Efforts to establish a new political order in Iraq have thus far concentrated primarily on the construction of new political institutions and the selection of leaders to run them. In the hope of putting Iraq on a path toward democracy, elections for a national assembly were held in January 2005; elected officials then established a transitional government and drafted a constitution that was approved by a referendum in October; and this phase of the process concluded with the election of a new parliament in December. Yet while activities of this sort are needed to initiate a transition to democracy, political-science research makes it clear that the views of ordinary citizens are critical for sustaining and consolidating a democratic regime.

As early as 1963, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba observed that “if the democratic model . . . is to develop in new nations, it will require more than the formal institutions of democracy—universal suffrage, the political party, the elective legislature. . . . A democratic form of participatory political system requires as well a political culture consistent with it . . . [of which] the norms and attitudes of ordinary citizens are subtler cultural components.”¹ Writing more recently, Ronald Inglehart made the same point: “democracy is not attained simply by making institutional changes or through elite level maneuvering. Its survival depends also on the values and beliefs of ordinary citizens.”²

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Arab world, Iliya Harik has emphasized that countries need not only democratic leaders, but also populations with a democratic political culture. Evidence in support of this proposition comes from research in many countries and world regions, including Latin America, East Asia, and Africa. And as Palestinian political scientist Ziad Abu-Amr observed following the January 2005 elections in the West Bank and Gaza, it will take far more than elections to build democracy in Palestine.

Against this background, the present study analyzes the results of a survey of Iraqi citizens’ attitudes toward governance and democracy. The survey, conducted in November and December 2004, gives particular attention to: 1) attitudes toward democracy; 2) attitudes about the political role of religion; 3) the relationship between political attitudes and views about the rights and status of women; and 4) the degree to which political attitudes differ among Iraq’s ethnoreligious communities and are influenced by sectarianism.

Few Arab countries, if any, have been ruled by a government as efficiently brutal as the Ba’ath regime under Saddam Hussein (1979–2003). As Iraqi exile Isam al-Khafaji wrote in 1994:

[T]he Ba’ath regime has constructed a network of multiple intelligence apparatuses that pervades all aspects of Iraqi society. . . . Corruption, competition for influence and authority, and a rigid hierarchy have rendered this system highly effective in achieving one of its major objectives: promoting a sense of helplessness among the population. 8

As described in a more scholarly study of Iraqi politics, the country evolved under Saddam Hussein from a “popular democracy” to a “totalitarian democracy,” which was in fact no democracy at all. In the legislative elections of 1989, for example, “no opposition candidates were allowed to run; on the contrary, a yardstick even stricter than in the past was used to prevent the entry of opposition figures.” 9

In light of this dismal history, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a widespread desire for democracy among the Iraqi public. This desire is documented by a large survey conducted in Iraq in November and December 2004. With support from the National Science Foundation, and working in close collaboration with the Baghdad-based Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies, the present authors designed and carried out a major survey of attitudes related to governance and other political and social issues. The survey is based on a representative area probability sample, with a total of 2,325 respondents interviewed in 16 of Iraq’s 18 provinces. At least 120 respondents (4.4 percent of the national sample) were interviewed in every province selected. Of all respondents, 68.9 percent reside in urban areas, with 22.2 percent coming from Baghdad. In ethnoreligious terms, 61 percent are Shi’ites, 22.5 percent are Sunnis, and 16.5 percent are Kurds. In addition to questions about democracy, the survey instrument included
items dealing with such issues as Islam and its political role; identity, sectarianism, and perceptions of ethnoreligious communities; and the status of women and gender relations.

As stated, the survey found broad support for democracy. This is evident from the findings shown in Figure 1, which presents the distribution of responses to the last item in each of the following two questions from the survey instrument. The correlation between these two items is strong and statistically significant (r = .185; p < .001).

1. I’m going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country?
   a) Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.
   b) Having experts, rather than the government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country.
   c) Having the army rule.
   d) Having a democratic political system.

2. I’m going to read off some things that people sometimes say about a democratic political system. Could you please tell me if you agree strongly, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly, after I read each one of them?
   a) In a democracy, the economic system functions badly.
   b) Democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling.
   c) Democracies are not good at maintaining order.
   d) Democracy may have problems, but it’s better than any other form of government.

In the case of both items, as shown in Figure 1, very large majorities have a favorable attitude toward democracy. Specifically, 59 percent of those polled say that democracy would be a very good way of governing the country, and another 32 percent say it would be a fairly good way. By contrast, only 9 percent express the view that it would be a fairly bad or very bad way of governing the country. Similarly, 51 percent strongly agree and another 34 percent agree that despite its limitations democracy is the best form of government, whereas only 15 percent disagree or strongly disagree with this proposition.

These two items are taken from the World Values Survey (WVS), which permits the views of Iraqi respondents to be compared to those expressed by the citizens of other countries.\textsuperscript{11} During the fourth and most recent WVS round, carried out between 1999 and 2002, interviews were conducted with representative national samples of adult men and women in 85 countries, including Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Algeria. The two questions above were also asked in surveys carried out in 2003 and 2004 in Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), Jordan, and Algeria.\textsuperscript{12}

The WVS data may be used to assess attitudes toward democracy in Egypt in 2000, Morocco in 2000, Jordan in 2001, and Algeria in 2002,
and data from the later surveys may be used to assess attitudes toward democracy in Palestine in 2003, Jordan in 2003, and Algeria in 2004. These two data sets show that, despite some variation both across countries and over time in Jordan and Algeria, the extent and consistency of support for democracy are striking. The proportion of respondents who believe that having a democratic system is very good or at least fairly good ranges from 88 percent in Algeria in 2004 to 98 percent in Egypt in 2000. The proportion of respondents who believe that democracy is the best political system ranges from 84 percent in Palestine in 2003 to 96 percent in Egypt in 2000. These findings were presented in an article published in the July 2005 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, and the data tables are also available at [www.journalofdemocracy.org](http://www.journalofdemocracy.org).13

A comparison of these findings with those presented in Figure 1 shows that Iraqis express prodemocratic attitudes roughly to the same extent as do citizens of other Arab countries. Some might have expected that support for democracy would be higher in Iraq, on the grounds that the more repressive and brutal regime in that country would have made Iraqis even more eager than others for a democratic alternative. Others might have expected that support for democracy would be lower in Iraq, the rationale in this case being that Iraqis have had even less experience with democratic institutions and processes than citizens of the other Arab countries. Our findings support neither of these propositions, however. Differences in their respective political experiences notwithstanding, Iraqis and citizens of other Arab countries express very similar views regarding democracy. Thus, at least with respect to popular support for democracy, Iraq’s particular history has not led its citizens to think differently about issues of governance than do the citizens of other Arab states.

**Conceptions of Democracy and Social Values**

Two important questions deserve scrutiny against the background of this broad popular support for democracy. First, do those who express
support for democratic governance conceive of democracy in secular terms, or do many of them favor a political system that, while democratic, does not separate religion and politics? Second, does support for democracy vary to an important degree across Iraq’s ethnoreligious communities or as a function of sectarianism more generally? Both of these questions can be explored with data from the survey carried out in Iraq at the end of 2004.

Two highly intercorrelated items from the interview schedule may be used to assess attitudes toward the relationship between religion and politics. The first asks respondents whether or not they agree that it would be better for the country if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office. The second asks respondents whether or not they agree that the government should implement only the laws of the shari’a (Islamic law). The correlation between these two items is strong and highly statistically significant (r = .253; p < .001). Responses to these two questions, presented in Figure 2, show that there are substantial differences of opinion regarding the place of religion in political life. In both instances, response distributions are spread fairly evenly along a continuum ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” with each distribution nonetheless skewed to some degree toward agreement that religion and politics should not be separated.

Given that support for democracy is widespread and that attitudes toward the relationship between religion and politics are divided, it follows that at least some Iraqis who favor democracy also believe that Islam should play an important role in political affairs. To examine this relationship more systematically, we classify respondents by considering their attitudes both toward democracy and toward a political role for Islam. First, we categorize respondents as either supportive of democracy or not supportive of democracy using the two intercorrelated items pertaining to democracy shown in Figure 1. Those who express a very favorable attitude toward democracy on both items, a very favor-
able attitude toward democracy on one item and a fairly favorable attitude toward democracy on the other, or a fairly favorable attitude toward democracy on both items are classified as supportive of democracy. These individuals constitute 78.8 percent of all respondents. The remaining 21.2 percent of the respondents are classified as not supportive of democracy.

Second, we follow the same approach to categorize respondents as supportive of a strong relationship between religion and politics or not supportive of such a relationship using the two items shown in Figure 2 (one asking whether it would be better for the country if more people with strong religious beliefs hold public office and the other asking whether the government should implement only the laws of the *shari’a*). Individuals who strongly agree with both propositions, who strongly agree in one instance and agree in the other, or who agree in both instances are categorized as supportive of a strong relationship between religion and politics. These individuals constitute 51.1 percent of all respondents. The remaining 48.9 percent of the respondents are classified as not supportive of a strong relationship between religion and politics.

A juxtaposition of these two dichotomous measures shows respondent preferences regarding four different kinds of political systems: democracy with a political role for Islam, or *Islamic democracy*; democracy without a political role for Islam, or *secular democracy*; a nondemocratic system with a political role for Islam, or *Islamic authoritarianism*; and a nondemocratic system without a political role for Islam, or *secular authoritarianism*. As expected given the broad support for democracy and the division of opinion regarding the place of Islam in political affairs, most respondents fall into one of the two prodemocratic categories, with approximately equal proportions preferring Islamic democracy (38.8 percent) and secular democracy (40.0 percent). Among the remaining respondents, 12.3 percent prefer Islamic authoritarianism and 8.9 percent prefer secular authoritarianism.

These findings indicate that while most Iraqis favor democracy, and more often than not favor it strongly, there is significant disagreement as to whether democracy should be conceived in secular or Islamic terms. Both advocates and opponents of a strong political role for Islam will thus find support for their position in the ranks of the prodemocratic majority of the Iraqi public. The former may also find support among those who favor Islamic authoritarianism. In other words, while the data show that most Iraqis favor democracy and a slight plurality favors secular democracy, the data also show that 60 percent do not favor secular democracy and half of all respondents favor a political system (whether democratic or not) that does not separate religion and politics.

A related question about political-system preferences is whether those who want Islam to play an important role in politics have any particular
views regarding the kind of social order that the government should support through its policies and programs. Of particular relevance in this connection are views about how Islamic prescriptions should be interpreted and applied. As in other instances where a body of law must be interpreted and applied to present-day and changing real-life circumstances, there is disagreement and debate among Muslims, including devout Muslims, about whether such interpretations should be guided by a strict, literal, and historically dominant interpretation of Islamic law or by an interpretation that emphasizes adaptability, considers context, and looks for the underlying spirit and intent of the law.

In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, views about the rights and status of women are particularly salient in this regard. Those who take a more liberal position believe that Islam, properly interpreted, gives equal rights to men and women. They hold that this is the true intent of the religion, and some add that it is the local culture rather than the Muslim religion that is responsible for limits on gender equality. Those who take a more conservative position believe that, despite Islam’s explicit concern for the welfare of women, there is no way to avoid the conclusion that the religion gives women a different and ultimately inferior position to that of men in a number of important areas of society.

Figure 3 sheds light on the kind of social order favored by those respondents who desire a strong connection between religion and politics. The figure compares the responses of Iraqis with differing political-system preferences to three questions about gender equality and the status of women. These questions asked whether respondents agree or disagree 1) that education is more important for a boy than a girl, 2) that male and female university students should not attend classes together, and 3) that it is acceptable for a man to have more than one wife. While these questions do not ask specifically about interpretations of Islamic law, they do provide a basis for assessing the kind of social order that respondents would like the government to support.

Figure 3 shows that respondents who favor Islamic democracy and
those who favor secular democracy differ significantly in their views about the status of women. The former are consistently more likely than the latter to believe that education is more important for a boy than a girl, that male and female students should not study together, and that polygamy is acceptable. For the three questions, the percentages for the two respondent categories (supporters of Islamic democracy and supporters of secular democracy) are 52 and 35, 64 and 40, and 55 and 44, respectively. It is also notable that those who favor Islamic democracy are as likely as those who favor Islamic authoritarianism, if not more so, to take more traditional and conservative positions regarding the status of women. Taken together, these findings suggest that among Iraqis who favor a democratic political system—78.8 percent of all survey respondents—there are significant differences of opinion regarding not only the connection between religion and politics but also the particular social order the government should promote through its policies and programs.

The Sectarian Dimension

The relationship between Islam and politics is not the only challenging issue that Iraqis must confront as they look to their political future. The role of sectarianism and the relationship among the country’s three major ethnoreligious communities—Sunnis, Shi’ites, and Kurds—is of major concern as well. The Iraqi identity shared by the members of these three confessional communities is more recent and less firmly rooted than their sectarian affinities. This has raised the issue of autonomy and power-sharing: What should be the relative authority of national and regional governments, and how much influence should Sunnis, Shi’ites, and Kurds exercise at the national level?

A question more directly related to the present study is whether ethnoreligious communal differences, and sectarianism more generally, shape the way that Iraqis think about the desirability of alternative political models. To explore this question, Table 1 compares the political-system preferences of Sunnis, Shi’ites, and Kurds. It shows that there are both similarities and differences in the political-system preferences of members of the three communities. The most important similarity is that vast majorities—over three-quarters of the respondents—of all three ethnoreligious groups favor democracy. It thus appears clear that the broad aggregate support for democracy reported earlier is not being driven by the preferences of only some ethnoreligious communities.

Yet there are also some important differences among the three groups. The most striking difference concerns the kind of democratic system preferred. Among Kurds, support for secular democracy is much more common than support for Islamic democracy: 58 percent prefer the former, whereas only 21.5 percent prefer the latter. Among Sunn
respondents as well, support for secular democracy is more common than support for Islamic democracy, although the difference is less pronounced: 44.3 percent prefer secular democracy, while 32.6 percent prefer Islamic democracy. An additional 12.8 percent of Sunnis favor Islamic authoritarianism. It is perhaps surprising that so many Sunnis favor a political system that incorporates Islamic elements; it is also unexpected that only 10.3 percent of Sunnis favor secular authoritarianism—the kind of political system operated by Saddam Hussein, under which the Sunnis enjoyed a privileged position.

The pattern among Shi’ites is markedly different from that of the other two groups. It is only among Shi’ites that support for Islamic democracy is more pronounced than support for secular democracy (47.4 percent versus 32.2 percent). Another 14.1 percent of Shi’ites favor Islamic authoritarianism. These findings suggest that a political system will find favor among this ethnoreligious community, which comprises well over half of Iraq’s population, only if it assigns a meaningful role to Islam. Yet it is also noteworthy that almost one-third of Shi’ites favor secular democracy. This indicates that among Shi’ites, as among Sunnis, there are important internal divisions in the kind of political system that members of the community prefer.

The findings presented in Table 1 illuminate but do not answer questions about whether and how the political-system preferences of ordinary citizens will influence future debates about the political formula by which Iraq should be governed. One question that deserves attention, and which may be answered in the years ahead, is whether a preference for democracy among large majorities in all three ethnoreligious communities will contribute to the emergence of a political system that is indeed genuinely democratic. Another important question is whether the strong Shi’ite preference for Islamic democracy will outweigh the preference for secular democracy more common among Sunnis and Kurds. Moreover, in what way, if any, will the existence of substantial differences of opinion within the Shi’ite and Sunni communities influence how each group responds to the preferences of the other?

A question that may be explored with the data on which the present essay is based is whether it is a sectarian orientation, rather than membership in a particular ethnoreligious community per se, that helps to account

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<th>POLITICAL SYSTEM PREFERENCE</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Secular Authoritarianism</td>
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TABLE 1—IRAQI POLITICAL SYSTEM PREFERENCES BY ETHNORELIGIOUS COMMUNITY
for variance in political-system preferences. This can be examined using an item from the interview schedule that measures sectarian versus national identity and interests among respondents. The question asked: “Which of the following is more important: 1) preserving the identity and defending the interests of the ethnoreligious community to which you belong, or 2) working to forge a common national identity that unifies all citizens of Iraq?” Respondents were instructed to answer using a ten-point scale, on which a score of 1 corresponded to “defending my community,” a score of 10 corresponded to “forging a national Iraqi identity,” and a score of 5 or 6 indicated that the two are equally important. Responses to this question are heavily skewed away from sectarianism and toward forging an Iraqi national identity. A full 45.3 percent of those surveyed gave a response of 10 and another 21.5 percent gave a response of 9. Among all respondents, the average score was 8.42.

As might be expected, a preference for forging a national identity is most pronounced among Sunni respondents, whose average score on the ten-point scale is 9.01. Significantly, however, it is almost as pronounced among Shi’ites—the ethnoreligious community whose attitudes toward the balance between sectarianism and nationalism would seem to be especially important. The average rating of Shi’ite respondents is 8.61. Only among the Kurds is the rating lower, an average score of 6.62, although it is still well above the mid-point. It thus appears that sectarian sentiments are limited in Iraq—very limited among Sunnis and Shi’ites—and that most citizens give priority to forging an Iraqi national identity.

But is there a connection between political-system preferences and responses to the item on sectarianism versus nationalism? In other words, is there a difference between the political-system preferences of Iraqis who give high priority to forging a national identity (the majority), and those who attach more importance to preserving the identity and defending the interests of their ethnoreligious community? This question may be addressed by comparing the political-system preferences of the 66.8 percent who selected a score of 9 or 10 in response to the sectarianism-nationalism item with those of the 33.2 percent who selected a score of 8 or lower. This comparison reveals only minor differences in the political-system preferences of Iraqis in the two categories. The largest difference concerns secular democracy, which is favored by 41.7 percent of the respondents who prioritize the forging of a national identity but by only 35.2 percent of those who attach greater importance to sectarian interests.

The differences are of greater magnitude, and more instructive, when we explore the attitudes that exist within each ethnoreligious community. As shown in Table 2, Shi’ite respondents with a more national orientation (those selecting a 9 or 10 on the sectarianism-nationalism item) are disproportionately likely to favor secular democracy and dis-
proportionately unlikely to favor Islamic democracy. Among Sunni respondents, those with a more national orientation are disproportionately likely to favor Islamic democracy, and they are disproportionately unlikely to favor Islamic authoritarianism. Among Kurdish respondents, those with a more national orientation are disproportionately likely to favor secular democracy and disproportionately unlikely to favor secular authoritarianism. These findings suggest that the differing political-system preferences within each ethnoreligious community, and particularly within the Shi’ite and Sunni communities, are at least partly a function of intracommunal differences in sectarian orientation.

The preceding analysis indicates that sentiments pertaining to sectarianism and nationalism, although not strongly related to political-system preferences in the aggregate, have greater explanatory power when the data are disaggregated and each ethnoreligious community is considered separately. Most relevant for the present analysis is the finding that a more national and less sectarian orientation reduces the extent to which Shi’ite respondents favor Islamic democracy more often than secular democracy and the extent to which Sunni respondents favor secular democracy more often than Islamic democracy. Thus, on the critical question of whether or not Iraqi democracy should assign an important political role to Islam, this means that any increase in a national as opposed to a sectarian orientation is likely to increase the division of opinion within the Shi’ite and Sunni communities. At the same time, more hopefully, it may reduce the degree to which the distribution of political-system preferences differs among Sunnis and Shi’ites and thereby also the extent to which the two communities are on opposing sides in debates about the political role of Islam.

**A Democratic Future?**

Given the violence and uncertainty prevailing in Iraq when this survey was conducted (November and December 2004), the data allow for optimism in at least some important respects. There is broad support for democracy, more often than not secular democracy, and a majority of

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**TABLE 2—POLITICAL-SYSTEM PREFERENCE BY SECTARIAN-NATIONAL ORIENTATION AMONG SHI’ITES, SUNNIS, AND KURDS**
Iraqis attach more importance to forging a common national identity than to preserving and protecting their subnational communal interests. To the extent that these attitudes and orientations are representative of Iraqi public opinion, and to the extent that the people shaping Iraq’s future are responsive to public opinion, it is possible to be at least somewhat optimistic about the prospects for a unified and democratic Iraq.

Unfortunately, this is not the whole story. There is substantial disagreement about the role that Islam should play in political affairs, and this disagreement to a considerable extent overlaps with and reinforces intercommunal differences. Further, those who favor Islamic democracy over secular democracy prefer a more traditional and conservative social order, at least with respect to the status of women, which indicates that a significant normative divide separates Iraqis with differing views about the political role of Islam. The absence of a consensus on these issues was apparent as the transitional government worked to draft a constitution during 2005; although a constitution was eventually written and endorsed in a national referendum, its provisions in this area are extremely general, and most difficult decisions have been deferred.

Survey data show that the Iraqi public shares with other Arab publics a strong desire for democracy. Whether a democratic political system will in fact emerge in Iraq, and to what extent it will be an Islamic rather than a purely secular democracy, are questions to which there are as yet no answers. Nor is there agreement among Iraqis themselves about the way these questions should be answered. Finally, it remains to be seen whether the differences or the similarities in the political orientations of Iraq’s major ethnoreligious communities turn out to be more important, and for that matter whether the differences within each community on questions of governance will prove consequential. How these questions are eventually answered will have profound implications for the kind of polity that emerges in Iraq, and perhaps also for how the Iraqi experience contributes to the political evolution of the broader Arab world.

NOTES


4. Scott Mainwaring, “Democratic Survivability in Latin America,” in Howard
Handelman and Mark Tessler, eds., *Democracy and Its Limits: Lessons from Asia, Latin America and the Middle East* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 45.


10. The two excluded provinces are Ninawa (Mosul) and Dahuk, the former because of the security situation and the latter because of opposition from Iraqi authorities. For additional information about the survey, see Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao, “Gauging Arab Support for Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 16 (July 2005): 85–97.


12. These latter surveys are based on representative national samples of 1,320 respondents interviewed in Palestine in December 2003, of 1,000 respondents interviewed in Jordan in the same month, and of 1,443 respondents interviewed in Algeria in July and August 2004. Mark Tessler is the principal investigator for this study, which is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation and devoted to “The Nature and Determinants of Regime Preference and Political Values in Jordan, Kuwait, and Palestine: Implications for Arab Politics and for the Comparative Study of Governance and Democracy.” Additional surveys are being conducted as part of this project in Morocco and Kuwait.