



## Democratic Revolution in Iraq?

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

*The Iraqi interim government must confront the frustrations of the Sunnis, the Shia, and the Kurds—the country's three main population groups, which share memories of suffering under Saddam Hussein and impatience to take responsibility in the longer-term government of a new Iraq.*

It is hard not to be pessimistic when looking at Iraq. Critical areas of the country—Baghdad, the Shiite holy towns of Najaf and Karbala, the northern city of Mosul, the major highways, the oil pipelines, the national electrical grid—all lack elemental security. Like all peoples of the Middle East, Iraqis are night owls: they need to play after sunset to maintain a sense of equanimity, fun, and social cohesion. In the hot summer months before us, this aspect of daily life is especially critical.

Fear, especially anxiety about the safety of female relatives, feeds the worst inclinations in us all. In Iraq, it nourishes anti-Americanism and the widespread belief that Iraqi authorities appointed by foreigners are incompetent. The incidence of violence probably does not have to be too high—and in most of Iraq, even in its most dangerous zones, if you are an ordinary Iraqi the chances of encountering violence are small—before fear psychologically poisons the political landscape. Since World War I, the Iraqis have been on the cutting edge of mixing brutality with politics in the Arab world. The democratic experiment in Mesopotamia would certainly have better odds if it were not born in such violence.

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### Winning Sunni Support

Irrespective of security, the Arab Iraqi inclination to think poorly of Iraqi officials associated with American officials is pronounced. For the Arab Sunnis, who are only around 20 percent of Iraq's population, the United States overturned a centuries-old Sunni dominion over the country. Even for Sunnis who hated Saddam Hussein (probably an overwhelming majority), even for Sunnis who sincerely want democracy and not another, more humane Sunni dictatorship (perhaps a majority), the new world is enormously unsettling. The Sunnis will in all probability follow the Arab Shiite lead—the cultural bonds that bind the two are probably greater than their differences—but they will not do so happily, and they will likely dislike, if not detest, the national authorities who create the new Iraq.

The new president, Sheikh Ghazi Ajil al-Yawar, a prominent Sunni from Mosul and the influential Sunni-Shiite Shammar tribe, will no doubt help the interim government gain traction among Sunnis and Shiites (we should be thankful that the unreconstructed Sunni pan-Arabist, Adnan Pachachi, a State Department and United Nations favorite, failed to secure the ceremonial, but probably rhetorically powerful, presidential office). Nevertheless, the “legitimacy” of Mr. al-Yawar's selection, like that of other Sunni Arabs in the upper reaches of the interim government,

will likely be hammered in the coming months by Arab Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds who are frustrated or angered by the new Iraq.

It will be fascinating to watch whether these Sunni officials can keep their balance without recourse to ever-more severe anti-Americanism—a tried-and-true approach for rousing Sunni Arabs. If the legitimacy of the Sunni members of the interim government evaporates completely before January 2005, the date for the first round of national elections, it will be difficult for a Sunni center to hold. And without this lodestone, the preparation and execution of elections throughout the Sunni triangle will be daunting. Especially since Fallujah and after the transfer of sovereignty on June 30, a vocal Sunni minority can probably check U.S. counterinsurgency operations that could offer protection to those who do not want insurrectionists dictating the politics of their towns.

Sunni clerics, a force very much under-appreciated by the Americans, will be key in using their bully pulpits to encourage just enough forbearance to see this process through. Unfortunately, the Sunnis have discovered Islamic militancy (this process started under Saddam, who encouraged a more devout Sunni religious identity in the last decade of his rule, and it has gained speed since his fall). A spiritual tug-of-war is going on among faithful Arab Sunnis—between traditionalists and those who have imbibed the Saudi-inspired and -financed Wahhabist creed—and it is unclear how this competition will play out.

## Shiite Political Goals

The Shiite clergy led by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has been consistently ecumenical toward the Sunnis and their clerics. With rare exceptions, the ayatollah has fought the repatriation of Shiite mosques that Saddam gave to Sunnis after the Shiite-led rebellion of 1991. Sistani's commentary about governance and democracy has been free (in Sunni eyes) of insulting Shiite historical allusions. So, too, has been Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sayyid al-Hakim, the number two Shiite cleric who is the only "pure" Iraqi Arab (Sistani is of Iranian birth) among Najaf's four grand ayatollahs. Contrary to much "accepted wisdom," the increasing religious identity on both the Sunni and Shiite sides is likely to fortify, not weaken, the fraternal and nationalist bonds between the two Arab communities.

Though vastly more tolerant and appreciative of American actions, the Arab Shiites, too, have diminishing patience and curiosity about Americans and the Iraqi authorities whom Washington has placed over them. The desire for elections among the Shiites is enormously powerful—Sistani's pro-democracy broadsides, which knocked America's MacArthur-like proconsul, L. Paul Bremer, to his knees and sent the Bush administration reeling toward the UN, have had such force precisely because his statements reflect widespread sentiment throughout the Shiite community. It is by no means clear whether the Shiites view this new interim government as a step closer to democracy, which will finally give the Shiites the social prominence and political power equal to their numbers (they are at least 60 percent of the population).

Ayatollah Sistani has given the new government a tepid blessing, while emphasizing that real legitimacy can only come from the ballot box. The Shiites have already noted—particularly those who are more religious and politically define themselves in terms of their faith—that this new interim government actually gives less to them than did the Iraqi Governing Council. The Shiite prime minister Iyad Allawi is a thoroughly secularized fellow who appears to be more comfortable with Sunnis than with Shiites. His former organization, the Iraqi National Accord, was a well-known repository for fallen though not necessarily democratically inclined Sunni Baathists. Sistani did not veto his selection, and the Grand Ayatollah certainly could have. The cleric surely realizes that Mr. Allawi has no political base in Iraq—if Mr. Allawi has a political future, he must build it among the Shiites, which means he must be sensitive to the preferences and concerns of the clergy. If he tries to use his office except as an instrument to prepare for national elections, then he runs the serious risk of making himself politically irrelevant very quickly. The Central Intelligence Agency, which has backed Mr. Allawi for years, and the White House would be well advised not to believe they have gotten the better of Ayatollah Sistani with the selection of Mr. Allawi, who was not the cleric's first choice. The ayatollah continues to control the destiny of a democratic Iraq.

It is certain that the ayatollah and the Shiite community as a whole will view the new interim government with profound suspicion until it proves that elections are its first and overwhelming priority. If it does not do this, if it even intimates that the January 2005 date for constituent elections may be too soon (and many "experts" in the United States and the United Nations believe

this), then it is conceivable that Sistani will view the American presence in Iraq as harmful to the advance of democracy. This would be a terrible conclusion, but it is certainly possible. The Bush administration could find itself being asked to leave Iraq right around November 2004.

### **Kurdish Independence?**

And the Kurds are for very good reasons going to cause everybody major headaches. Given the regular pummeling of the Kurds by Sunni Arabs in modern Iraq, the Kurdish desire for considerable autonomy is sensible and morally compelling. There has been no bad blood between Arab Shiites and the Kurds, but the latter are well aware that a centralized Iraqi state will empower Arabs. And the Shiites have probably been the staunchest defenders of Iraqi nationalism. Sistani will not allow the Kurds to retain the authority that the Transitional Administrative Law, the interim constitution, would give them. If they vote as a bloc, the Kurds would have an unchallengeable right to veto any aspect of a new constitution. The Kurds want this right and are threatening—de facto, if not de jure—to withdraw from Iraq if they do not get it.

There is no easy answer to this. Ultimately, the Kurds have to weigh the risks and gains of independence. Washington ought not to abandon them. But it should encourage them to seek political compromises and constitutional protections that circumscribe but do not

nullify the principle of one-man, one-vote. The Kurds are unlikely to find a more thoughtful Shiite Arab counterpart than Ayatollah Sistani, who in the history of Shiism can only be called a democratic revolutionary.

### **Common Bonds**

Which brings us again to why, despite all of the bad news and troublesome history, we should have real hope. Since 1921, Iraqis have known violence more devastatingly than any other people in the Middle East. Psychologically, Shiites and the Kurds are indeed defined by slaughter and defeat. The mosques plastered with the pictures of thousands of lost loved ones, the mass graves, and the great religious schools nearly destroyed by spies demonstrate the effects of extreme tyranny on Iraq. But this experience has also given the Iraqi people—and especially the Shiite clergy—terrifying memories that have encouraged a profound interest in modern political theory and practice. Though Ambassador Bremer might disagree, Iraqis probably do not need to be tutored as much as Westerners might think on the virtues, responsibilities, and sacrifices necessary to sustain democracy. They may well fail, but an enormous number of Iraqis now want representative government. We will soon know whether they are going to be able to see this through, or whether the dark side of their history will resurface. George Bush has put their fate, as well as his own, in their hands.