



## The arab 'allies' problem

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HAVING tried to undermine the Iraqi attempt at building a democracy, the Arab League is sending signals that it may be changing the foredoomed policy it has pursued for almost three years. At a meeting in Cairo last week, the 22-member league agreed to host a national reconciliation conference bringing together all of Iraq's ethnic and religious communities.

Sources report a great deal of maneuvering over the exact date and nature of the proposed conference. Several members, notably Egypt, wanted the gathering to take place almost immediately, with representatives picked by the league.

The Iraqi government, however, saw that as a trick to undermine its own legitimacy. A conference in which elected political leaders would have the same status as non-elected ones would have made a

mockery of the electoral process that Iraq has developed since liberation. The Iraqis also rejected the idea of holding a conference before the Dec. 15 general election. They preferred next February – that is to say, after the formation of a new government emerging from the nation's second free general election. When other members approved their proposal, the Iraqis won their first major diplomatic victory in the league.

Holding the conference in February forces the Arab Sunni groups to choose between participation in elections or siding with the insurgents who wish to seize power through mass terror. Those who wish to attend the conference – and thus negotiate a share of power for their community within a new Iraq – would have to abandon the policy of paying lip service to democracy while encouraging the insurgency.

The only issue that matters in all this is for the Arab Sunnis to join the electoral process. They've already started doing that by massively voting in last month's constitutional referendum; there are signs that they'll continue with an equally massive participation in the Dec. 15 election.

But, while Iraq's Arab Sunnis seem to have changed strategy, the Arab League is still trying to play a double game on the democratization of Iraq. At the core of this are efforts to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the elected Iraqi government, headed by Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. With few exceptions, almost all Arab League members have refused to name ambassadors to the new Iraqi government and to fully reactivate their diplomatic presence in Baghdad. The league has also refused to send observers to help supervise (alongside the U.N.) the successive municipal and general elections held in Iraq since liberation.

For several crucial months last year, when Iraq was passing through the worst of the terrorist campaign, the league also made noises about excluding Iraq and refused to invite the officials of the interim Iraqi government to its routine conferences. (The league's hostile attitude inspired a debate in Baghdad over whether Iraq should walk out of a moribund club in which it had more enemies than friends.)

It is clear that, with few exceptions, the present leaders in almost all league members see a democratic Iraq as a threat to themselves.

Egyptians, who have witnessed more than two dozen fraudulent elections in the past half-century of one-party rule, look with envy on Iraq's elections, in which all parties – from the extreme left to monarchists – are allowed to take part with a level playing field.

Libyans, who have never had *any* elections, would be even more envious of the Iraqis, who can choose their government through the ballot box and at regular intervals.

Jordanians, who are told they are not yet mature enough to have a real democracy and should swallow the so-called "supervised democratization project," would wonder what it is that the Iraqis have and that they don't.

As for Syrians, who suffer under the tyranny of the same Ba'athist ideology that suffocated Iraq for almost four decades, the only issue of interest is about the moment of their own deliverance.

It is thus no surprise that most Arab League members are doing all the mischief they can to sabotage the political process in Iraq.

Cairo is the center of much of the anti-Iraq propaganda concocted by an unholy alliance of pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists. Jordan is where much of the funding for the terrorist insurgency is allocated, often thanks to bank accounts created by Saddam Hussein and his henchmen over the years.

Syria is the preferred route for Arab Sunni jihadists going to Iraq to pursue a murderous campaign. Libya, for its part, is offering the anti-Iraqi jihadists a safe haven, plus vast sums of money. And Qatar is the home of the satellite-TV channel that has become a kind of bulletin board for al Qaeda and other terror groups killing people in Iraq.

That the anti-democratic members of the Arab League would be doing all they can to kill all hope of democracy in Iraq is no surprise. What is surprising, however, is that almost all these states are also supposed to be allies of the United

States, which is for now the principal guarantor of the Iraqi experiment.

As Iraqis prepare to elect a new government, perhaps it is time for Washington to read the riot act to its so-called Arab allies. Without the active or tacit support of at least a dozen Arab states, the terrorist insurgency would not survive in an Iraqi environment that is manifestly hostile to it.

The Arab League needs to do more: It needs to choose between terror and democracy.