

Timing the Trusteeship: Iraq and the Opening Window of Opportunity

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**An Interview with Priya Bindra, Beth Goldman,
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Brown Journal of World Affairs: What is your perception of the current viability of the trusteeship for Palestine, which you proposed last year?

Martin Indyk: I first put the idea of a trusteeship forward before the war in Iraq had started. My argument was that since the president had made it clear that he believed the war would open an opportunity for peacemaking between the Israelis and Palestinians, and since we were going to essentially set up a trusteeship in Iraq, why not set one up in Palestine as well? After all, there is no longer a capable and responsible candidate for Palestinian leadership that can be a partner in a peace process with Israeli, Palestinian, U.S., European, Russian or UN decision makers. So in the context of U.S. action in Iraq, if these leaders want to solve the Palestinian problem, they are going to have to take similar action with the Palestinian government: come in, take control of the area on behalf of the international community, and grow the institutions of governments on the Palestinian side that would result in a leadership that can negotiate a final deal with Israel.

After the war our trusteeship enterprise in Iraq ran into pretty serious trouble.

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And at that point I reached the judgment that there would be no will to carry out a Palestinian trusteeship on the part of the Bush administration, given that we were preoccupied with what looked increasingly like a failed trusteeship mission in Iraq and limited success in Afghanistan.

This had been my judgment basically up until last month when suddenly Sharon promised Israel he would withdraw unilaterally, in a matter of months, from all of

Gaza and parts of the West Bank. Therefore, even though U.S. involvement in the establishment of a trusteeship looked very bad from the outside, Sharon's proposal was going to create a vacuum on the Palestinian side, which would force the hand of the international community. If we did not want that vacuum to be filled by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, or warlords, then we would have to start thinking about filling it with a trusteeship of some kind.

While the Israelis have never liked the idea of a trusteeship, the logic of what

they are now doing is bringing them around to accepting a modified version of the idea. The Israeli defense minister was quoted last week as saying that he "wants the international community to come in and take over the settlements that Israel will withdraw from, because he does not want Hamas to take over the settlements." I think that the time for a trusteeship is coming again in some form or another.

Journal: Under the auspices of what organization do you see the trusteeship manifesting, or under what type of leadership do you see the trusteeship being governed?

Indyk: I believe it has to be led by the United States, because the United States is the only external party that enjoys the trust of both the Israelis and Palestinians. However, in order for it to be legitimate in Palestinian eyes, it is essential that the trusteeship be



Photo Courtesy of Nancy Soukup

Ambassador Martin Indyk explores the future of trusteeship at the Ralph Bunche centenary. (26 February 2004)

established by a UN Security Council resolution. Therefore, it should be a UN sanctioned, U.S.-led initiative.

Journal: What are the military and legal limitations of America's role in the trusteeship?

Indyk: As part of any trusteeship proposal there is going to have to be an international force component. The trustees have to be able to establish order in the areas that they are in control of, even if it is just Gaza. This means that a trusteeship has to establish its authority over Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the various gangs that operate in the area. I do not believe that the military has to go in as the lead component in policing Palestine. The existing Palestinian security apparatus has been damaged both by the intifada and Israel's response to it, and can be restructured and reassembled quite easily, particularly in Gaza. The role of international forces can, therefore, be confined to supporting this restructured and retrained security apparatus—training intelligence, tactical advice, and if necessary, special forces that enter with the Palestinian security services. I do not believe that it would be wise or necessary for the U.S.-led trusteeship to be the leader. The United States should keep a low profile on the military side. Instead British, Canadians, and Australians, who are capable and who have experience in these types of operations should form the presence on the ground. I would say that the United States should be much more publicly involved on the civilian side, and work to restructure the political institutions and economic institutions of the Palestinian authority.

The legal issues will be resolved by the UN Security Council. The international community should move in and take control of this area. Let us remember that the international legal precedent set by the League of Nations mandated the territory to the British, and the British gave back that mandate to the United Nations, which provided for the partition of this territory between the Israeli and the Palestinian State. If Israel, the occupying power after 1967, gives the territory up, it can be taken over again by the international community through a UN Security Council resolution.

Journal: How do you think Palestinian perceptions of the United States have changed since the war in Iraq?

Indyk: I think that Palestinian perceptions of the United States have changed as a result of the transition from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration. The Clinton administration was actively engaged in trying to solve the Palestinian problem, while the Bush administration has not been actively engaged. Even though

Palestinians had different expectations of the Clinton administration, they adhered to the overall model that the Arabs have been stuck on since 1957, when President Eisenhower forced Israel to withdraw from the Sinai after the Sinai war. The feeling has been that if the United States would put its foot down like Eisenhower did, it could force Israel to withdraw and then the Arabs would get their territory back.

I think the Palestinians have come to understand that the United States is not going to do that. Now the Palestinians, like the Egyptians under Sadat, all turn to the United States to try and get it to use its influence with Israel. That is the way the Palestinians view the United States—it is the only outside power that can actually influence Israel. That is why they look to the United States, even though Bush has disengaged and criticized the Palestinians. Even though the Europeans have been far more pro-Palestinian over the decades, the Palestinians would be quite happy to abandon Europe if the United States was ready to come in. The statements of the Palestinian spokesmen, for example, are constantly calling for the United States to get more involved.

Journal: We would like to take a look at the issue of Palestinian leadership. What kind of legacy do you think Arafat has left? What kinds of problems are inherent in Arafat not being recognized by the Bush administration?

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Indyk: Well leadership is a large problem because Arafat believes that the best way he can prove his relevance is by thwarting every attempt to make progress. He has obstructed issues ranging from reform within the Palestinian government, to attempts to stop the violence, and efforts to get peace negotiations going again. Unfortunately for him and for the whole process, Israel and the United States are no longer prepared to accept that Arafat can be the facilitator of an agreement.

The reason that Israel and the United States are not prepared to try to convert him from obstacle to partner is because he has repeatedly broken the commitments he has made in the past. Nobody would argue that Israel should make a deal with Arafat. In the United States, 9/11 reinforced the image that Arafat is involved with terrorists and therefore the United States should not be dealing with him. As a result, we were left with a stalemate in which he is still there, but nobody wants to deal with him.

How do we break out of that stalemate? The Israelis are going to break out by acting unilaterally, choosing not to deal with Arafat and refusing to wait for the emergence of another Palestinian leader. This forces our hand and asks whether we have the will-power to go in, take away authority from Arafat, and establish a new leadership.

I think the concept that we need to think about in these circumstances is not quite a trusteeship, but a modified trusteeship—one more like a *receivership*. The Pales-

tinian Authority is bankrupt, and the receivers come in and take control of the company assets. The people who ran the company into the ground need to go. But receivers do not come in and get rid of everybody; they just get rid of the top management. The rest of the company actually has managed to function even in the most extreme circumstances and should be kept. You do have an elected legislature and you do have a cabinet of technocrats. The best example is Finance Minister Salaam Fayyad, who is an IMF-trained economist. There are also people there who have achieved legitimacy from fighting Israel. They are nationalists, dedicated to a two-state solution and living with Israel, provided that Israel withdraws to the 1967 lines. So there are people you want to lean on to come through with the political leadership in the next few years.

Journal: How do you then avoid including the spoilers such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad?

Indyk: As long as they do not give up terrorist attacks, they should not be included. If they do renounce terrorism, and are prepared to disarm, then I think that, given the support that they have amongst the Palestinian populace, there would be a political place for them within the Palestinian Authority.

Journal: Since Hamas, and the Palestinian cause more generally, have a great deal of support throughout the Middle East, do you have to mobilize other Middle Eastern nations and get them on board prior to the creation of a trusteeship?

Indyk: Yes. That is much easier to do today than it has ever been in the past, for a number of reasons. First of all, Arab states understand that they do not have a military option thanks to Israel. The evaporation of the Iraqi army and its replacement with U.S. forces has made this abundantly clear.

In 1968, the Arab League assembled in Khartoum. The meeting took place after the 1967 war and in response to an Israeli offer of full withdrawal from conquered territory (except Jerusalem). The Arabs resolved that there would be no negotiations with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no peace with Israel. Yet, what they did, last year, in the Arab League initiative, was reverse the three no's. They offered, in return for full withdrawal, peace treaties with Israel and an end to the conflict with Israel.

Secondly, they are fed up with the problem. They are now being pressed by their own people to open their political space, to reform their economies, and to take care of the basic needs of their people. Their people are no longer prepared to view the Palestinian problem as an excuse for reform.

Thirdly, if Israel is going to withdraw from Gaza and the West Bank, the last

thing that neighboring countries such as Egypt and Jordan want are a failed terrorist state on their borders. Therefore, they have a strong incentive to provide support for these initiatives. There is a role for Egypt in training the Gaza security forces and Jordan in training the West Bank security services. However, I do not believe that they will provide forces to serve in these areas. The Palestinians do not want them. Therefore, it is much more important for Egypt and Jordan to give this intervention an Arab political seal of approval, and I believe that we will be able to accomplish this.

Journal: How about mobilizing nations such as Iran that have less of an incentive to compromise?

Indyk: I think the Iranians will be opposed to the trusteeship for ideological and tactical reasons. Iran does not want this to succeed; it has never wanted this to succeed. The Iranians are the most aggressive external supporters of Palestinian terrorists and will strongly oppose any plan for a trusteeship quite strongly. People do not know the history or do not want to know the history, but at every step of the way, when we were making progress in the peace process, the Iranians came in to thwart it.

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Journal: What kind of an impact would a stable democracy in Iraq have on Palestine? Is some sort of domino-democracy theory applicable here?

Indyk: I do not believe that a stable democracy in Iraq will lead to democracy throughout the region, but Iraq can affect the situation in a number of ways. As long as we do not have that situation under control and we are bogged down there, it is difficult to do a lot on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Of course, if our hand is forced we will do something, but the reality is that much bigger problems need to be addressed.

If we succeed in Iraq and a democracy emerges, will that have a positive effect? It will not make much of difference in terms of the democratic impulse on the Palestinian side; movements towards democracy there have been blocked by Arafat, but they do not require things to go well in Iraq in order to move forward.

We need a stable situation in Iraq, because that is very beneficial for the overall balance of power between Israel and the Arabs. Egypt and Jordan's military are in decline, and the Iraqi army has been replaced by the U.S. army. The only conventional force that faces Israel is Syria, which is facing block obsolescence in its air force and army. Therefore, there is no real threat out there. If you have a stable Iraq, it dramatically improves Israel's standing vis-à-vis the Arabs on a military front. In terms of the balance of power and balance of military power, Israel is much stronger now as a result of the war. And as long as Iraq remains relatively stable, that will continue to be the

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case. Israel does not need the Jordan valley to protect against a combined Iraqi, Syrian, and Jordanian threat, it becomes much easier for the Israelis to countenance withdrawal. And if they have a sense of security that comes from the shift in the balance of power vis-à-vis the Arabs, then I think that they would be more willing to do things that would undermine their deterrent capability vis-à-vis the Palestinians. They would become more willing to take more risks on the Palestinian front, in order to get out and separate from the Palestinian population.

Journal: You mentioned earlier that the U.S. mission in Iraq is looking more and more like a failed trusteeship. Do you think that there are lessons from that experience, which are applicable to the Palestinian situation?

Indyk: Yes. The situation is a little different with regard to the Palestinians, but certainly some general propositions are applicable. There needs to be better planning. Assumptions need to be questioned and tested, including my assumption that the Palestinians would welcome a move towards trusteeship. In Iraq we are making mistakes that we would not have the opportunity to commit on the Palestinian front. We destroyed the Iraqi army personnel infrastructure, which put people who only knew how to shoot a gun on the street. We also alienated the Sunnis, which was perhaps hard to avoid. We need to think about how to structure any intervention to insure that it is viewed as legitimate and does not alienate the bulk of the Palestinians.

Journal: You mentioned earlier that the removal of the Iraqi army will provide greater peace and security for Israel. How about the emergence of terrorist organizations and complex terrorist networks?

Indyk: Iraq has become a magnet for al-Qaeda, and it has also become a playground for the Iranians, who have moved Hezbollah into Iraq, using the Iranian revolutionary guard to set up Hezbollah. As a consequence, the focus of their activities has shifted to Iraq. They can kill Americans everyday, fairly easily and hope to humiliate the "Great Satan," like they did in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. I think that this means a lot more to them than another World Trade Center. They have always aimed to force the United States to withdraw from the region. If they can achieve that in Iraq, then that is where they will focus their energies, and that is what we are now seeing. The incidence of suicide bombing is increasing and suicide bombing is the modus operandi of al-Qaeda, not of the leftovers from Saddam Hussein's regime. I have a hypothesis that all of this talk of attacks in the United States is actually disinformation. If al-Qaeda wants to bring George Bush down, then it is going to be much more effective to

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bring him down via chaos in Iraq, rather than via a World Trade Center attack in the United States, which will only consolidate support for him. For a number of reasons, therefore, Iraq becomes a new battleground for al-Qaeda. If a trusteeship is possible in Palestine, then we must ensure that this battleground does not repeat itself there. ●

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