The Role of the United Nations in Postwar Iraq

A Lesson Plan Provided by PBS's NewsHour Extra

Doug DuBrin

Background
In April 1945, with the end of World War II in sight, representatives from fifty nations came together in San Francisco to create a constitution for what would become the United Nations (U.N.). The primary goals for the organization included keeping world peace, cultivating friendly relationships among nations and promoting human rights and freedoms.

Another ambition was to avoid having the United Nations be powerless in preventing global conflict. This was in response to the inability of the League of Nations, formed after World War I, to stop Germany’s annexing of countries such as Austria and Czechoslovakia, consequently leading to World War II.

Currently, the United Nations is projected to be involved in the restructuring of the Iraqi government. How much the U.N. is involved, though, remains to be seen. The United States and other members of the current “coalition of the willing” intend to play a dominant role in Iraq’s restructuring, with the U.S. spearheading the process.

Non-coalition nations, though, such as France, Russia and Germany, have much to gain by being part of the rebuilding effort, both politically as well as economically.

Time
15-20 minutes

Materials
• NewsHour Extra story (reprinted on page 193, or available online at www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june03/unrole_4-6.html) on the role of the U.N. in postwar Iraq
• student notebooks/journals
• List of questions regarding the article.

Correlation to National Standards

Procedure
1. Introduction: Begin by providing for the students a rudimentary history of the U.N. Emphasize that a primary goal of the organization was for it to be more decisive than the League of Nations after World War I.
2. Next, have the students carefully read the NewsHour Extra article, either independently or in pairs.
3. Then, have the students work in pairs or small groups to address the following questions: (see below)
4. Lastly, discuss the responses as a class. Allow for some debate over the role of the international community (U.N.) in Iraq’s rebuilding and that of individual or coalition nations (such as the U.S. and Great Britain).

Discussion Questions
• What role do you think the U.N. should have in the formation of a postwar government in Iraq?
• Should nations that were not actually involved in the war effort itself have a say in the new government?
• Should the postwar Iraqi government be designed by the U.N., the U.S., or by the people of Iraq?
• Should each group have equal say?
• How much input should Iraq’s neighbors (such as Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait) have in the process? Do they ultimately have more at stake than other countries?

Extension idea
After the students have gained a solid foundation on the current role of the United Nations in Iraq’s restructuring, assign any or all of the following for either extended in-class activities or for at-home assignments:
1. Make a list of both the positive and negative aspects of an international organization, such as the U.N., playing a significant role in global conflicts (e.g., Iraq, S. Korea, Kosovo, Somalia). Based on your answers, what conclusions might you draw regarding the involvement of an international governing body in world affairs?
2. Explain whether you think individual nations are ultimately responsible to themselves or to the world community. In other words, does a nation such as the U.S. have a responsibility to follow the rules or demands of the U.N., even if they are seemingly at odds with its own policies and/or interests?
3. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz has stated that the U.N. should be more involved in the dispensing of humanitarian aid to the people of Iraq than in the rebuilding of their government (see NewsHour Extra article). In light of this, should the United Nations...
The Role of the United Nations in Postwar Iraq

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The United States asserts that its coalition of allies will play the leading role in postwar Iraq, despite critics who would like a more international approach.

Despite America’s assertion that its coalition of allies in the Iraq war will play the leading role in postwar Iraq, other nations continue to press for increased international involvement in deciding Iraq’s future.

Making the rounds of the Sunday talk show circuit [in early April], Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz was skeptical about the United Nations’ ability to run Iraq, citing the U.N.’s role in Kosovo in the late 1990s.

Not another Kosovo
Following U.S.-led NATO bombing in 1999, the United Nations created an interim civilian administration in Kosovo, which it named UNMIK. But four years later, instead of setting up a fully independent government, the United Nations is still overseeing Kosovo’s administration. The U.N. promises Kosovo will eventually be in full control of the government.

On CBS’s “Face the Nation,” Wolfowitz said the Kosovo situation is “not a model we want to follow, of a sort of permanent international administration.”

Wolfowitz said the U.S.-led coalition would likely run Iraq until a new Iraqi government is in place and ready to take care of its affairs.

“I think the right goal is to move as quickly as we can ... to a government that is—if I could paraphrase Abraham Lincoln—of the Iraqis, by the Iraqis, for the Iraqis,” he said. “Not to make them a colonial administration or a U.N. administration, or run in any way by foreigners.”

The role of the United Nations
Critics of the influential U.S. role would like to see a more international postwar Iraq. Mustapha Karkouti, a member of the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, says that while European countries, including Britain, would not be opposed to the U.S., maintaining an advisory role in Iraq, those countries would “like to see the United Nations playing what they call a vital and important role, not the supporting role the U.S. administration seems willing to give it.”

Wolfowitz said the United Nations’ main role in postwar Iraq would be to bring humanitarian relief to the Iraqi people.

“The U.N. can be a mechanism for bringing that assistance to the Iraqi people ... but our goal has to be to transfer authority and operations of a government as quickly as possible, not to some other external authority but to the Iraqi people,” he said on Fox News Sunday.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, after meeting with European Union and NATO foreign ministers in Brussels on [April 3], expressed similar sentiments, saying the coalition “has to play the leading role” in a postwar Iraq.

“Military commanders will be responsible for stabilizing the situation, for securing the country and the people. But that does not mean we have to shut others out. There will definitely be a United Nations role, but what the exact nature of that role will be remains to be seen,” Powell said.

European critics
The U.S. stance differs significantly from the views of officials in France, Germany and Russia, who would like to see the United Nations put in charge of Iraq.

“We believe the United Nations should have a central role, whether political or economic,” said French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, whose country was one of the most outspoken opponents of the war.

“The U.N. is the only international organization that can give legitimacy” to Iraq’s reconstruction, he said.

In an interview with the German newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau, German Defense Minister Peter Struck recently warned that Europe could not be expected to contribute troops or money to help Iraq’s reconstruction if the United States was running the country.

“If reconstruction is not placed under the U.N., then I don’t see any primary responsibility for Germany,” he said. “When you consider they are already reportedly looking for companies in the United States for reconstruction, then it seems obvious to me that the process will be secured by the U.S. military.”

Vocabulary

Sunday talk show circuit: political talk shows on American television including, Meet the Press, Face the Nation, Fox News Sunday and This Week.

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

interim civilian administration: a government that is put into place between the old and new governments.

“Working closely with Kosovo’s leaders and people, the mission (UNMIK) performs the whole spectrum of essential administrative functions and services covering such areas as health and education, banking and finance, post and telecommunications, and law and order.” (www.unmikonline.org)

colonialism: control by one power over a dependent area or people (Merriam-Webster)

European Union: economic, scientific, and political organization consisting of Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Finland, & Sweden (Merriam-Webster)

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**Additional Suggestions**

By Joanne Dufour

The United Nations of today is vastly different from the organization developed in 1945. Currently, there are at least forty-two specialized agencies and programs, and the General Assembly has grown to nearly four times its original size. Each of the 191 General Assembly members has one vote, but the body's decisions are nonbinding. The Security Council, on the other hand, consists of five permanent members and ten rotating members. The council's decisions are binding on all member-states.

Over the years, the UN has been involved with Iraq in a variety of ways: with the Oil for Food Program, the World Food Program has been a main supplier of essential food supplies; the UN Children's Fund is helping to counter children's health problems resulting from the Gulf War and the Iraq War; the UN's refugee agency has worked with a wide range of private voluntary organizations to provide humanitarian relief; the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has worked to preserve national treasures through the World Heritage Program; and the UN Special Commission has conducted the weapon inspection process through the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Regarding Iraq's future, the UN and its agencies may play a peacekeeping role, continue efforts against terrorism, engage in ongoing health-related work, work to counter environmental damage, facilitate the acceptance of credentials from a new Iraqi government to sit in the General Assembly, assist in reconstruction efforts, and participate in other efforts.

There have been a number of cases in which the Security Council has authorized a peacekeeping process after a war and has supervised the steps of writing constitutions, holding and monitoring elections, and being there when the new government was installed. These processes have sometimes taken years to complete.

**Questions**

- What constraints exist in the Security Council that impede decisiveness when addressing issues of war and peace?
- How have we seen these constraints in operation regarding recent events in Iraq?
- What lessons can be drawn from other nation-building efforts, such as those in Cambodia, Sierra Leone, or Afghanistan?
- What new or different institutional alternatives or other international entities could assist a nation rebuilding after a war?

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**Useful Websites**

The United Nations

www.un.org; click on “The Situation in Iraq.”

The United Nations CyberSchoolBus

www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus

...primarily be oriented towards humanitarian efforts? Due to recent complications such as those in the governing of Kosovo, should the U.N. be kept out of political or military campaigns altogether?

4. Based on current events, explain whether you think the U.N. will have an active role in other emerging global crises (e.g., North Korea).

5. Europe has recently become more united both politically and economically with the formation of the European Union (EU). As a result of recent events such as the war in Iraq, do you see the U.S. becoming more connected or less so to other nations (such as those in the EU) in the near future?

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**National Standards**

National Council for the Social Studies

For detailed explanations, please consult www.socialstudies.org/standards/teachers/vol1/

- **Thematic Standards**
  - Standard 5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS
  - Standard 6 POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE
  - Standard 9 GLOBAL CONNECTIONS
  - Standard 0 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES

- **Disciplinary Standards**
  - Standard 1 HISTORY
  - Standard 3 CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT

This lesson plan can be found at www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/iraq/unrole_4-6.html. More social studies lesson plans are available at PBS TeacherSource, www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/.

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