

IRAQ: SETBACKS, ADVANCES, PROSPECTS

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Whatever their views regarding the wisdom of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, friends of democracy cannot help but wish that the new regime which emerges in that country will be a reasonably democratic one. This is a matter of the gravest concern to the long-suffering Iraqi people, and to many others besides. For the success or failure of the effort to build and maintain a law-governed and democratic Iraq is bound to have major implications for the fate of democracy in the Middle East and beyond.

The outcome of the attempt at democratization in Iraq is not likely to become clear for a number of years. Although many serious obstacles have already been encountered, the most difficult institutional challenges, including holding elections for a representative government and drafting and adopting a new permanent constitution, still lie ahead. Moreover, this essay is going to press just after the capture of Saddam Hussein, and other significant changes are sure to take place as well. Nonetheless, given the importance of the Iraqi case, it seems worth the risk to offer an analysis of the early efforts to begin laying the foundations of democracy there, as well as some thoughts about what the future might hold.

The threefold goal of this essay should be stated at the outset: It begins by analyzing the serious setbacks that have dogged U.S.-led efforts to reconstruct Iraq into an at least relatively functional law-governed and democratic society. The essay then takes stock of the many successes and achievements that these efforts had nonetheless realized by the time of this writing, eight months after the armed forces of the United States, Britain, and some smaller allies toppled Saddam Hussein's 35-year-old dictatorship in three weeks of mobile, high-speed

warfare. And finally, it suggests various modalities for the building of democratic institutions, and analyzes the prospects for a sustainable democracy in Iraq.

The coalition forces have faced serious difficulties in Iraq, and these were apparently intensifying as the end of the year approached. But to portray these difficulties as definitively signifying the failure of the reconstruction or Iraqis' rejection of the U.S.- and British-led coalition's plans for their country would be a mistake, since it would mean unrealistically discounting many positive developments that augur well for Iraq's future as a free, democratic, peaceful, and law-governed country. Iraq is obviously not out of the woods, but to pronounce the coalition's effort a failure after just a few months of reconstruction following decades of dictatorship would be premature, to say the least.

With that proviso noted, let us turn to the setbacks. These fall into two categories: Some represent the appearance of difficulties inherent in the knotty circumstances of Iraq after decades of Saddam's depredations, distortions, and neglect, while others have been the bitter fruit of unforced errors. Coping with the former and learning to recognize and rectify the latter have demanded considerable flexibility and improvisation from veteran U.S. diplomat L. Paul Bremer and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) that he heads. U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell relayed a sense of the challenge when he confided in a September 2003 interview that "one unanticipated aspect of the postwar occupation was the extent to which the entire structure of Iraqi military and civil society collapsed so completely as the war ended, leaving a vast problem for American troops to handle."¹

Indeed, the problem of which Secretary Powell spoke has been vast. A seemingly endless array of challenges has confronted the CPA, at best delaying and at worst threatening to undermine the economic and political reconstruction of Iraq. The intrinsic difficulties can readily be listed: They include the political power vacuum created by the swift collapse of Saddam's regime; the chaotic and sometimes violent manifestations of political demands by people suddenly freed from tyranny; and the damage visited upon the country's economy and basic-services infrastructure by Saddam's abuses plus more than a decade of international sanctions. Yet other troubles can be traced to blunders committed by the CPA itself, some of whose policies and political decisions, particularly in the important early period after the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, smacked of poor preparation, scant knowledge of the country, and lack of sensitivity to certain salient social and cultural mores.

It is undeniable that insecurity and at times chaos have reigned for a dismayingly long time in some parts of Iraq, particularly in sections of Baghdad (whose sprawling environs contain around a fifth of Iraq's total population of about 25 million people) and in the "Sunni" zone. This area, which is often called the "Sunni triangle," is actually more of

a quadrilateral whose corners rest on Baghdad in the south, Saddam's home city of Tikrit in the north, Ramadi in the west, and Baquba in the east. The Arabic-speaking, Sunni Muslim tribes who predominate in this area received ample largess and many privileges from Saddam, and in turn staffed much of his secret-police and military apparatus. It is in this area that the vast majority of U.S. casualties have occurred. Saddam loyalists, who stand to lose the most from the demise of his regime, have perpetrated almost-daily attacks on U.S. convoys and personnel in this zone. Well-equipped and seemingly generously financed by Saddamist remnants who raided Iraq's treasury before fleeing Baghdad, these guerrillas have been waging a low-intensity war that U.S. commanders have been hard-pressed to contain, let alone eliminate.

It also appears that many (some say more than 2,000) violent Islamists from other Arab countries have infiltrated the porous borders of post-Saddam Iraq to strike at the U.S. "infidels." It is hard to say precisely how extensive and sophisticated is the cooperation between Saddamists and Islamists, but some does seem to exist. Adding to the CPA's woes are the vast numbers of convicts—some estimates run as high as 280,000—whom Saddam let out of jail in late 2002. Many of these are hardened murderers, kidnappers, robbers, and rapists who have terrorized certain cities, particularly Baghdad, and created a climate of lawlessness.

Compounding all this is the veritable sea of easily accessible weaponry in which Iraq is awash. In the early days after Saddam's fall it was reported that one could buy five hand grenades for a dollar in the main markets in broad daylight. Some improvement had occurred by August, when the price had reportedly risen to \$3 per grenade, though a bulk rate of \$20 for ten grenades was also said to be available.² Most of the armaments come from looted government arsenals: The CPA estimates that Saddam stockpiled a staggering 600,000 tons of arms and munitions. After six months of occupation, coalition forces had been able to destroy or secure no more than about 75,000 tons—or 12.5 percent—of the deadly stuff.

All these things have contributed to the precarious security situation, which weighs heavily and directly on U.S. forces and the CPA, and which has led to a substantial erosion of the initial good will and popular support that was in evidence just after Saddam and his regime were forcibly unseated last spring.

Of course, any fair account of the deterioration in security must recognize that many difficulties flow from the vacuum created by the collapse, under the guns of outside forces, of one of the twentieth century's most Procrustean and barbaric authoritarian systems. Iraq has previously known military coups followed by swift clampdowns, but never a sustained power vacuum. The war that the coalition launched on March 19 aimed to defeat the Iraqi armed forces and neutralize the Ba'ath Party, the two institutions that for more than three decades had sustained Saddam Hussein's grip on power. This meant that a yawning

political void would be left, with the well-nigh unavoidable consequence of an indefinite period of insecurity and instability.

There were, however, things that the coalition authorities could have done differently to ease the security problem. Two major mistakes were the decision to dissolve immediately all regular Iraqi military forces and the decision to ban all Ba'ath Party members from taking part in public life. The point is not that these institutions should have been allowed to carry on "business as usual." By any measure, Saddam's conscript army of almost half a million troops was absurdly bloated and a mainstay of his coercive rule. The Ba'ath Party, too, functioned as an instrument of intimidation designed to dragoon all sectors of society into line behind the "Great Leader." Coalition authorities were correct to think that Iraqis would be better off without such predatory entities in their midst.

The blunder lay in the timing. Evidently looking far over the horizon but not just down the road, CPA officials seem to have forgotten to ask themselves what it might mean to turn tens of thousands of military officers loose on the streets without at first even the promise of monetary compensation. Similarly, to proscribe all Ba'athists without exception from taking part in reconstruction was to exclude most of the very Iraqi professionals whose services must prove crucial in any scheme to rebuild the country. Coalition leaders should have known that the Party's ranks included large numbers of nominal members who were careerists more than cadres: They had joined only because, under Saddam, a party card was often essential to one's job prospects. In the case of both the Ba'ath Party and the armed forces, it would have been wiser to have begun with wide-ranging investigations aimed at identifying human rights violators and active Saddamists. Unfortunately, however, the army's dissolution and the party's proscription were announced without any mention of either compensation or measures to sort out the thugs from the time-servers. Substantial groups of Iraqis with military and organizational skills were thus dangerously alienated early on from the CPA and the reconstruction effort.

It is more than likely that Ba'athists and ex-soldiers have been involved in leading concerted attacks against coalition forces. These attacks have not only caused huge disruptions in the CPA's plans to secure and stabilize Iraq, but have led to gravely heightened tensions between Iraqis and coalition forces in some areas. The unenviable position in which U.S. troops have found themselves—especially in Baghdad and the Sunni regions to its north and west—has been that of trying to win civilian "hearts and minds" while simultaneously maintaining intense vigilance and a high tempo of operations against daily assaults by the so-called resistance. As attacks continued, U.S. soldiers responded with increasing belligerence and less regard for Iraqi cultural norms and sensitivities.³ As the year's end approached, with the U.S. mounting major military operations in cities of the "Sunni Belt," supported by heavy air and ground weapons, there seemed to be little good will left

for the United States in the Sunni regions of Iraq. Another problem that has plagued the coalition authority has been the snail's pace at which the country's return to a semblance of normalcy has proceeded. Rampant unemployment amid a stagnant economy fueled a number of angry, and in a few cases fatal, confrontations between distraught Iraqis and coalition troops or Iraqi police. The CPA's progress in restoring basic services was painfully slow for months. Lagging electric-power generation during the summer of 2003, for instance, proved to be a major headache, as millions in Baghdad and elsewhere suffered from temperatures of up to 130 degrees Fahrenheit and economic activity was retarded.

Finally, the CPA failed to do a good job of communicating its plans and policies to the Iraqi people. It was slow to respond to widespread Iraqi fears—stoked relentlessly by the Arab-world media—that the “real” U.S. goal was to dominate Iraq unilaterally and steal its oil. Various U.S. officials reiterated their commitment to Iraqi democracy, but the contours of a possible timeline for institutional change in Iraq followed by U.S. withdrawal remained nebulous throughout the summer and into the fall of 2003. In mid-November, however, the CPA agreed to mark out clear signposts toward the transfer of sovereign powers to Iraqis, culminating in elections for a new permanent Iraqi government by the end of 2005. This should do much to quell Iraqi disquiet about U.S. intentions.

Why Talk of an “Iraqi Resistance” Is Misguided

While the situation in Iraq gives rise to much concern, it is not by any stretch of the imagination desperate. Many observers, perhaps focusing too heavily on day-to-day media coverage, seem unable to shift their attention from the security situation to other developments in the country, many of which give grounds for optimism. Perhaps first among these is that Iraqis on the whole have chosen the path of peace. It is unfortunate that many in the Arab and Western press have bestowed on the perpetrators of attacks against coalition forces the grandiose label “the Iraqi resistance.” Such a categorization, whether purposely or inadvertently, creates an impression of a universal phenomenon supported by most Iraqis. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Most of the attacks on coalition forces in fact have occurred in an area that is geographically and demographically narrow. My analysis of U.S. casualties since the beginning of the occupation shows that more than four out of five U.S. deaths inflicted by hostile action took place in the Sunni areas that cover parts of Baghdad and the territory to its north and west. If one looks at the total numbers of attacks (nearly all of which, every day, are “misses” that result in no harm to coalition forces and do not make the news), one sees that more than 75 percent of them have occurred in the towns north and west of Baghdad and on the roads linking them, while fewer than 2 percent have taken place in Basra, the heavily

Shi'ite southern city with a population of 1.75 million.⁴ Taken together, all these Sunni towns (including Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah, Baquba, Balad, Taji, and Dhuluiya) contain no more than 1.5 million people, or about 6 percent of Iraq's total population. More than three times as many coalition soldiers have been killed in the area inhabited by this tiny segment of the population, belonging mainly to tribes that filled the ranks of Saddam's security organs, than in the entire Shi'ite-dominated region of southern Iraq, which is home to more than half of all Iraqis. Indeed, three days after a November 12 suicide truck bombing that killed 19 Italian members of the coalition forces—including 12 Carabinieri military-police troops—and 8 Iraqi civilians in the southern city of Nasiriyah, local people organized two large demonstrations, lofting placards that denounced the attack as an outside plot to undermine the fraternal relations between the Carabinieri and the townsfolk. The marchers laid wreaths of flowers at what had been the gate of the Italian barracks.⁵

In fact, the Sunni community as a whole might be excused for feeling exasperated at seeing its religious affiliation associated constantly with attacks on U.S. troops. There is no evidence that the Sunni middle class in Baghdad is involved in, or even supports, the violence in Iraq. And in the northern city of Mosul, where more than a million Sunni Arabs live, there are still considerably fewer attacks on U.S. soldiers than in the area between Baghdad and Tikrit.

In areas heavily peopled by Kurds and Shi'ites, who between them constitute around four-fifths of the population of Iraq and predominate across more than three-fifths of its land area, there has been much less violence against coalition forces. The Kurds have allied themselves closely with the United States, and were the only Iraqi community that joined the coalition to fight Saddam. Since then, they have been vocal supporters of the coalition presence, not even demanding a timetable for withdrawal.

The majority Shi'ites, for their part, do register more eagerness to see the occupation end and full Iraqi sovereignty return, but they have been adamant that the path to this goal should be a peaceful one. They generally have been willing to give the United States the benefit of the doubt, waiting for the CPA to make good on its promises to stabilize Iraq, set it on the path of economic and political development, and then leave. The community's senior clerical leaders (known as the four *marjas*, they are Ali al-Sistani, Muhamed Ishaq Fayadh, Muhamed Said al-Hakim, and Bashir al-Najafi) have consistently counseled against confronting coalition forces.⁶ Sistani, the most senior cleric with the largest following, has issued a *fatwa* (religious opinion) that permits cooperation with the occupation forces.⁷ Even the young clerical firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr has stopped short of advocating violence in his anticoalition sermons.⁸

Two reasons explain this moderation. First, the Shi'ites—who were marginalized, harassed, and even persecuted by the old regime—feel indebted to the United States for ending Saddam's tyranny. Second, the

Shi'ites know that a hasty exit by coalition forces would in all probability usher the Ba'athists back into power. The Shi'ites, who make up as much as 60 percent of the population, also feel that it is in their own best interest to wait until their majority status is confirmed by a census (Iraq has not had one nationwide since 1987). After such a census, the onset of electoral politics will bestow political and institutional legitimization on Shi'ite demographic preponderance, and the time will then be ripe for foreign forces to withdraw.

As far as we can tell from opinion polling conducted by Gallup, Zogby International, and the Iraqi Center for Research and Strategic Studies, the majority of Iraqis are holding aloof from any anticoalition activities. Furthermore, when asked whether they would support the coalition forces remaining in Iraq for one more year, more than 70 percent said yes. This is not that far from CPA thinking, as should be apparent from the coalition's ongoing (and now accelerated) "Iraqification" approach to security, which revolves around the transfer of responsibility for public order to local police who are being recruited, trained, and organized with coalition help. As of December 2003, more than 120,000 Iraqi police and other security officers had deployed in Baghdad and other major cities, putting an increasingly Iraqi face on the mission of protecting the public against terrorists and other criminals. Between May and November, more than 100 Iraqi police and security officers gave their lives in the line of duty. While the transition has been hampered by early delays and has sometimes been rough, overall it has proved a positive development, and Iraqis have welcomed it. Thousands more new police officers are being trained, and coalition officials are also working to form a new-model Iraqi army of about 40,000 highly mobile troops. All this augurs well for the gradual stabilization of the security situation.

The Governing Council and the Cabinet

The CPA's path through Iraq's complicated political terrain has resembled its movement toward transferring security responsibilities to Iraqis. After a deleterious delay of more than three months, the CPA appointed a 25-member Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) with wide-ranging decision-making authority. After much deliberation, the IGC named a 25-member Cabinet of well-regarded technocrats and specialists to manage the central-government ministries. While CPA chief Bremer holds veto power over the IGC, he had not used it as of this writing, and has seemed commendably cautious about taking any steps that would put the CPA into an adversarial relationship with the IGC.

Critics of the IGC and Cabinet have three main complaints. First, many officials and journalists from other Arab countries, joined by some Iraqis, claim that the IGC lacks legitimacy because its members were named by foreigners. For a time after the IGC's appointment, requests

by its members to make official visits to Arab capitals met icy receptions. In speeches of stunning hypocrisy, a number of Arab leaders insisted, to cheers from their state-run media, that only an authority chosen by free elections could be accepted as representing Iraq. For more than a month, the secretary-general of the Arab League—not one of whose 22 member states is a democracy—vowed that “Iraq’s seat would remain unfilled until the formation of an elected government.”⁹ To this, the IGC’s Ibrahim al-Jafari tartly replied that “we in the new Iraq are willing to learn from [other Arab states], so when their governmental representatives are chosen through democratic elections, we shall follow suit.”¹⁰ Arab leaders were soon shamed into retreat, and agreed to seat the Iraqi foreign minister as a “temporary measure” pending the formation of a permanent government. The rest of the international community seems likewise willing to accord the IGC functional recognition as Iraq’s representative in the international arena.

The second line of criticism focuses on the ethnic and sectarian considerations that governed the choice of personnel to serve on the IGC and in the Cabinet. Each 25-member body comprises 13 Shi’ites, 5 Sunni Arabs, 5 Sunni Kurds, and 2 individuals from smaller minorities such as the Turkoman or the Chaldeans. In some quarters of Iraq (especially among the Sunnis) and in a number of Arab countries, the CPA and the IGC have been criticized for allegedly promoting particular and especially sectarian loyalties over national unity. Such a practice, the critics warn, will tend to foster and institutionalize narrow affinities and could exacerbate divisions among the various Iraqi communities.

The critics may have a point here. Certainly, as we shall see later, it would not be wise to allow the present ethnic and sectarian allocations to be written into the new constitution, for instance. The Middle East does not need another Lebanese-style confessional system that carries within itself the seeds of violence and dislocation. But after 35 years of Saddam’s narrow and virulent ethnosectarian policies, the CPA had to try and give as many groups as possible a place at the table. More than half the members of the IGC, moreover, are affiliated with secular parties and organizations. One of the “Shi’ite” members, for example, is actually the secretary-general of the Iraqi Communist Party! Clearly the permanent electoral system should be devoid of ethnic or sectarian considerations, but in the early days after Saddam, it was on balance desirable to take such considerations into account as part of a special effort at inclusiveness.

The third critique, heard widely in the Arab world, dismisses the IGC and the Cabinet as U.S. puppets. While it would be naïve to think that the CPA will allow the IGC and the Cabinet to make major decisions deemed inimical to fundamental U.S. goals, to label the IGC and the Cabinet as puppets is hardly an accurate depiction of their evolving relationship with the CPA. To begin with, the very fact that Iraq has a *Governing* Council and not a merely *Advisory* Council is the

result of Iraqi political figures from various parties standing their ground and convincing Bremer that he would have to give them some decision-making powers or have no council at all. The IGC chose the Cabinet, moreover, with negligible CPA input. Although Bremer has made a point of trying to promote a greater role for women in the political process, he did not argue with the IGC's decision to name only one female Cabinet member. In early November 2003, the United States and Turkey abandoned their painstakingly negotiated agreement to send 10,000 Turkish troops to Iraq after the IGC publicly voiced unanimous opposition to the deal, citing the inevitability of friction between the Turks and the Iraqi population. Later that month, Washington was rife with hints and rumors that the days of the IGC were numbered due to its alleged paralysis and ineptitude. Specifically, Bremer and the CPA seemed particularly frustrated by the IGC's declared inability to comply with a UN demand to set by December 15 a timetable for drafting an Iraqi constitution. In fact, the CPA ended up accepting the IGC's position and agreeing on a political process of democratic transition and constitutional design that was almost wholly in tune with IGC thinking.

The Cabinet, for its part, has gone about its business with no visible CPA interference. In early October, for instance, the Communications Ministry gave three Arab companies large contracts to install a mobile-phone network using European rather than U.S. technology. This was a surprise to many in both the Arab world and the West (including members of the U.S. Congress) who had been assuming that the CPA would somehow steer these contracts to U.S. suppliers.

The Emergence of Civil Society

Probably the most encouraging development in Iraq has been the surge of activity at the level of local self-government and civil society. Most Iraqi towns and cities—including the major conurbations of Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Kirkuk—now have governing councils that have been chosen through consensual processes, often involving elections. In most cases these councils have run the affairs of their towns either in cooperation with, or independently of, coalition forces.¹¹ The case of genuine “grassroots democracy” in Baghdad is particularly interesting. Suffering from widespread lawlessness, the city was still able in the fall of 2003 to form 88 neighborhood councils, which then in turn elected a 37-member council for the whole city.¹² These councils will over time prove to be indispensable agents not only for political stability, but for the growth of a democratic political culture and institutional ensemble in the new Iraq.

Without a doubt, the mushrooming of local self-government councils has been one of the major success stories of the occupation. Even those

councils that have not been elected have been selected through peaceful and relatively (or even impressively) consensual means, in more than a few cases with initial advice and assistance from coalition military officers, and are providing scope for unprecedented amounts of open debate and citizen participation. As such, these appointed councils too represent strong signs of progress, and will, one may reasonably hope, eventually be brought under the electoral principle without fundamental disruption.

On the national level, a plethora of political parties has sprung up—so many, indeed, that precise numbers are hard to come by. There are at least twenty, and by some estimates more than a hundred. They run the ideological gamut from left to right, and represent secular as well as religious concerns. Organizationally, some are developing a national reach with offices in more than one city, while others are focused on building support on narrower ethnic or tribal bases. Interestingly, many of these parties have also begun to build alliances, coalescing around a common policy or political demand. One example is the coordination among leftist parties in highlighting the plight of the unemployed. Another is the Wafd coalition, which was created in September by parties and other groupings that oppose the IGC. These groups quickly formed a 30-member committee to explain to Arab and European countries the group's concerns and its objections to IGC and U.S. policies. This expression of opposition peacefully and within the democratic "rules of the game" is the kind of sign one would hope to see if democracy in Iraq is to have a future.

At the level of civil society, many important professional syndicates—these are prestigious groups that respectively represent journalists, physicians, engineers, lawyers, writers, university professors, pharmacists, and so on—have ousted the old leaders that Saddam forced on them and elected new ones in their place. These new-modeled syndicates have not only called for the institution of a democratic political system, but have also shown eagerness to take an active part in public life after Saddam. On the preparatory committee of the physicians' syndicate, for example, sit doctors who also hold memberships in 14 of the new political parties.¹³ In some cases, this new journey on the democratic path has proved less than smooth. Recriminations—the bitterest have occurred among the journalists, whose field Saddam so intensely politicized—have often centered on the expected division between exiles and those who remained behind.¹⁴

The turmoil in the journalistic profession also reflects what can probably be described as the most spectacular change in political culture that has occurred in Iraq. Saddam's Iraq had just five daily newspapers, and the robotic rendition of governmental ideas and policies defined them all. As of late 2003, a reader can find more than 150 dailies and weeklies being energetically sold—and avidly bought—on the streets of Iraq's cities. These papers speak for all kinds of organizations and shades of opinion,

including those given to vigorous attacks on the CPA and the IGC. Clearly, Iraqis have a hunger for undoctored news and varied opinions.

Building Democratic Institutions

The mushrooming of political parties, syndicates, and newspapers signals a nascent political pluralism upon which democracy can be built.¹⁵ But the success of the democratic experiment will depend on whether the constitutional and political arrangements put in place can adapt to the country's social and communal imperatives. Perhaps the most talked about and heatedly debated topics are the ethnic and sectarian divisions in Iraq. Many see these as impediments to stability and democracy. Over the long term, however, the interest of these communities in being able to place checks on each other's powers is likely to promote democracy at the expense of communal particularism. The question is what set of institutional arrangements is most likely to bring this about.

As we have seen, one method, which the CPA adopted, is to apportion decision-making and administrative positions on the basis of the demographic ratios of the various communities. This practice, which governed the selection of IGC and Cabinet membership, was extended to district and council elections in communally heterogeneous Iraqi cities and towns. The CPA would determine the "fair" number of representatives for each community and then invite members of that community to vote for their representatives. Kirkuk is a case in point, with an elected city council apportioned among Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Sunni Turkoman, and Christian Assyrians.

Saddam had marginalized or excluded almost all of Iraq's communities other than the Sunni Arabs. Hence it seemed fitting for the CPA to give a political role to representatives from as many communities as possible. Yet institutionalizing such a policy—by writing it into the new constitution, for example—would be bad for Iraq's future, since it would ingrain and legitimize particularistic identities, creating notions of "exclusiveness" that inevitably would exacerbate the divisions among the country's various communities. Indeed, the much-touted ethnosectarian democratic experiment in Kirkuk is already beginning to founder. The Kurdish mayor has demanded the relocation of hundreds of thousands of Kurds to the city, prompting the Arab deputy mayor to demand a new city council. Turkoman council members, meanwhile, have threatened to boycott meetings because of the appearance of Kurdish flags in the city, an issue that has precipitated armed clashes. Christians have complained that they feel underrepresented, and Arab Shi'ite clerics have arrived in Kirkuk to "protect" the small Turkoman Shi'ite community, which is not represented on the council. All this points to the conclusion that a far better alternative for the country would be the creation of a federal system that is decentralized on the basis of territory, not ethnicity or sect.

Creating territorially based federalism allows local governments to have responsibility for all citizens in their areas, not just ethnic or sectarian conationals. Thus creating a federal state consisting of a Kurdish north, a Sunni central portion, and a Shi'ite south would entrench ethnic and sectarian attitudes, leading to a spectrum of highly undesirable outcomes ranging from ethnic cleansing to inflexibility in political bargaining among the federal units and between them and the center. It is far more propitious to divide Iraq administratively into more than three units, perhaps even to keep the present 18-governorate structure. Such an arrangement would still serve the interests of the various communities, but could do so while shifting political and social attitudes away from blatant ethnic and sectarian concerns to more secular and political priorities that would spring from the inevitable competitions over resources. Each of Iraq's larger communities might even see some such competitions arising within itself, which would reduce the chance of larger-scale confrontations.

Another institution to be avoided at all costs is a strong presidency. This is after all the political model that dominates Arab politics, where authoritarianism, corruption, and self-aggrandizement reign. History teaches that it is almost impossible to get Arab presidents to leave office: They usually cling to power by amending constitutions in undemocratic ways, or by violating constitutional norms outright. Indeed, Arab presidents increasingly have not been content merely to stay in office indefinitely, but have begun grooming sons to succeed them. In Arab capitals today, one hears Arab presidential systems described as "monarchical republics."

Splitting executive functions between a head of state and a head of government would be a better bet for those who hope to sustain democracy in Iraq, since a prime minister chosen by a parliamentary majority would be a buttress against presidential abuse. Such a system could feature a president chosen by the legislature's upper house. An arrangement of this sort would be less open to the abuse of power, less likely to slide into authoritarianism, less vulnerable to military coups, and therefore more liable to endure as a foundation for consent-based government. It would also be geared to rewarding leadership based on technical and administrative competence rather than fiery rhetoric and nationalist appeals.

As for electoral systems and modalities, the issue is whether to give voice to local minority interests by having multimember districts (MMDs) or to encourage the emergence of sole local representatives through the institution of single-member districts (SMDs). There are several advantages to MMDs in the Iraqi context. They should 1) increase the representation of professional and middle-class opinion; 2) allow tribal elements to enter parliament without becoming the exclusive channel for a region's representation; and 3) provide a better chance for smaller ethnic and religious minorities from the big cities to gain a voice in parliament. Additionally, experience elsewhere seems to show that MMD

systems which feature more than five legislators per district tend to be associated with greater representation of women in parliament.

Finally, the ethnosectarian complexion of Iraq makes it advantageous to adopt a mixed electoral system, where half the seats are determined by district elections and the other half by proportional representation (PR). This system gives voters more chances for direct and personal contact with representatives from their locales, and also promotes the development of nationwide parties with programs that transcend narrowly regional, ethnic, or sectarian concerns. Typically, in order to field PR candidates, parties need to have large numbers of registered members spread across most electoral districts. This provides incentives for outreach and discourages efforts to build parties on ethnic and sectarian bases. The Kurds, for example, will need to cooperate with other groups in forming a national party or else face the prospect that their only representatives in parliament will come from those districts that have predominantly Kurdish populations.

The introduction of a new constitution that reflects the political institutions discussed above—accompanied by a demonstrated commitment of the new order to democratic transition—should also help to free Iraq's large middle class from the apathy that plagues it like a hangover from the Saddam era. Extensive research has shown that an independent and self-sustaining middle class is essential for democratic civil life. The bulk of Iraq's middle class, however, has been directly dependent on the state, primarily through employment in the civil bureaucracy, state-owned industries, and military or security agencies. Even the "independent" Iraqi private sector has shown little inclination to promote democracy. As long as there was money to be made, state dictates to leave politics alone fell on ready ears. And to add to this paralysis, the 13 years of UN-mandated economic sanctions had a debilitating impact on society as a whole, the middle class included. World Bank figures show that the country's economy contracted by 22 percent in 2003, following contractions of 21 percent in 2002 and 12 percent in 2001. Annual per-capita income, \$3,600 in 1980, now stands at just \$450. Half the workforce is jobless, and three-fifths of all Iraqis depend totally on the food-rationing system.¹⁶

The recently passed \$18.6 billion U.S. aid package for fiscal 2004 should go a long way to putting Iraq on the road to economic recovery. Furthermore, supporting free market and private-sector initiatives will have enormous political payoffs in developing a self-sustaining and entrepreneurial middle class that could become the pivotal agent in promoting democratic values and institutions.

It is thus essential that as many Iraqi businesses as possible be contracted to participate in the reconstruction process. Already many in Iraq have complained that corporations such as Bechtel and Halliburton have awarded too many contracts to Saudi, Kuwaiti, Jordanian, Egyptian, and

other non-Iraqi companies for work that Iraqis could do just as well and for less. Whatever the merits of these complaints, if the aid package is to be an agent not just for economic prosperity but also for political reform, then a substantial portion needs to go to indigenous businesses.

Prospects

Given all the problems that have dogged Iraq since the fall of Saddam's regime, the casual observer may be excused for thinking that all talk of promoting liberal ideals and building democratic structures is simply untenable or at best grossly premature. And the perceptible increase in guerrilla activity and military hostilities toward the end of the year could only cement such misgivings. After all, how could one expect Iraqis to think about the ways of democracy in the midst of such violence?

In fact, the most encouraging sign for the long haul is the sheer frequency with which Iraqis are using such key democratic terms as elections, parliament, human rights, press freedom, minority rights, and the like as debates over the country's future proceed. In the wide-ranging discourse now being heard both publicly and privately in Iraq, the need for an elected legislature and government has become almost a foregone conclusion. When it comes to the electoral process, there may be debates over timing as well as the exact methods and institutions to be adopted, but a clear majority harbors no doubt that elections are *the* necessary path to governance. Even the Muslim clergy insists on elections as crucial to the legitimacy of any governmental or constitutional arrangement. Thus while the CPA was planning to appoint the members of a constitution-drafting convention, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the most senior Shi'ite cleric, insisted that any such body must itself be chosen by Iraqi voters.¹⁷ In another instance, the Najaf Hawza comprising Sistani and the three other most senior ayatollahs rejected a new nationality law on the grounds that only "constitutional government and parliament, elected by the people, can take such strategic decisions."¹⁸ Sunni leaders too have advocated the institution of democracy and have called for "general elections."¹⁹

This propensity reveals itself in a number of recent opinion surveys. Taken together, the Gallup and Zogby International polls mentioned earlier cover Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Ramadi. On one key matter, the pollsters found that around 40 percent of those surveyed preferred a secular multiparty democracy, while only 10 percent said they wanted an Iranian-type clerical government.²⁰ The Iraqi Center for Research and Strategic Studies has conducted more comprehensive surveys in Baghdad, the Shi'ite cities of Basra and Najaf, the Sunni cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, and the Kurdish cities of Irbil and Sulaymaniya. These polls show that more than half of those asked chose democracy. As for the modalities of democracy, 58 percent favored a democratic system with powers shared between a president and a prime minister, 22

percent advocated a strong presidential system, and 14 percent preferred a prime minister and cabinet alone.²¹ Moreover, in a survey conducted by an Iraqi newspaper among law professors, lawyers, and judicial experts, 74 percent preferred a secular constitution, with 98 percent insisting on protections for civil liberties and 94 percent favoring separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers.²² What is encouraging about these figures is that they show a strong residue of prodemocratic sentiment at a time of extensive frustration with lawlessness, lack of public services, and unemployment—conditions that traditionally have made people long for strong centralizing institutions to keep order.

Any analysis of post-Saddam Iraq must concede that security, political, and economic conditions have not developed according to what might roughly be called “the best-case scenario, prewar.” Unforeseen developments for which the coalition forces seemed unprepared combined with CPA political blunders to sidetrack plans for the rapid political and economic transformation of Iraq. By the same token, much coverage of the problems that face the coalition administrators and their Iraqi partners has been exaggerated, while many successes—achieved, let us remember, quite rapidly and often under arduous conditions—have gone begging for attention. Although what people formed under totalitarianism say to inquisitive strangers must always be taken with a grain of salt, it is impressive to see that in a number of different surveys the Iraqis have indicated by wide margins that they are neither incurably hostile to the coalition presence nor despondent about their future. The Gallup and Zogby International polls show that seven out of ten Iraqis are in fact optimistic about both their own and their country’s future; two-thirds believe that the removal of Saddam Hussein was worth the hardships that they have endured since his fall; and two-thirds also want coalition forces to remain for another year.²³

With civil society showing vigor, representative institutions being built at several levels, and the concepts of electoralism and wide-ranging public discussion becoming increasingly central to Iraqi political consciousness, there is room to be reasonably encouraged not only about Iraq’s stability and economic prosperity, but also, and perhaps more importantly for the future of the country, about the prospects for workable and sustainable democracy.

NOTES

1. *New York Times*, 26 September 2003.

2. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), 14 August 2003.

3. Even a committed supporter such as female IGC member Raja al-Khuzai was moved to declare in a press conference in Madrid that there was “widespread consternation in Iraq regarding the coalition forces, most of whom treat the Iraqi people harshly and with contempt.” *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), 16 September 2003.

4. This analysis, done by the author, makes use of a variety of Arabic- and English-language media sources, and is confirmed by a similar analysis that the newspaper *USA Today* undertook of 558 attacks that took place between 17 August and 28 September 2003. See *USA Today*, 3 October 2003. Consider also the segment entitled “Basra Faces a Different Threat” on National Public Radio’s program *All Things Considered*, broadcast of 13 October 2003, www.npr.org/rundowns/segment.php?wfId=1464598.

5. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 November 2003.

6. See for example, *al-Hayat* (London), 18 August 2003; and *al-Zaman* (Baghdad), 4 August 2003. Other senior Shi’ite clerics, such as Taqei Mudarassi, Muhamed Bahr al-Uloom, Hussein al-Sadr, and Muhamed Hussein al-Hakim have echoed the same sentiments on many occasions.

7. *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 15 October 2003.

8. *Al-Hayat*, 20 September 2003; *al-Hayat*, 7 September 2003; *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 15 October 2003; *al-Zaman*, 2 and 6–7 November 2003.

9. *Al-Zaman*, 6 August 2003; see also *al-Hayat*, 2 August 2003.

10. *Al-Hayat*, 26 September 2003.

11. See for example, *al-Hayat*, 3 August 2003; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 14 August 2003; *al-Hayat*, 16 September 2003; *al-Zaman*, 11 October 2003; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 October 2003.

12. Thomas L. Friedman, “The Least-Bad Option,” *New York Times*, 12 October 2003.

13. *Al-Wifaq* (London), 7 September 2003.

14. *Al-Hayat*, 24 July 2003; *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 7 August 2003; *al-Zaman*, 7 August 2003.

15. This section draws on Adeed and Karen Dawisha, “How to Build a Democratic Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 82 (May–June 2003): 36–50; and Adeed and Karen Dawisha, “Hope for Iraq,” *Prospect* 89 (August 2003): 18–23.

16. United Nations/World Bank, “Joint Iraq Needs Assessment,” October 2003, 4, 18, 59.

17. *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 12 September 2003.

18. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 7 October 2003.

19. *Al-Hayat*, 14 June 2003; *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 3 August 2003; *al-Hayat*, 4 August 2003.

20. *Al-Wifaq*, 9 September 2003; *Washington Times*, 5 October 2003.

21. *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 7 August 2003; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 24 October 2003.

22. *Al-Zaman*, 17 September 2003.

23. Poll findings were reported in *Al-Wifaq*, 12 and 25 September 2003; *New York Times*, 24 September 2003; and *Washington Times*, 5 October 2003.