Arab press calls vote a test of U.S. vision

By Peter Valenti
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As Iraqis prepared for today's election, many in the Arab world turned their thoughts back to the 1920s and the heyday of European empire-building in the Middle East. Just as the Vietnam War and the Depression still strongly shape Americans' political and intellectual thinking, powerful memories of that earlier era of nation building continue to resonate in the region.

Aware of the negative results of Britain's colonial experiment, which created Iraq by fusing three provinces of the former Ottoman Empire and installing a pious Hashemite monarchy, many Arab columnists suggest that what is at stake in today's vote is, in fact, the viability of this U.S.-inspired "new Iraq." Perhaps surprisingly, a majority of commentators in the Arab press actually support holding the elections.

Writing in the Iraqi daily Al-Azzaman, commentator Taysir Abd-Al-Jabbar Al-Alwisi makes an impassioned plea for voters to go to the polls. In the face of threats by insurgents, he calls for "not surrendering and refusing to submit" and concludes that all Iraqis must "reject the systematicization of hatreds." He believes "the election could simply 'send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.'"

But even optimistic commentators express fear that the election could simply be a cover for U.S. machinations, just as the British-sponsored Iraqi political system in place from 1920 until King Faisal was overthrown in 1958 served as a cover for British imperial and oil interests in the region.

Najah Muhammad Ali, a columnist from Basra in southern Iraq, expresses deep suspicions about the intentions of the United States in his opinion piece in Iraq's liberal political weekly Al-Abali.

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because of what he sees as paternalistic statements coming out of the White House, reminiscent of the "tutoring-the-Arabs" mentality that justified European colonialism in years past.

He traces a tortured U.S. logic that resembles an Escher knot: The occupation is feeding the insurgency, but the White House insists it must continue the occupation for quite some time, even after a democratic system is in place, because of the insurgency. Quoting from Matthew 10:34, he wonders whether this is a case of "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."

Writing in Saudi Arabia's Ashraq Al-Awsat, a pan-Arab daily published in London and Beirut, Bilal Al-Hasan heeds scorn on White House rhetoric that describes the election as a "magical solution for problems that are not magical." Bush, he says, "wants elections in order to say inside of America that democracy is progressing globally in accordance with White House plans."

Many commentators voice concern that the occupation will undermine gains made by Iraqi democracy enthusiasts.

Dr Azmi Bisharah, a reformist Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset, writing in the Palestinian daily Al-Quds, says "the mixing of the Arab reform agenda with the American agenda increases the estrangement of the democratic movement from the majority of the (Arab) people."

Referring to the vision of White House neoconservatives who he believes cloak their political agenda with the U.S. promise of democracy, Bisharah says he anticipates a backlash. "The problem is first that the American agenda clashes with Arab general opinion on issues they consider important and pivotal, such as Palestine and the occupation of Iraq," he writes. "The American agenda calls upon Arab democrats not only to take a democratic or reform stance but also expects them to support (or normalization of relations with Israel, 'moderate' positions on the Palestinian issue and favorable dispositions toward U.S. foreign policies." All this, he concludes, "diminishes the credibility of those (Arab groups) who support democratic ideals."

Commentator Salamah Nimat also expresses a widely held suspicion of the democratization process. In the pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat, Nimat writes: "America, which earmarked $200 billion for the war and military operations in Iraq, didn't endow any other money except $29 million to spread democracy in the (Arab) nations from Morocco to the Persian Gulf. And while it is fumbling in Iraq, it requests nations which are making attempts toward their own democratization ... to help the U.S. achieve its military goals in Iraq and a success in spreading its promised democracy."

An editorial in the Al-Quds al-Arabi daily, published in London, notes Iraqi Defense Minister Hazim Shalan's admission that anticipated election boycotts mean roughly half of Iraq's population will not participate in the vote.