

## AN OPENING AT SHARM EL-SHEIKH

By Phebe Marr and Scott Lasensky

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For the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein, representatives of the new Iraq will sit together with each of the neighboring states, plus the United States (as well as others), at a conference next week in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. Coming on the heels of the American military campaign in Fallujah, surging violence in other Sunni towns, the succession struggle in the Palestinian leadership, and Secretary of State Colin Powell's resignation - not to mention Iraq's troubled history with its neighbors - it is all too easy to dismiss or overlook this gathering.

But the meeting at the Sinai resort, which comes at Baghdad's request, provides a critical opening for the Bush administration and the new Iraqi leadership to engage Iraq's neighbors. This is a valuable opportunity for two reasons. First, it is a chance to address practical problems like border security, debt relief and humanitarian aid. And more broadly, it can initiate a larger diplomatic process that brings greater legitimacy to the interim government and provides a regular forum for Iraq and its neighbors to improve cooperation.

As the U.S. learned in the Balkans and Afghanistan, post-conflict state-building cannot move forward if the neighbors are trying to pull things apart. Despite the potential for serious long-term divergences of interest between Iraq and surrounding countries, there are immediate, discreet concerns that can be addressed at Sharm el-Sheikh. The violence, terrorism and instability caused by porous borders are serving neither Iraq's interests nor those of its neighbors, none of which wants to see Iraq become a failed state. The U.S.-led military force, not to mention Iraq's still weak police and military, do not have the capability to solve the border problems on their own. Action by the neighbors is imperative.

On the economic side, the Sharm el-Sheikh forum can also be used to rejuvenate a sagging assistance program. This includes debt relief, an effort that has been losing steam even as Iraq's oil-producing neighbors,

especially the Gulf states, witness their largest windfall in a generation. It is understandable that Iraq's creditors prefer to cut deals once an elected government is in place. But, in the meantime, these states - especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia - can put forward more specific pledges about what they are prepared to do once an elected government is operating in Baghdad.

Beyond the immediate, tangible concerns of borders and economic assistance, the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting presents an opportunity for Iraq's neighbors, as well as key regional and international actors, to signal support for elections and a willingness to recognize the government that will result from them. This will enhance the interim government's legitimacy and improve prospects for credible elections.

The Sharm el-Sheikh meeting could also lead to a regular forum for Iraq to engage with its neighbors, albeit with the U.S. also at the table, lest the new Iraqi leadership be intimidated or brushed aside by its much more seasoned and experienced counterparts around the region. The gathering in Egypt will include a host of participants, including the United Nations, the Group of 8 and the Arab League. Should such meetings become regular, a smaller set of participants would be more conducive to improving coordination between Iraq and its neighbors. Jordan, a stable and efficient "gateway" to the new Iraq, could host future meetings.

Dialogue among Iraq and its neighbors would also provide an opportunity for the U.S. to talk at a high level with Iran and Syria. The more Washington can find common ground with these states on day-to-day concerns in Iraq, the easier it will be to work with them on the broader questions of security that now poison American relations with Tehran and Damascus.

As security in Iraq continues to deteriorate, some have suggested that the U.S. play a game of "chicken" with the neighbors and threaten to pull out of the country. This form of coercive diplomacy would be dangerous. Such brinkmanship is more likely to lead to unforeseen and risky interventions by the neighbors that would further destabilize Iraq.

There is no substitute for positive, direct engagement, even if this requires dealing with "strange bedfellows," to borrow a phrase from James Dobbins, who served as the Bush administration's envoy to Afghanistan. If America was able to find common cause with Iran on a

range of post-conflict concerns in Afghanistan, it makes sense to do the same in Iraq.

Modest results at Sharm el-Sheikh could lead to more-than-modest progress further down the road. But progress will also have its costs. Success at Sharm el-Sheikh and beyond requires that Washington cede some aspects of its overriding control over reconstruction spending, ongoing military operations and Iraq's political process. Iraq's interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi, needs the meeting to bolster his position, just as the U.S. needs help to turn its lonely and costly fight around. The gathering next week will provide a golden opportunity to craft a regional approach that gives Iraq's neighbors and other powers a greater stake in the success of the new Iraq.

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