from participating in the writing of the new constitution. In effect, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has promoted the separation of mosque and state in Iraq. This is hardly the sign, as argued by Mr. Hersh, of an ethnic community where democracy is subordinated to religious intemperance.

Mr. Hersh also presented the Shiite community as under the control of neighboring Iran. While there is certainly Iranian political influence in southern Iraq - especially in and around the port city of Basra - the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, Shiites and Sunnis alike, reject Iranian interference in Iraqis politics. While Mr. Hersh mentioned the al-Dawa - Islamic Call - Party, and SCIRI - the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, only the latter is really closely tied to the current Iranian regime. Further, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani - the head of the Hawza - the most important and powerful Shiite religious institution, has warned Iran not to interfere in Iraqi affairs, as has Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the Mahdi Army. In other words, even among the Shiite clergy - which by no means reflects the views of all Iraqi Shiites, there are deeply political differences on what Iraq's relations with Iran should be.

In my discussions with many Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan last spring, they made it clear that Iraq's Kurds want federalism, not independence. While there are some Kurds who would like an independent Kurdistan, all Kurds realize that a small, landlocked nation, surrounded by hostile neighbors - Turkey, Syria, Iran and the Arab Iraqis to the south - would not allow them to export their oil, nor have access to much needed investment capital from the Arab Gulf states. Thus Kurds argue that federalism is their best option. In their view, it will work to prevent future governments in Baghdad from attacking them with poison gas, as did Saddam in 1988, or seize Kurdish land and give it to Iraqi Arabs, as Saddam also did to stir up sectarian strife.

It is true - as Mr. Hersh argued - that many Kurds seek land in and around the city of Kirkuk. The problem is that he only gave us a partial picture. In trying to set Kurds against Arabs, Saddam destroyed 170 Kurdish villages during his ANFAL - ethnic cleansing - campaign and seized much Kurdish land in and around Kirkuk - which he gave to Arabs. Kurds whose land was seized during the 1970s and 1980s want that land returned. There is currently a commission responsible for adjudicating requests for land transfers in the Kirkuk region, which, while struggling with limited resources, seeks to assure that former Kurdish lands are returned to their rightful owners through due process.

Among the Sunni Arabs, there has been a major change of heart since last January's National Assembly elections in which many refused to vote. While still hostile to the American occupation, many Sunni Arabs now realize that ballots - rather than bullets - represent a better way to achieve their goals in post-Saddam Iraq. During the past few weeks, several Sunni organizations have met with Shiite and Kurdish leaders to reconcile the political differences among the three groups. The Sunnis fear that federalism will lead to a quasi-independent Shiite state in the south and a quasi-independent Kurdish state in the north. Since Iraq's oil wealth is located in the north and south of the country, Iraq's Sunni Arabs fear that they will not only be politically, but economically marginalized by the new constitution. This latter concern is not a trivial one with Iraq suffering from an estimated 65 percent unemployment rate. The fact that the Sunni Arab leadership is pushing for a political solution, rather than a resort to violence - as a way to redress their community's grievances - is a very positive development. Nowhere in his talk, or in the question and answer period that followed, did Mr. Hersh make any reference to this process.

Many of us here at the University share Mr. Hersh's displeasure with the Bush administration and its proto-authoritarian policies. However, Mr. Hersh has no right to use innocent Iraqis in his fight against an administration he deeply dislikes. To imply that Iraqis have accomplished nothing by way of creating a true democracy so that he can strengthen his

criticism of the Bush administration is to do a great injustice to those Iraqi democrats - many of whom have been threatened, attacked and even killed - who have pursued the liberties that we here in the United States take for granted. In future talks, Mr. Hersh would better serve his audience by first studying Iraqi politics and society in greater depth and to stick to speaking about the investigative reporting that he has done so well.

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