

UN Troubleshooter Ready to Tackle Daunting Challenges in Iraq

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By Ahmed Rashid

Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations' top diplomatic troubleshooter, managed during his two years in Afghanistan to balance diverse interests in Kabul while forging a viable, though limited governing system. Now, Brahimi is seeking to reprise his role as an architect of reconstruction, this time in Iraq. Political experts and diplomatic observers believe Brahimi will find it more difficult to achieve his stabilization aims in Iraq than in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he appears to offer the best hope of reversing Iraq's slide into chaos.

The Bush administration seems determined hand over limited sovereignty to an Iraqi governing entity that, with just over a month to go before the intended June 30 transfer of power, has yet to be clearly defined. The task of bringing clarity to Iraq's post-handover governing structure belongs to Brahimi, an Algerian who has lengthy experience in trying to put strife-torn countries back together.

Just five months ago, Brahimi was concluding his tenure as the UN's reconstruction tsar in Kabul. His blunt style was a critical factor in his success in Kabul: He was not afraid to stand up to the United States after the American military drove the Taliban from power in Kabul. In establishing the reconstruction framework for Afghanistan, Brahimi refused to sanction UN participation until the Bush administration had provided clear guarantees concerning the authority of the interim Afghan government, and about the powers wielded by UN officials.

Perhaps Brahimi's greatest contribution to peace-building in Afghanistan was to meld the conflicting demands of all the major players - the US forces looking for terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, the UN international peacekeeping force in Kabul, the fledgling government of President Hamid Karzai, the warlords who dominated Afghanistan's provinces, the UN and its humanitarian agencies, as well as Kabul's neighbors, in particular Pakistan and Iran. "Creating an effective power-sharing and decision-making process in Kabul, despite the overwhelming demands of the Americans, was the key to stability," says a Western ambassador in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's stability remains tenuous. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. But experts generally agree that Brahimi's handling of the reconstruction challenges improved the chances that the country can find a way to break its vicious cycle of violence. Brahimi's importance to the stabilization process was widely recognized last December, as he was in the process of stepping down. Karzai, Afghan warlords and US military commanders all publicly lamented his departure. The Afghan president went so far as to appeal to Brahimi to stay.

An intense opponent of the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003, Brahimi was at first reluctant to accept the position of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special representative in Baghdad. Eventually he set aside his views on the war, due in part by a lobbying effort by the Bush administration. He even was wooed personally by US President George W. Bush on several occasions.

Brahimi is no favorite of the White House. Many in Washington remain angry with him over recent comments in which he described Israel's actions towards Palestinians as the "big poison in the [Middle Eastern] region." He also condemned the US military's decision to besiege the Sunni Muslim stronghold of Fallujah in Iraq. Even so, the Bush administration sees no viable alternative to Brahimi as a peacemaker in Iraq.

UN diplomats say British Prime Minister Tony Blair played a key role in bringing the United States and Brahimi together. When the US reconstruction effort in Iraq began to flounder in late 2003, Blair pushed Secretary of State Colin Powell, and later Bush himself, to get Brahimi on board as quickly as possible and cede the UN a larger reconstruction role.

The 70-year-old Brahimi became politically active at an early age, serving as the Algerian National Liberation Front's representative in Indonesia from 1956-61, during the struggle to end French colonial rule in Algiers. He later filled a variety of diplomatic posts for independent Algeria, moving on to work for the Arab League. In 1989, acting as a special envoy for the Arab League, Brahimi established his conflict-resolution credentials by helping to broker an end to Lebanon's civil war.

In 1997, Brahimi made his first attempt to forge peace in Afghanistan at a time when the Taliban still held sway over much of the country. He ultimately resigned in frustration in 1999, but did not go quietly. Brahimi vigorously criticized the Afghan factions for not being willing to compromise. He also assailed Pakistan's support of the Taliban, and the US reluctance to become involved in peace-building efforts.

As he tries to put together a government in Iraq that can accept authority on June 30 from the US-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority, powerful forces are working against Brahimi. The hardliners within the Bush administration, the so-called neo-cons, distrust Brahimi, believing him capable of betraying US interests in Iraq. In addition, members of the current Iraqi Governing Council worry that Brahimi's vision for a new government will drastically curtail their influence. Meanwhile, bin Laden has declared Brahimi to be a Western collaborator and has called for his assassination.

A senior US diplomat admits that Bush ordered Robert Blackwell, a top figure on the National Security Council, to travel constantly with Brahimi, "just to act as protector to keep the neo-cons off his back."

Yet, the neo-cons may be the least of Brahimi's worries. Bin Laden's death threat must be taken seriously, and Brahimi indicates that he accepts the possibility of an assassination attempt as an occupational hazard. "Life is always in the hands of God and that if, helping the people of Iraq recover their independence and putting an end to foreign occupation is reason to be attacked and killed, so be it," he said.