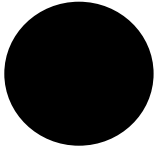


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## Imagining Iraq, Defining Its Future

*Missy Ryan*

BAGHDAD, Iraq—In a neglected graveyard, headstones of British soldiers lie discarded in the sand, sheared off by nearby bomb blasts, toppled by vandals, and crumbled by the passage of 90 years since these young men died in an unfamiliar desert land while their generals and statesmen conjured up a country called Iraq. The British war cemetery, which sits on the edge of a Baghdad thruway, is one of the visible reminders of the first Western occupation of modern Iraq, when European powers divvied up the spoils of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I and British administrators endowed Iraq with the foundations of a modern state.

Today, the legacy of the American adventure in Iraq is slowly coming into focus. As U.S. soldiers prepare to withdraw after a seven-year occupation, the new Iraqi state takes unsteady steps toward an uncertain future. At the heart of that assessment, which will shape America's standing across the Middle East for years to come, is the nature and performance of the nation the United States leaves behind—its ability to contain a still-tenacious insurgency, the success of its elections, the brand of government it chooses, the role it allots to women and minorities. Even after parliamentary polls in March, when voters defied insurgent attacks

to cast ballots, the dangers are many. Iraq has not yet settled major questions about the balance of power between central and regional authorities, how a newly empowered majority will treat minorities, and how to achieve national reconciliation.

Still, in some respects, Iraq may present a more favorable portrait than anyone could have expected in 2006 and 2007, when the bodies of Iraqis slain in sectarian violence piled up on the streets and innocent people were shot at checkpoints for having the wrong name. Indeed, it may be surprising to think that Iraq in 2010, though far from a liberal, Jeffersonian (or even certain) democracy, could put American allies like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan to shame in terms of democratic governance.

In a region known for rigged elections and authoritarian regimes, Iraq stands apart for its elected, if only somewhat representative government, competing political parties, and the existence of institutional checks and balances. A decade ago, Iraqis didn't dare vote against Saddam Hussein in periodic sham elections. Toothless local media crowed endlessly about Baath Party triumphs. Decision-making was utterly opaque and concentrated at the top where paranoia reigned supreme.

## *A Rose in the Desert*

“You have to remember that our government was one of the worst in the world. To found a democracy in this context is like planting a rose in the desert. We managed to do it, but at a tremendous cost,” says my friend Moafaq, a Shiite writer and linguist who lives in Baghdad.

Indeed, it must be asked what is an acceptable cost for such modest progress. How far has Iraq actually come? Can the parties empowered by the March 7 vote form a functional coalition government? And can a country sitting astride the Middle East’s Shiite-Sunni fault line, where rival factions have yet to define a collective vision for the future and where security forces take faltering steps against a still-ruthless insurgency, hold things together as the United States prepares to terminate combat operations in August 2010?

In light of the vast changes that are likely to take place over the next several months, it’s worth taking a look back at just how we got to this point. Just as Britain’s Lt. Gen. Frederick Stanley Maude, riding in to claim Baghdad in March 1917, promised to liberate Iraqis from Ottoman rule, Operation Iraqi Freedom and the early days of the U.S. presence in Iraq reveal the quixotic assumptions about how Iraqis would take to a new foreign military authority.

Salama al-Khafaji, a dentistry professor who became one of the few female members of Iraq’s new governing council, remembers her 10-year-old son pull a chair up to the garden wall to watch U.S. tanks roll down the street in April 2003. “We were dreaming about this day for so long,” said Khafaji, a devout Shiite whose family had practiced their religion in secret for fear of being executed or imprisoned by Saddam. “But we didn’t think that it would be followed by the destruction of everything we knew.”

Expectations for a peaceful, democratic transformation in Iraq seemed an impetuous

dream in the dark years that followed, when militants dressed in security uniforms overran government buildings and officials were assassinated on their way to work. Even by the grotesque standards of the Iraq war, Khafaji has sacrificed unimaginably for a new Iraq.

Her eyes glisten as she recounts how gunmen ambushed her armed convoy in the city of Yusufiya, south of Baghdad, in May 2004. She escaped, but her 17-year-old son, riding in the car ahead of hers, was shot and killed as he hid in a roadside canal. Two years later, insurgents fired a mortar at the home of Khafaji’s younger sister, who had been threatened repeatedly due to her sister’s political activity. She was killed. In 2007, Khafaji’s husband, a businessman, was shot in the back as he walked down the street in Baghdad’s Mansour neighborhood. Three of her bodyguards have also been killed.

Khafaji professes no regrets. “My father taught us that good things do not come easily. I believe Iraq is worth sacrificing for—the Tigris and Euphrates, the palms, the shrines, and mosques,” she said. After a political hiatus of several years, Khafaji decided to return to politics and signed up last year as a candidate with a leading Shiite group. “I would like to be proud of Iraq. But we haven’t reached where we need to get yet, to where Iraqis deserve to be.”

## *Stoking Sectarianism?*

Many Iraqis blame the United States for empowering the religious and identity-based parties that presided over the governance disaster that followed the early military success. The economy ground to a halt, oil production sputtered, and reconstruction money sloshing through the country made for rampant corruption. U.S. decisions brought their own problems, most notably the decrees dissolving Iraqi security forces and purging ministries of tens of thousands



On the eve of the March elections, praying for Iraq's future and mourning its present.

of Baath party members. Overnight, Iraq lost its governing class and the streets were flooded with armed, angry men.

The American occupiers—much as the British retained the Sunni Arabs who were the Ottomans' administrators in Iraq—looked for a mixture of familiarity and authority in selecting early leaders of post-Saddam Iraq. But for many Iraqis, the new political elite, drawn from expatriate opposition leaders and Islamists persecuted under Saddam, was viewed with suspicion. Many of the leaders of the United Iraqi Alliance, speaking for a newly ascendant Shiite majority, had lived in exile for decades and were presumed now to be advancing their own agendas—exactng vengeance for years of subjugation, which reinforced sectarian and ethnic hostility.

It's true that Iraqis have voted mainly along sectarian lines since the overthrow of Saddam. In 2005, voters cemented the dominance of identity-based parties, such as the powerful Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council

(ISCI), Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Islamic Daw'a Party, and the Kurdish alliance. In some ways, the rise of identity politics in Iraq was understandable. Party affiliation became an existential question. People wanted to know who could protect their families from enemies, both real and perceived. And identity in Iraq can be a tricky thing. The way Iraqis identify themselves depends on who's asking and why. To a Westerner, the man on the street is Iraqi, a proud nationalist; but to a fellow Iraqi, he is a Sunni, a Shiite, or a Kurd. Within his own sect or ethnicity, he may be a southerner, a Baghdadi, or a Kirkuki.

If Iraqis weren't surprised by the sectarian alliances created in the chaos after the American invasion—and following decades in which Saddam responded to Shiite and Kurdish threats with a paranoid brutality—they were shocked when the country tipped into all-out sectarian war. At least 95,000 civilians have perished since 2003, according to Iraq Body Count, a British watchdog

group. Over 4,500 foreign troops have lost their lives.

Today, after a period of relative calm, there are worrying signs Iraqis are moving further apart. In the wake of the sectarian purges of 2006–07, Baghdad is a far more segregated city than it once was. In the largely autonomous Kurdistan region to the north, many young people speak only broken Arabic. In the historically diverse city of Kirkuk, a post-2003 initiative to allow minorities to study in their native tongue has meant that many Kurdish children study in schools funded and staffed by the Kurdistan government. Their official Kurdish textbooks teach that Kirkuk is by right a Kurdish city, home “mainly to Kurds, but where Arabs and Turkmen also live.”

That sort of assertion in Kirkuk, where a dispute over provincial demography and voter registries held up provincial elections last year and threatened to derail national polls in March, infuriates Arabs like Abu Bilad, a lieutenant colonel forced out of Saddam’s army in 2003. Like other Kirkuki Arabs, Abu Bilad accuses Kurds of heavy-handedness and abuse since they took control of Kirkuk in 2003. He’s also one of the growing number of Sunnis and other Iraqis nostalgic for the Saddam era. “Look, I know half of Kirkuk. I have many friends who are Kurds. But the police here, who are mostly Kurdish, don’t take interest in us Arabs or Turkmen,” he said. “My life is much worse now than it was before.”

### *Taking Stock*

Far from the heady days of 2003, American officials now measure progress bit by bit—and compare Iraq to other nations in the region. Iraq “is already more democratic than all its neighbors, except for Turkey,” says a U.S. official, on condition of anonymity. That’s not saying much, though, given Iraq’s rough and tumble neighborhood: the controlling Assad dynasty in Syria, King

Abdullah’s virtually unchecked power in Jordan, and Hosni Mubarak’s enduring rule in Egypt—plus the monolithic Saudi monarchy on one flank, Iran’s troubled Islamic Republic on the other.

While Iraq does have a representative parliament, barely three years ago, this body was the cause of violence, not the solution. The year after Iraq’s first full-term legislature was seated in 2006, television broadcasts of live parliamentary sessions were halted out of fear that lawmakers’ attacks on one another (accusations of fomenting terrorism, support for the outlawed Baath Party) would spark violence on the streets. Today, sessions are still aired on state television, though with a delay of at least several hours that allows for editing—a tribute to the delicate nature of debate and deal-making in Iraq’s young democracy. Blocs drawn up on sectarian and ethnic lines in 2005 have been unable, four years later, to find consensus on major legislation, such as a long-delayed framework for investment in the critical oil and gas sector and a law that could reduce political intrigue by requiring transparency in party funding.

Decision-making is hobbled by unfamiliarity with parliamentary procedure and a lack of institutional precedent. Perhaps most worrying, the major parties empowered after 2003 and reaffirmed in the 2005 elections have taken steps to perpetuate their political advantage and limit the influence of smaller competitors.

Hamid Majeed Moussa, who heads the Iraqi Communist Party, has teamed up with a small opposition Kurdish party for a joint appeal to Iraqi courts to roll back voting rules he believes skew elections toward incumbents. “The big parties admit this openly,” says Moussa. “For our democracy to be truly representative, we need political, social, and economic stability.” But the heavy-handed nature of politics in the new Iraq is not likely to change without a push. Legis-

lation has been characterized by a tendency to rush to the edge of crisis only to creep back from the brink by cutting a backroom deal with something for everyone. Last year's passage of an election law, so long delayed that it thrust the U.S. withdrawal plans into doubt, was an untidy, idiosyncratic process—not quite democracy, but in the words of former U.S. commander Gen. David Petraeus, "Iraqracy."

Part of the problem is constitutional ambiguity. The constitution, drafted under U.S. influence and ratified in a 2005 referendum, enshrines some liberal rights. Other areas were left ill-defined in the rush to build political consensus. In hindsight, the ensuing feuds over interpretation were inevitable. Kurds and Arabs cannot agree, for instance, on an article that puts the fate of disputed Kirkuk to a referendum. In another, there was no clarity going into the March elections about who was to be included in Iraq's presidency council, which vetoes laws and signs off on executions—no small duty given the settling of scores that has followed Saddam's ruthless 24-year rule.

Meanwhile, though many in Iraq fear a return to unchecked authoritarianism, many others believe this country needs a strong hand. Nouri al-Maliki, who emerged as a compromise candidate for president in 2006 largely because he wasn't well-enough known to be objectionable, has steadily cemented his position as a forceful politician, especially since he took on Shiite militias in Basra and Baghdad's Sadr City in 2008. He has carved out widening areas of influence, building a coterie of influential advisors and creating an anti-terrorism squad under his direct control. But, in the past year, the Parliament has suggested it may eventually become a more robust check on executive power, taking steps to limit

officials' use of public funds for electoral campaigns and summoning ministers to answer for insurgent attacks and reports of corruption.

### *A Long Road Ahead*

If political discourse has made some imperfect gains, social and personal freedoms still have a long way to go. Iraqi media before 2003 consisted of a handful of cowed, official newspapers and a pair of state-owned television channels. Today, there are 200

“ Blocs drawn on ethnic lines in 2005 have been unable, four years later, to find consensus. ”

print outlets, 60 radio stations, and 30 television channels in Arabic, Turkman, Syriac, and two dialects of Kurdish. But the new Iraqi media has yet to become a vigorous check on official power. It is dominated by sectarian parties and prone to publishing unsourced, politically motivated reports of dubious accuracy.

Journalists are still targets of violence and come under pressure from authorities. New regulations that would tightly control foreign and local media harken back to the days when government minders shadowed visiting reporters everywhere. And the past few years have seen a flurry of real and threatened lawsuits from the government against local and foreign media critical of the fledgling state. Britain's *Guardian* newspaper was ordered by an Iraqi court to pay \$86,000 in compensation for an article that depicted an increasingly authoritarian al-Maliki.

For Iraqi women, the post-Saddam era has offered the possibility of greater political power. In seven years, they have attained a limited degree of influence, but there are ominous signs on the horizon. Safia al-

Suhail, a prominent female lawmaker whose father was assassinated by Saddam while living in exile in Beirut, notes that while Iraqi women won the right to occupy at least a quarter of seats in parliament, many of the women elected in 2005 were selected for their willingness to comply with party wishes. Since then, female politicians have been routinely excluded from decision-making on the country's most important issues. The ministries they lead today—including environment, housing, human rights—have small budgets and slim cabinet influence compared to ministers of defense, interior, finance, or oil. In other areas, life has deteriorated sharply for Iraqi women following the end of Saddam's nominally secular regime. In the worst days of the sectarian violence, militants made conservative Islamic dress mandatory for even non-observant Iraqi women. They could not drive cars or visit public parks. In Basra, once known as a progressive port city, the bodies of more than 40 slain women were dumped in 2007 on dusty thoroughfares, accusations of straying from Islam scrawled across their chests.

Today, women have returned to the streets, but many activists fear that another electoral victory for religious parties could cement a retrograde course. Women's advocates are pushing to scrap an article in the 2005 constitution, which has not yet been implemented, that would allow the establishment of different family courts for each sect and ethnicity. That would effectively give power over marriage, divorce, and child custody to conservative religious authorities rather than civil courts.

The story is even more worrying for small minorities in Iraq, including a dwindling Christian population. A huge share of Iraq's Christian community, one of the oldest in the Middle East, has fled since 2003. Christians are now believed to number barely 700,000, less than 3 percent of Iraq's overall population. And the intimidation

continues. In the lead-up to the March elections, hundreds of Christian families fled the northern city of Mosul (once known for its diverse Christian, Kurdish, and Arab Muslim population) after a series of attacks from unknown assailants.

Attempts to secure a greater number of dedicated seats for Christians and other small religious and ethnic minorities in parliament have failed—they are guaranteed just 8 out of 325 seats. Migration and violence might someday entirely extinguish even smaller populations, like the Shabak, Yazidis and Sabeans—all non-Muslims.

### *A House in Disarray*

But as President Barack Obama accelerates the U.S. troop withdrawal planned for August 2010, a broader question is what "rule of law" should mean in today's Iraq. "Democracy means freedom for everyone, including the thieves," my friend Moafaq likes to say, laughing darkly. Indeed, corruption is all but unchecked. Bribes have become a matter of course to obtain passports, set up a business, or get a building permit. Armies of shadow government employees have emerged to help feckless citizens navigate, for a fee, a formidable bureaucracy. Judges, bureaucrats, and police are all complicit—virtually no one is immune to the institutionalization of corruption in Iraq since 2003. This election season, however, pledges to fight the ubiquitous *fassad*, Arabic for corruption, were plastered across Baghdad—a common refrain as each candidate jockeyed to convince exasperated voters he or she was tougher on corruption than the next. Time will reveal if this is more than just window-dressing.

A handful of mid- and senior-level officials have been indicted, but anti-corruption agencies like the Integrity Committee remain meek. Anti-corruption officials have been targeted by insurgents, and face other obstacles, like a law that allows ministers to

protect any subordinate from prosecution. To date, former Trade Minister Abdul Falah al-Sudani, an al-Maliki ally, is the most senior official forced out by corruption. He resigned almost a year ago over accusations of kickbacks and fraud in the Trade Ministry's food import program. But he has not yet been brought to trial, and his fate will likely be linked to that of al-Maliki—who, so far, has shown little interest in prosecuting his former minister.

That this corruption is in part due to the vast quantity of American funds that overwhelmed Iraq is of no surprise. But the inability, after seven years of occupation, to build a flourishing, free-market economy is an unexpected failure. Hardscrabble towns across the country are testimony to the legacy of Saddam's centralized economy, the corrosive effect of global sanctions, and the economic paralysis brought on by years of war.

The farm sector, the nation's biggest employer (but a distant second to oil in terms of economic production) is in shambles. The manufacturing industry barely exists, and efforts to privatize calcified state-owned industries have proceeded haltingly. Today, foreign business delegations visit Iraq, but outside of Kurdistan there is virtually no Western investment beyond energy. There is little banking or lending to speak of. Iraqis still hoard their cash in their homes. Even Iraq's oil sector, which boasts the world's third-largest reserves, is stuck with production levels roughly those of the pre-war period. Oilfield and refinery officials are still making do with equipment that dates to the 1950s and '60s.

Still, there are reasons to feel optimistic about Iraq's economy and its ability to weather fluctuating oil prices. Consumption is skyrocketing. The streets of Baghdad are

packed with new, imported cars and Iraqis carry flashy cell phones. The government was strengthened last year by Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahristani's success in brokering almost a dozen long-term oil contracts with leading world energy firms. The deals may bring Iraq an extra \$200 billion a year in

“Corruption is all but unchecked: bribes are a matter of course to obtain passports, set up a business, or get a building permit.”

oil revenue, and should help turn the nation into the world's second-largest oil producer, close on the heels of Saudi Arabia.

But a modicum of stability and security is central to resurrecting the economy. Without that, Iraqis' dream of turning this country into the next Middle Eastern miracle will remain just that.

### *A Future under Threat*

In the run-up to the March elections, whatever quiet optimism might have been lurking in the hearts of Iraqis was shattered by a series of daring attacks targeting Baghdad ministries, hotels and other symbols of authority and influence—a reminder of the destructive power of Iraq's ongoing insurgency. In northern Nineveh province and other ethnically mixed areas, Sunni insurgents continue to bomb police patrols and assassinate civilians, hoping to delegitimize the government and ignite ethnic strife. Violence has erupted in western Anbar, the Sunni desert region that came to symbolize the success of the American partnership with local tribal militias in the battle against Al Qaeda since 2006. As polls opened for the March 7 parliamentary elections, insurgents launched a series of attacks that killed dozens of people.

The large-scale attacks jarred a public just beginning to believe the worst was over. They raise questions about the vulnerability of Iraq's security forces to bribery and insurgent infiltration and, more broadly, the government's ability to avoid letting violence derail the political process. The uptick in bombings revealed alarming gaps in local security forces' abilities and equipment. Iraq is investing tens of millions of dollars in rebuilding its air force, but still relies on American soldiers to collect evidence after bomb attacks. Even more embarrassing were reports this year that domestic security agencies were relying on bomb detection equipment that was pure quackery. Indeed, hundreds of Iraqi police and army checkpoints had done away with actually searching vehicles, instead scanning for explosives with what was essentially a radio antenna that emitted random chirps, costing up to \$60,000.

The backdrop to the upswing in violence, however, is the American withdrawal. By September 1, all but 50,000 U.S. soldiers will have left Iraq. Those that remain will be considered not combat soldiers but "advisors" to local forces. (Make no mistake, though—they will still be warriors, honed to kill and armed to the teeth.) And, in less than two years, the last U.S. soldier is due to be gone, according to a bilateral pact signed by the Bush administration. But future Iraqi leaders may well find it's in their interest to extend that deadline. In reality, American troops are likely to be stationed in Iraq far beyond 2011. A small, unobtrusive U.S. presence could benefit both countries. Indeed, after all this bloodletting, Washington's interests lie with stability in Iraq, at least a superficial one, and the American presence has so far pressured feuding Iraqi elements to work together. Moreover, the Iraqi leadership seems to understand that a U.S. footprint provides the state with a degree of international credibility.

But the real and lasting threat to Iraq's future is the failure to achieve meaningful reconciliation among religious factions. For Shiite leaders like al-Maliki, who was sentenced to death in absentia under Saddam and spent decades in exile, embracing former foes from the Sunni minority is a difficult proposition. The same goes for Kurds, who fear a return to Arab authoritarianism and instinctively distrust Iraq's central powers. Their dream of an independent state and their claim to Kirkuk has often trumped their support for American goals in Iraq. It's no wonder, then, that the preamble of Iraq's constitution reads like an arraignment, noting Saddam's gassing of Kurds in the 1980s, the massacre of Shiites rebelling after the 1991 Gulf War, the oppression of Shiite Fayli Kurds and other crimes. Saddam's Baath party is outlawed in one of the document's first articles.

Coming to terms with the past, not an endless stream of recriminations, seems a far-off goal. Yet reconciliation is precisely what Iraq needs if it is to avoid spiraling back into chaos as the U.S. forces draw down. Vice President Joe Biden, Obama's special envoy on Iraq, has leaned hard on Iraqi leaders.

### *Disenfranchisement in the Desert*

The fear, though, is that after decades of Saddam's tyrannical minority rule, Iraq may be destined for a new tyranny of the Shiite majority. In the fraught lead-up to the March election, many Iraqi Sunnis certainly seemed to believe that was the case. Though al-Maliki and other politicians publicly tried to convince voters that they stood for non-sectarian nationalism, the early months of this year were marked by a return to the sectarian venom of the past, triggered by the exclusion of hundreds of candidates with suspected ties to the Baath party.

The decision to exclude these candidates came from the Justice and Accountability



Commission, a shadowy panel headed by Shiite power-brokers Ahmed Chalabi and Ali al-Lami. The timing of the commission's announcement prohibited any clear-eyed examination of the accusations and was suspicious for a number of reasons. There are also doubts about the legality of the commission itself. Moreover, Chalabi and Lami, (the latter was once jailed by the U.S. military for suspected links to Shiite militants), were candidates themselves—and surely had something to gain by knocking out political opponents. For leading Sunnis sidelined by the ban, it was more proof of a vast Shiite conspiracy to shut them out of power permanently. Iraqis have a term for this sort of thing: *tasfiya*—political elimination—rooted in the Arabic verb “to filter.”

Abu Alaa, a secular Muslim who owns a bookshop in Baghdad, fears such passions could reignite bloodshed. “What we need now is reconciliation. The problem is that al-Maliki and the Kurds are living in the past, fearing that the Baathists will return and oppress them again,” he says.

It is an understandable fear, especially when Sunni insurgents continue to call Shiites heretics and indiscriminately spill civilian blood. But it is also a convenient fiction. The Baath Party is unlikely to resurface in Iraqi politics. But its legacy will continue to play havoc with the country until Shiite leaders come to terms with those it associates with a ghastly past—in the courts for those rightfully accused of crimes and through the political process for the rest. Some outside experts wonder aloud if Iraq might be ready for the sort of truth and reconciliation committee set up by South Africa after apartheid, or by Peru after its war with Shining Path and other leftist

rebels. On the ground in Baghdad, the answer is unfortunately self-evident. While major bloodshed continues, and while vendettas and violence threaten to derail the political process, it's too soon.

Almost a century after British administrators stitched together a country called Iraq from Ottoman *vilayets*, this diverse,

“Some experts wonder if Iraq might be ready for some sort of truth and reconciliation committee. It's not.”

divided nation is still being reinvented. The fault lines of religion, ethnicity, and identity left in place by the British period continue to undercut Iraq's future. Western-style democracy and greater economic openness have so far been unable to answer questions about how to build a strong rule of law amid ongoing violence, bring mutually suspicious factions together in a shared vision for power-sharing, or give minorities a compelling stake in the whole undertaking.

If the flawed and bloody story of America's involvement in Iraq is to have any chance of a happy ending, Washington must remain vigilant in helping Iraq come to grips with these forces. But the task is assuredly not easy. Each solution must be tailored to the unique history and demographics of a country that straddles tribal society and a socialist past, that stands on the cusp of great oil wealth, and that shares the rampant corruption of the world's poorest countries. Even a small measure of success could encourage democratic openings in other Arab countries, and go a long way to renewing a U.S. image badly tarnished over the past seven years. If it fails, and it could, we may be asking the same questions again in another 90 years. ●