The Long Haul for Democracy in Iraq

By Larry Diamond

Out of the ruins of one of the world's worst tyrannies, in an ancient land that has rarely known any kind of decent and constitutional governance, a democracy is struggling to be born.

Iraq is one of the world's least likely sites for a transition to democracy. Virtually all of the classic preconditions for liberal government are lacking. And yet, with its decades-long despotism shattered, Iraq is now better positioned than any of its fifteen Arab neighbors to become a democracy in the next few years. That achievement, however tentative and imperfect, would ignite mounting aspirations for democratization throughout the region—from Iran to Morocco—and renew the momentum of freedom worldwide.

Democracy building in Iraq flies in the face of staggering obstacles: an economy devastated by war, international sanctions, and most of all, decades of breathtakingly corrupt and megalomaniacal misrule; a political culture of fear, suspicion, intolerance, and submission, fed and distorted by that misrule; a flattened civic landscape, in which every type of non-governmental organization and political party alternative to the Ba'athists was driven into exile or underground; a national fabric deeply riven by ethnic, regional, and confessional cleavages that were rubbed raw by decades of oppression and injustice; and a periphery of scheming, hostile neighbors, most of whose regimes are deeply threatened by the prospect of a democratic Iraq, and who are busily infiltrating religious militants, intelligence agents, terrorists, and money to try to kill it in the womb.

This is a formidable array of challenges—plenty of fodder for all the skeptics who dismiss the US presence there as naïve, foolhardy, or somehow sinister.

So why, after a month of confronting these issues inside in Iraq, am I so hopeful about the prospect of Iraq becoming the first Arab democracy in the contemporary world?

On the ground in Iraq, the picture one sees is quite different from what dominates most of the news reports. Yes there are bloody, shocking acts of terrorism every few days. But it is not Iraqis who are staging the suicide bombings, and it is only a tiny cabal of Ba'athist diehards who are trying to kill any agent of reconstruction and democratic change. Increasingly, Iraqis are fed up with this violence and turning in the criminals who are waging it. The dwindling ranks of saboteurs and dead-enders, in cahoots with al-Qaeda and other jihadists, can blow up buildings and kill people. But they cannot rally Iraqis to any alternative political vision. They can only win if we walk away and hand them victory.

Fortunately (for now) the Administration, the Congress, the American people, and the broader international community are not wavering. They are supporting an ambitious agenda for democratic transformation and reconstruction in Iraq.

Led by liberal-minded Iraqi drafters designated by the Iraqi Governing Council, work is nearing completion on a Transitional Administrative Law that will structure government and guarantee rights from the transfer of sovereignty on June 30 to the seating of a democratically elected government under a new constitution. With its provisions for civil liberties, due process, separation of powers, devolution of power, civilian control of the armed forces, and other checks and balances, this Iraqi transitional law will be the most liberal basic governance document anywhere in the Arab world.

Civil society is springing up. With training and assistance from USAID's office of Transition Initiatives, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other international donors, associations of women, students, professionals, journalists, human rights activists, and civic educators, along with independent think tanks and centers of thought, are building organizations, developing agendas, holding conferences, and crafting the grant proposals that will enable them to work for democracy on a much larger scale. In one private university, a team of eight translators is at work full time translating works on democracy from English into Arabic.

Iraqi women—organized in part into an Iraqi Higher Women's Council—have come together rapidly across ethnic, regional, and ideological lines to craft an impressive agenda for political inclusion and empowerment of women. Some new civic associations—including a gifted group if democratically minded
young people with skills in the visual arts-are helping the Coalition Provisional Authority to craft an ambitious civic education campaign. Once each week, for the next several months, this campaign will distribute throughout Iraq a million leaflets, each batch explaining in simple terms a different concept of democracy: human rights, the rule of law, free and fair elections, participation, accountability, transparency, minority rights, and so on. These will be reinforced with similar messages on radio and television.

Iraqi democrats of all ages believe passionately in the need to educate for democracy, from both secular and religious perspectives. Some Islamic thinkers, like Sayyed Fargat Qizwini, believe not only that Islam is compatible with democracy, but that a proper understanding of Islam makes democracy a moral imperative. All of these Iraqis stress that democracy cannot be secure until "we get rid of the little Saddam in each of our minds."

Hundreds of Iraqis are now being trained to facilitate "democracy dialogues" that will bring Iraqis together in their own towns and communities to talk about (and in a way, practice) these concepts of democracy, as well as their hopes and expectations for the new political system. During the next year and a half, these town hall meetings will also provide a forum for Iraqis to participate in the drafting of their permanent constitution.

Over the next few months, Iraq will witness the most intensive flow of economic reconstruction and democracy-building assistance of any country since the immediate aftermath of World War II. The labor demands in the construction industry alone will dramatically reduce unemployment. At the same time, a new Iraqi electoral administration will undertake the daunting task of preparing the country for its first free and fair elections. Iraqi political parties will receive training in methods of democratic organization, recruitment, and campaigning, giving new democratic parties in particular a chance to compete.

The quest for a decent and democratic political order could founder on the shoals of intolerant, exclusivist identities. But recent developments generate cause for hope. In the negotiations on the transitional law, contending groups are working hard with one another (and with the CPA) to find formulas that will manage their differences and give each section of Iraq a stake in the new system. Public opinion polls show that almost half of Iraq's Muslims identify themselves not as "Sunni" or "Shia" but as "just Muslim." Fewer than one in five favor a party ideology that is "hardline Muslim." Most want a democratic or at least moderate system. Support for the Ba'ath party is not dead, but it is confined to hard core of about 20 percent, whose ranks figure to dwindle as life throughout improves and the new democracy picks up momentum.

Political leaders are beginning to reach out across regional, ethnic, and confessional lines. A leading moderate Shiite Islamist on the Governing Council, Dr. Mowaffak al-Rubaie, recently delivered an eloquent public endorsement of a federal system for Iraq. Denouncing the long history of oppression of the Kurds, as well as other peoples, he declared, "Centralization is the source of our division. Either we engage in a bitter conflict over power or we devolve power to the fringes of society." Federalism is not just a Kurdish request, but an Arab one as well, he said. "Everyone wants to feel that they belong to where they came from."

Much analysis and reporting has predicted that Iraqis would be unable to agree with one another (and with the CPA) on a formula for the political transition. In fact, by late last year, the transition program was approaching deadlock over the November 15 plan for indirect elections (caucuses) to choose a Transitional National Assembly (TNA), a method opposed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and most of his devoted Shiite followers. They instead have been demanding direct elections before the handover of power on June 30.

With the recent United Nations fact-finding mission to Iraq, led by Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, a compromise solution now seems feasible: direct elections for a TNA, but only by a timetable that would enable the country to attain minimal levels of the conditions for free and fair elections (drafting an electoral law, organizing an electoral administration, providing the necessary security, registering voters, acquiring the necessary equipment and materials, training political parties, educating voters, and deploying civil society monitors). Most experts think it will take at least nine to twelve months to prepare elections that will not be perfect but at least, in Brahimi's words, "reasonably credible."

Of course, it is going to take a lot longer than a year to build democracy in Iraq. Even after a permanent constitution is drafted, debated, ratified, and utilized to select and seat a new government, Iraq's
economic and political reconstruction will be an ongoing task for many yeas to come. The country will need extensive security and technical assistance for many years to come to assist the new governments at all levels, support civil society, and help fight crime, corruption, and terrorism. The U.S., the U.N., and other international donors will need to remain extensively engaged in the face of renewed terrorist efforts to drive us out with acts of spectacular violence.

Americans are not generally a patient people. We stayed the course to victory for four decades during the Cold War, but when it comes to nation building, our impulse is to get in and get out quickly. That will not work in Iraq.

A democracy can be built in Iraq. No one can engage the new panoply of associations and the emerging democratic consciousness of the people and not sense the possibilities. But these new institutions and ways of thinking will only take root slowly. In the first few years, they will be fragile and highly vulnerable to sabotage from within and without. The overriding question that will confront the United States-as the inevitable leader of a supporting coalition for democracy in this region-is whether we have the vision and the backbone to see this through, in the face of mounting costs in lives and dollars.

Americans will debate the timing and justification for this war, along with the failures of post-war planning. They will question the conditions for future interventions. But I hope the current broad support for our efforts there will not waiver. A failed transition in Iraq will not see the country slip back into any kind of “ordinary” Arab dictatorship. The power vacuum in the country is too thorough, and the well of accumulated grievances too deep, to allow for that. If we withdraw prematurely and this experiment fails, religious militants, political extremists, external terrorists, party militias, criminal thugs, diehard Ba'athists, and neighboring autocracies will all rush in to fill the void. The scenarios will range from the creation of a new base for international terrorism-Afghanistan with oil-to a regionally driven civil war, a hellish combination of Lebanon and the Congo. Any such descent will suck every possibility of democratic peace and progress in the Middle East into its destabilizing vortex.

The thugs and terrorists are betting that if they make enough trouble and kill enough Americans, we will cut and run, as in Lebanon and Somalia. This is the one thing that Iraqi democrats fear more than anything else. In several events over the past month, I have told them that we would not do this, that we would stand with them for the long haul to build a democracy in Iraq.

I hope I will not be proven wrong. Nothing in this decade will so test our purpose and fiber as a nation, and our ability to change the world for the better, than our willingness to stand with the people of Iraq over the long haul as they seek to build a free and democratic country.

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