

# History Matters: Past as Prologue in Building Democracy in Iraq

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by Eric Davis

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In his *Art History After Modernism* (Chicago, 2003), the German art historian Hans Belting argues that history is the locus of identity for all societies. Losing a sense of its heritage does great damage to a society and hampers its ability to move into the future. In the Middle East, history—or perhaps more precisely, historical memory—deeply informs the contemporary cultural and political consciousness of its peoples. Without recognizing the significance of the past, who could speak of Zionism, which is linked to the ancient Israelite kingdoms; Pan-Arabism, grounded as it is in the glories of the Meccan, Umayyad, and Abbasid empires; or Saddam Hussein's efforts to link his rule to the Babylonian kings, Nebuchadnezzar and Hammurabi?

Current Iraqi politics and society cannot be rebuilt without an understanding of the country's past. We need to appreciate the ways stereotyping has affected U.S. views of the country, how our lack of understanding of Iraqi history has adversely affected our post-Saddam policy; and how restoring Iraq's historical memory could be a vital part of building a democratic Iraq.

## Stereotyping

Many years ago, I arrived in Cairo as a young graduate student from the University of Chicago. Upon telling Egyptians that I lived in Chicago, many, even those who were well educated, reacted in disbelief, asking how I could reside in a city dominated by organized crime and gang violence. Notwithstanding that Al Capone et al. had been dead for many years, Egyptians still envisioned Chicago according to the images they saw in American films and television programs. This speaks to the problem of stereotyping and the ways in which it can hamper the development of cross-cultural knowledge, obviously a critical issue when we think of the complexities of the Middle East.

Several forms of stereotyping have adversely affected our understandings of Iraq. First, because Iraq is a predominantly Muslim country, there is the notion that there can be no democratic political culture such as that enjoyed by many Western countries and non-Muslim, non-Western countries, since Islam purportedly does not allow for the separation of church and state. Western analysts also argue that there is no tradition of a democratic political discourse in Islam.

Second, democracy is supposedly impeded in Arab countries because they were not formally constituted as modern nation-states until after the Ottoman Empires collapse in 1918. According to this view, the populaces of many Arab states still have not developed a shared sense of political community, and consequently the people need authoritarian rulers to insure political stability. If we add to this conceptual mix the argument that many Arab countries are still largely tribal in organization, especially in rural areas, then this social structure supposedly promotes regional, rather than national, identities, again undermining political stability and a democratic political culture.

Third, Iraq occupies a special place in the conceptual framework of Middle Eastern and Arab politics. Because its population is divided among three main ethnic groups—the Sunni Arabs (about 20 percent of the population), Shiite Arabs (about 60 percent) and Kurds (between 15 percent and 20 percent), some Western analysts argue that Iraq is an artificial nation-state. Because of the presumed implacable hostility between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, the strong hand of an authoritarian ruler is said to be the only force that can keep Iraq united and politically stable.<sup>1</sup>

These arguments are not only deeply flawed, but also profoundly ahistorical. A few examples from outside the Iraqi context show how these arguments fail to explain the internal dynamics of modern Iraqi politics. One example would be the *fora* (*manabir*) that Muslim, Christian, and Jewish theologians and thinkers established in Muslim Spain and elsewhere in the Islamic world between the tenth and twelfth centuries, where they would meet to share their respective religions' views on important common theological issues. This tradition continued into the twentieth century, where there are many examples of devout Muslims maintaining close friendships with Christians and Jews. One such example was Muhammad Talat Harb (1867–1941), the founder of the Bank of Egypt and its large industrial conglomerate. Harb, a

<sup>1</sup> Examples of such thinking can be found in many texts on Iraq, e.g., Uriel Dann, *Iraq Under Qassem* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Elie Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies* (New York: Praeger, 1970) and *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992); and more recently, "Ramazani Says 'Unrealistic Assumptions' Hindered Iraq Plan," report on Oct. 3, 2004, lecture given by Middle East politics expert Ruhollah Ramazani at the University of Virginia Law School, at [www.law.virginia.edu](http://www.law.virginia.edu). See also Charles Glass, *Tribes with Flags* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1990).

devout Muslim and a prolific writer who defended Islam against the charge by Western Orientalist scholars that Islam was an inferior religion because it required the veiling of women, counted numerous Egyptian Jews and Christians among his close friends and business associates.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, one of the strongest impulses for democracy in the Middle East has come from reformers in Iran, inspired by President Mohammed Khatami, who is also a cleric. The Iranian case is significant because many of the pro-democracy reformers who now argue for a form of politics that both closely resembles liberal politics in the West and emphasizes the grounding of Iran in Islamic culture, had earlier supported the 1978–79 Islamic Revolution. These examples indicate the over-simplicity of frequently made assertions about the relationship between religion and authoritarian rule in the Arab and Muslim Middle East.

## Understanding Iraqi History

Much of the current Western analysis of Iraq completely ignores Iraqi history prior to the Baath Party, including the first Baathist regime, which seized power in February 1963, and the second, which seized power in July 1968. Both regimes imprisoned, tortured, executed, or expelled intellectuals and political activists who had been working to build a civil society and to promote democratic politics.

### *The Rise of Iraqi Civil Society*

In my twenty-five years of studying Iraqi politics and society, I have been continually struck by the resilience of Iraqis and their unwillingness to submit to Baathist authoritarianism. Indeed, the Iraqi nationalist movement that developed following the Ottoman collapse in World War I exhibited an ecumenical tradition, advocating cultural pluralism, political participation, and social justice. This Iraqi nationalist vision was most evident in the 1920 revolt against British rule in Iraq. Sunni and Shiite Arabs joined forces, praying in each others' mosques and celebrating together their respective holidays. Iraqi Muslims went to the houses of Christians and Jews—the largest single ethnic group in Baghdad at the time of the uprising—and insisted that they join protest marches and demonstrations because they were Iraqi citizens like everyone else.

The Hashemite monarchy installed by the British during a rigged national referendum in 1921 undermined the Iraqi nationalist vision as a

<sup>2</sup> See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 43, 47, 186–7; Eric Davis, *Challenging Colonialism: Bank Misr and Egyptian Industrialization, 1920–1941* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 53, 93–96, 100–02, 116.

“big tent” which, while recognizing Iraq’s predominantly Arab character, would offer cultural and political space to all Iraq’s ethnic groups. The dominant Iraqiist, or domestically oriented, wing of the nationalists stood in opposition to a smaller, state-supported Pan-Arabist political tendency, which sought to make Iraq part of a larger Pan-Arab state. One of the goals of the Pan-Arabists was to change Iraq’s Sunni Arabs’ status as a minority in Iraq to a majority once Iraq was only a region (*qutr*) of a larger Pan-Arab state.

The Pan-Arabist tendency rejected pluralist notions of Iraqi political community, instead emphasizing a xenophobic and chauvinist interpretation of Arabism that promoted Sunni Arab domination of Iraqi politics and society. Under the Hashemite monarchy, the Iraqi government attempted to inculcate a Pan-Arabist consciousness among Iraqi schoolchildren. The Hashemite monarchy, which carried the stigma of having been installed by the British, sought to use Pan-Arabism to bolster its legitimacy by stressing its ties to the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, of which the Hashemites were the guardians, and its blood ties to the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet Mohammed.

During the 1930s, Pan-Arabists developed proto-fascist organizations such as the al-Muthanna Club and its al-Futuwwa movement, and in June 1941 they participated in an attack on Baghdad’s Jewish community. In contrast, the Iraqi nationalist movement developed a broad political coalition encompassing members of all Iraq’s ethnic groups, including Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Kurds, Jews, Christians, Armenians, and other minority groups. Iraqi civil society began to flourish with the formation of numerous student and professional associations, including a highly respected legal profession, a vibrant press, artist ateliers, writers’ associations, labor unions, and an extensive coffeehouse culture. Political parties such as the National Party, *Jamiyat al-Abali*, and the Iraqi Communist Party promoted political participation by all Iraqis and emphasized the need to develop an inclusive sense of political community. Iraqis from all the country’s ethnic groups cooperated in opposing the British-imposed Constitution in 1924, organizing the 1931 General Strike against the British, and maintaining solidarity during numerous labor strikes from the 1930s through the 1950s which called for better working conditions. They also organized broad-based uprisings against the monarchy and the British in 1948 (known as the Wathba) and 1953 (the Intifada).

This nascent civil society expanded greatly after the end of World War II, as large numbers of Iraqis participated in Iraqi politics through the many new political parties, such as the National Democratic and Independence parties formed after the war. With the temporary relaxation of state control, a coalition of Iraqi nationalists and moderate Pan-Arabists competed in the June 1954 elections, running a highly professional campaign and scoring impressive victories in the country’s most important electoral districts, including Baghdad and Mosul. Efforts by sectarian elements during the electoral campaign—particularly those from the Baath Party, which was first formed in Iraq in

1952—to separate Arab nationalists from Iraqi nationalists were unsuccessful, and the electoral coalition retained its cohesion.

During the 1950s, Iraqi poets developed the Free Verse Movement, one of the most important innovations in modern Arabic poetry. Similar developments occurred in other areas of literature, such as the short story, and in the plastic arts, particularly in sculpture. Iraqi poets (Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, Nazik al-Malaika, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, and Buland al-Haydari), short story writers (Abd al-Malik Nuri, Mahdi al-Saqr), artists (Jawad Salim and Ismail al-Shaikhly), and historians (Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani and Faysal al-Samir) became famous throughout the Arab world.

Iraqi nationalism received a strong impetus from the regime of Staff Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim (1958–1963), which took power after the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in July 1958. While sympathetic to Pan-Arab concerns, Qasim believed that Iraq needed to address its internal development problems first. Instead of a unitary Arab state, he favored a federated entity, much along the lines of the European Union. Under Qasim, sectarianism disappeared as a key element in recruiting for positions within the state bureaucracy, the military, and other official walks of life. Indeed, Qasim is the only ruler of modern Iraq who eschewed sectarian criteria in ruling the country. His refusal to exploit sectarian divisions for political ends; his focus on social justice, such as the need for land reform; and his own ascetic lifestyle made Qasim the only truly popular leader since the founding of the modern state. After he was overthrown and executed by the first Baathist regime in February 1963, it was discovered that he had no personal wealth, having donated to the poor his military pension and his two government salaries as prime minister and defense minister.<sup>3</sup>

Qasim's fate offers many lessons for the current situation in Iraq. Immediately after the July 1958 Revolution, Qasim assembled a cabinet of distinguished opposition leaders from the monarchist era, including Kamil al-Chadirji, head of the National Democratic Party, and Muhammad Mahdi al-Kubba, head of the Independence Party. Unfortunately, after consolidating his power, Qasim felt he could dispense with the cabinet, thereby foregoing the opportunity to institutionalize a moderate, non-sectarian government committed to political pluralism and social reform. While others have argued that Qasim feared a democratic political system because it would allow in either the Pan-Arabists, who had many followers within the Sunni Arab-dominated officer corps, or the powerful Iraqi Communist Party, the fact remains that power corrupts.<sup>4</sup> No matter how well intentioned Qasim was in trying to bring

<sup>3</sup> Eric Davis, *Eric Davis, Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 116–17.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of these trends, see *ibid.*, pp. 109–47; and Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), esp. p. 764 et passim.

about better living conditions for the Iraqi populace and in eliminating sectarianism in politics, his authoritarian rule, however non-violent, gradually isolated him from the citizenry, facilitating his overthrow in 1963.

*The Rise of the Baath and the End of Civil Society*

The Baathist regime that came to power in February 1963 and its brutal National Guard militia foreshadowed the extensive human rights abuses that would characterize the Baathist regime that seized power in a July 1968 putsch. Counting petty criminals among its members, the February 1963 regime quickly tried to undo many of the social reforms enacted by Qasim, such as equal rights for women. Shocked by the excesses of its National Guard, a forerunner of Saddam Hussein's security apparatus, the military toppled the regime in November 1963. Iraq was ruled by a number of weak Pan-Arabist regimes until Saddam, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, and Baathists drawn largely from the rural tribal areas around the town of Tikrit in the Sunni-Arab Triangle of north-central Iraq seized power in 1968.

This second, or Tikriti, Baathist regime was very weak. In January 1969, it hung a group of Iraqi Jews in Liberation Square in downtown Baghdad in an effort, as British diplomatic correspondents reported at the time, to intimidate the populace. Internal schisms afflicted the Baathists until 1973, when the chief of security, Nazim al-Kazzar, tried the last unsuccessful coup attempt. The regime felt so vulnerable that it invited the Iraqi Communist Party, its historical nemesis, to join a national-front coalition, to give the government greater legitimacy as "revolutionary" and "anti-imperialist." This front was short-lived, as rising oil wealth during the 1970s allowed the regime to initiate an ambitious development plan and coopt large numbers of middle class and educated Iraqis.

Just when the Tikriti Baath seemed to have consolidated power during the late 1970s, having eliminated the communists by executing party members who had become government ministers in 1978, Saddam ousted Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and seized the presidency in 1979. He then invaded Iran in September 1980 to seize territory from the new Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini. The war was a disaster. Iraq suffered huge human and material losses and probably would have lost the war had it not been for Saudi and Kuwaiti financial support and U.S intelligence and military assistance.

When a truce was finally arranged in 1988, the Baathist regime faced massive domestic discontent, since lower oil prices prevented it from sustaining the 1970s social welfare state. The seizure of Kuwait in August 1990 was a desperate attempt to buy the support of Baath Party members and security-force operatives by allowing them to plunder Kuwaiti society. Through its so-called Project for the Rewriting of History (*Mashru' Iadat Kitabat al-Tarikh*), the regime sought to undo all the progressive change enacted by the Iraqi nationalist movement until 1963. Saddam began to believe this project's

rhetoric—namely, that he was a semi-deity foreordained to lead a Pan-Arab state, and that Iraq’s military was invincible.<sup>5</sup>

### *The 1991 Uprising*

The 1991 intifada almost led to the collapse of the Baathist regime. Suddenly the historical memory of the Iraqi nationalist movement reinserted itself into Iraqi political discourse. For the first time in their modern history, Iraqis openly discussed sectarianism. Opposition groups met to develop ways of promoting civil society in a post-Baathist Iraq. One of the results was Charter 91, produced at a conference in liberated Kurdistan in 1991, which called for a federated, democratic, and culturally pluralistic Iraq.

The huge exodus of Iraq’s middle and upper-middle classes, which has been estimated to comprise as much as 15 percent of the populace—one of the largest expatriate communities in the world—began producing some of the most important works on the need to confront sectarianism, to develop political institutions that would control would-be authoritarian rulers, and to be tolerant of cultural diversity. Qasim’s rule was reexamined in view of its lack of corruption and anti-sectarianism. Still, Qasim was criticized for not allowing free, democratic elections. Even Iraq’s Jewish community was reexamined in monographs and articles detailing the contributions of the Iraqi Jewish community to Iraqi society. While some Iraqi Jews had been sympathetic to Zionism, the vast majority considered themselves Iraqi citizens and fully integrated members of Iraqi society.

These developments had a powerful impact on Saddam and the Baath. A long series of articles attributed to Saddam and published in the Baath Party newspaper, *al-Thawra*, in April 1991, demonstrated the impact of the intifada and the democratic opposition. For the first time, Saddam himself publicly discussed sectarian differences in Iraq and the role of the Shiite in the 1991 uprising. While Saddam tried to tar the Shiite, Kurds, and other oppositional forces, he did not blame Western imperialism or Zionism for the intifada but recognized that it represented an internally generated movement.

Increasingly insecure over his role, Saddam continued to narrow the social base of his regime. Executions, even of many Tikritis, led him to rely increasingly on his immediate family and clan members. He created what Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abdel Jabar calls “the family-party state” (*dawlat hizb al-usra*), dominated by close family members and tribal associates, and the Baathist regime became more an organized crime syndicate than a political party.<sup>6</sup> Saddam’s two sons, Uday (1964–2003) and Qusay (1966–2003),

<sup>5</sup> Davis, *Memories of State*, pp. 148–75.

<sup>6</sup> Faleh Abd al-Jabbar, “Min Dawlat Hizb al-Wahid ila Dawlat al-Hizb/al-Usra” [From the One-Party State to the Family-Party State], *al-Thaqafa al-Jadida*, 267 (Dec. 1995–Jan./Feb. 1996), pp. 6–28.

acquired ever-greater power, and in desperation Saddam even revived the moribund system of tribalism in the countryside. Tribal sheiks took control of the rural populace, replacing the many Baathist leaders killed during the 1991 intifada.

At the same time, a democracy, albeit imperfect, developed in liberated Kurdistan in Iraq's northern provinces. Landlocked, having no economic resources to speak of and suffering from a blockade from the Baathist regime to the south, the Kurdish regional government established a parliament, held free elections, allowed radio and television stations and an ideologically diverse press to develop, and built new schools and hospitals. Infant mortality declined and educational levels rose, while in Baathist-controlled areas, the opposite occurred. The Kurdish experience clearly demonstrated that, once freed from Baathist repression, Iraqis were perfectly capable of ruling themselves.

### **Democracy's Prospects in Contemporary Iraq**

It seems at the moment that the hopes and expectations of the large majority of Iraqis that a more participatory and tolerant society would be created in the wake of the fall of the Baathist regime were unrealistic. The inability of the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) and U.S. military forces to suppress a widespread insurgency seems to underscore this view. The hostility of many Iraqis towards the U.S. occupation is cited as further evidence that democracy will not find fertile soil in Iraq. But does the current unrest in Iraq really indicate a lack of commitment to creating democracy?

Public opinion polls show that Iraqis continue to support democracy in large numbers. Iraqi society is highly capable of creating a political community characterized by democratic governance. However, many factors are working against the will of the citizenry, including a wide array of domestic and international forces. Despite the heavy odds that have been stacked against them, Iraqis continue to press forward to create a more democratic society.

A widespread insurgency was planned by the Baathist regime prior to its overthrow. Knowing that the Iraqi army would be unable to confront U.S. military superiority, Saddam's regime organized a resistance movement that would fight American forces after the invasion. Large caches of arms and money were planted throughout Iraq, especially in the rural towns and villages of the Sunni-Arab Triangle. These resources were to be used in escalating attacks on American military units intended to sap the U.S. forces' resolve and oust them from Iraq.

Those who ran the family-party state, having lost their political and economic prerogatives, instigated the initial uprising, which also involved members of the massive security apparatus Saddam had created before being overthrown, the Fedayeen and other elite military units loyal to Saddam, and high-ranking army officers and Baath Party officials. However, the insurgency grew much wider in the months following the regime's overthrow in March

2003. Iraq's porous border allowed foreign radicals, many of them Islamist militants, to infiltrate the country and widen the insurgency's social and political base.

Gradually, the insurgency also began to attract rural inhabitants of the Sunni-Arab Triangle. These included young, nationalistic Iraqis not necessarily associated with the Baath Party, many of whom were even hostile to Saddam. In their view, the U.S. occupation threatened to marginalize the Sunni Arab community, which would lose the privileged access to the state it had enjoyed since the Ottoman period. This latter group of Sunni Arabs found much of the American troops' behavior—e.g., public interrogations of handcuffed and blindfolded male insurgents—shaming and insulting. Other Sunni Arab supporters of the insurgency have come from tribes that were close to the Baathist regime, Saddam having hand-picked their leaders in the 1990s.

Despite the insurgency's intensity, large areas of Iraq have remained relatively calm. The Kurds have not joined the uprising. In the south, the vast majority of the Shiites have likewise avoided violent confrontation with Iraqi and American security forces. The important exception was Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr (1974?–). Al-Sadr is from a prominent clerical family, the son of revered Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who was assassinated by the Baathist regime in 1999. Al-Sadr boldly renamed Saddam City, the impoverished Shiite quarter of Baghdad, as Al-Sadr City, and appealed to unemployed Shiite youth. His Mahdi Army attracted large numbers of these young male Shiites who, like their counterparts in the Sunni-Arab Triangle, envision a bleak future for themselves. But al-Sadr's militia found itself fighting not only American forces, but also other Shiite groups. These included the Badr Brigade of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which rejects al-Sadr's claim to leadership of the Shiite community.

## **U.S. Policy**

To understand why the insurgency has been able to destabilize Iraq and impede the movement toward democratization, we need to examine U.S. policy in Iraq. Ironically, many decisions taken by the former Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) after the invasion in March 2003 helped strengthen the insurgency and inadvertently created serious obstacles to a democratic transition. The U.S. military's failure to prevent widespread looting after Baghdad fell sent the message that the United States did not have a well thought-out plan for post-Baathist Iraq. Its failure to protect cultural sites such as the National Library and the Iraq Museum, while it did secure the Republican Palace and the Ministry of Oil, sent the same message. Many Iraqis therefore exercised great caution in committing to U.S.-proposed projects intended to rebuild civil society.

Despite warnings from Iraqi and American military experts not to do so, CPA administrator Paul Bremer dissolved the Iraqi army shortly after the war, putting nearly 400,000 troops out of work. Suddenly unemployed, and in an inflation-plagued economy, many former troops provided weapons to the insurgents or participated in attacks on U.S. forces in return for money, which they often needed to feed their families. Bremer also dismissed most Baath Party members from government posts, not appreciating that, far from being committed Baathists, many had joined the party only to maintain their positions. Dismissing them denied Iraq the important professional skills of those who had been Baathists in name only.

Nor did the CPA confront the large unemployment problem that developed after the war. While rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure—including potable water, electricity, and sewage treatment—was crucial, much of the funds designated for rebuilding Iraq would have been better directed towards a comprehensive, New Deal-type, public-works and education program that would have provided Iraqis with immediate employment. Removing garbage and sewage, painting and repairing schools, and providing schoolchildren with lunches would not only have provided a source of income and have sent a message of hope to Iraqis, but also would have undermined support for those seeking to subvert democratization. In other words, a large portion of the billions of dollars that were allocated to Iraq would have been better spent at the grassroots level rather than on projects lacking short-term benefits.<sup>7</sup>

While Bremer and the CPA received high marks from many Iraqis for efforts such as promoting new organizations designed to protect women's rights, they were also criticized for being too removed from the citizenry. The CPA did not fully utilize micropolitics—i.e., direct contact with Iraqi communities to solicit their views on their country's future. One official who did adopt this approach was Lt. General David Petraeus, who vigorously pursued contacts with tribal leaders and notables in and around the Mosul area under his command. His policy received high marks from Iraqis.<sup>8</sup>

The CPA did not attempt to develop these close contacts with the Sunni Arab community or sufficiently reassure Sunnis that they would not be discriminated against in the post-Saddam political order, even though they would need to share power with the Shia and the Kurds. Such reassurances would have helped to offset Sunni Arab hostility to the CPA. By not cultivating prominent Sunni Arab leaders in rural and tribal areas, the CPA failed to make these areas less fertile ground for ex-Baathists and foreign militants.

<sup>7</sup> "Baghdad: A Race Against the Clock," *International Conference Group*, June 11, 2003, pp. 3, 10. On lucrative contracts awarded in Iraq, see "Corporate Contracts" discussion at the Global Policy Forum's website, [www.globalpolicy.org](http://www.globalpolicy.org), under "Iraq," and "Examining Halliburton's 'Sweetheart' Deal in Iraq," *All Things Considered*, Dec. 22, 2003, at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org) for *Frontline's* Nov. 23, 2003 interview with Lt. Gen. Petraeus. See also "Mentoring Iraq," *Daily Standard*, Apr. 26, 2004.

For several months, the CPA likewise ignored the Hawza, the loosely-knit association of Shiite clerics, until Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani began to raise political demands during fall 2003 that ran counter to the CPA's goals. Al-Sistani was forced to enter politics not just by the United States' neglect of the Shiite community's interests, but also by the challenge posed to the Hawza's authority by al-Sadr. Al-Sadr's supporters felt that the Shiites were not adequately represented in the post-Saddam political planning and opposed the dominant Hawza view that religion and politics should be largely separate. While most of the Hawza wanted to limit the clergy's involvement in politics to being consulted by the government on matters relating to education and personal-status law, al-Sadr's followers want an Islamic state in Iraq. By not engaging the more moderate Shiite clergy early on, the CPA created an opening for al-Sadr, justifying his claim that once again Iraq's Shiites were being left out of the corridors of power.

Iraq's current political problems cannot be attributed solely to the insurgency and the CPA's political decisions. Because the post-Baathist Sunni Arab community had no recognized political authority, it was difficult for the CPA, and it remained difficult for the IIG, to identify interlocutors with whom to negotiate on political interests and creating new political institutions. The struggle between the Hawza and the Sadristis also initially prevented the Shia from being able to speak with one voice. The Kurds insist that they be given strong, constitutionally specified protections that will prevent Baghdad from engaging in the type of attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan that have characterized many Arab governments in the past. However, al-Sistani and the Hawza oppose a constitution that gives the Kurds the types of guarantees that would amount to veto power over national policy decisions. In short, contention among Iraq's political elites constitutes another serious impediment to democratization in Iraq.

But Iraqis' socio-political behavior at the grassroots level tells a story beyond the ethnic divisions so often used to characterize Iraqi politics. There was a massive flowering of the institutions of civil society after the overthrow of Saddam's regime. The Iraqi Communist Party's *People's Path* soon reappeared in Baghdad, followed by more than two hundred newspapers and magazines in Arabic, English, and the languages of Iraq's major minority groups. Labor unions began to reorganize legally for the first time since the early 1960s. Iraqi women started a large number of organizations to protect rights that they had already won earlier, in the twentieth century. A large number of literary groups were formed, and numerous artists' groups and experimental theater troupes appeared in Baghdad. The latter count many Iraqi youth among their members, indicating that support for democracy extends beyond those older Iraqis who are conversant with pre-Baathist civil society. Many of these new organizations are inter-ethnic in membership. Of great importance as well to a nascent Iraqi civil society is the reemergence throughout Iraq of a coffeehouse culture. It is in this informal institution that the political and cultural ideas of the day are discussed and debated.

## The Iraqi Understanding of Democracy

Many Western analysts are perplexed that the post-Baathist process of democratization in Iraq has not proceeded in a more positive direction. They are confused by the widespread hostility towards the United States' occupation of Iraq. However, Iraqis increasingly view the post-Baathist occupation of their country not as a vehicle for democratization and progressive change, but as a mechanism for domination of Iraq by the United States and its allies. For many Iraqis, "democracy" has become a code word for using Iraq to remake the Middle East in the United States' image. They fear that through this "domino democracy," the United States actually is seeking to enhance its strategic interests in the Middle East: that it is using this pretext to put pressure on neighbors such as Syria and Iran, to enhance Israel's power in the region, and to control Iraq's oil.<sup>9</sup>

Given this background, it is not difficult to see how, ironically, former Baathists have been able to argue that, for Iraq, democracy is not culturally authentic (*ghayr asil*) and does not accord with Iraq's national character and historical traditions.<sup>10</sup> In authoritarian discourse, whether that of ex-Baathists or Islamist radicals, democracy is painted as an imported form of rule designed to suppress Iraq's national aspirations. That is why, in order to promote democratization, the discourse of democracy in Iraq has to be restructured so that it cannot be used by those political forces that seek to reintroduce authoritarian rule in order to undermine progressive change.

One of the problems when discussing democratization in Iraq is that everyone assumes a uniform definition of the term "democracy." Here again, history matters. In the West, definitions of democracy as applied to Iraq have largely been derived from what has often been referred to as a neoconservative understanding of the term—i.e., a notion of the state's role being limited to protecting civil liberties and the rule of law, not one that is extensively involved in the market or that provides social welfare benefits. This neoconservative definition of democracy does not resonate with a sizeable segment of the Iraqi populace, and it is inconsistent with the term as understood by the mainstream of the Iraqi nationalist movement.

When asked about their vision of the future, Iraqis have stressed three values or issues above all in poll after poll: first and foremost, a desire for security; second, regular employment and a decent standard of living; and third, a democratic form of government. Thus, in keeping with the use of the term by the Iraqi nationalist movement before the first Baathist regime

<sup>9</sup> On the notion of "domino democracy," see Eric Davis, "Domino Democracy: The Challenges to U.S. Foreign Policy in Post Saddam Iraq," in Alan Curtis, ed., *Patriotism, Democracy, and Common Sense* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield/Milton Eisenhower Foundation, 2004), pp. 201–18.

<sup>10</sup> See the interview with Salah al-Mukhtar in the Kurdish newspaper *Hawlati*, Dec. 22, 2004.

suppressed it in 1963, the term “democracy” means self-determination (i.e., no foreign domination of Iraq), social justice, and anti-sectarianism (social tolerance). Elections and representative institutions are not the critical first issues that come to mind when democracy is mentioned.

In Iraq, what is really meant by democracy is “social democracy,” a form of democracy that implies much greater state involvement in a society’s political economy than the neoconservative model would allow. It also emphasizes a desire to promote processes and institutions that fight, rather than promote, sectarianism. It is this strongly felt desire that Iraq never return to the sectarianism of the Baath that offers the greatest hope for a pluralist Iraq and ultimately a respect for democratic institutions.

One of the main problems facing contemporary Iraq is the lack of trust among Iraq’s main constituent ethnic groups. This mistrust is less some primordial reflection of an “Iraqi national character” than the legacy of forty years of Baathist and sectarian rule. Restoring a longer historical memory could help to overcome that legacy.

Lack of trust does not just imply problems in creating political coalitions, especially among different ethnic and regional interests, but it also relates to the issue of political self-confidence, of making Iraqis feel capable of ruling themselves without the need for an authoritarian ruler such as Saddam to maintain political stability. A positive historical memory can also help promote trust among ethnic groups and overcome feelings of a lack of self-confidence.

During my first visit to Iraq, in May–June 1980, just before the onset of the Iran-Iraq War, I was curious why the Baathist regime was spending large sums of money to have university professors, intellectuals, and artists rewrite the nation’s history. While the regime argued that the effort was intended to overcome the influence of British colonial rule between 1918 and 1958, the actual goal was to expunge from the historical record the positive accomplishments of the Iraqi nationalist movement, which were thoroughly at odds with the repressive and sectarian policies of the Iraqi Baath Party. Of what was a regime that had one of the most repressive secret service apparatuses in the world so afraid? This question sent me on a quest to study the history of the pre-1963 Iraqi nationalist movement.

The images we possess of the current political situation in Iraq are somewhat distorted. To be sure, kidnapping, political violence, and sabotage of oil facilities are ongoing and present a serious threat to political stability. Kurdish demands for minority guarantees in a permanent Iraqi constitution have yet to be worked out. However, there is another reality that has been largely being ignored by the Western media. Very little mention has been made of the myriad examples of Iraqis who, since the fall of Saddam and the Baath, have been actively involved in civic life—such as establishing municipal councils, publishing newspapers and journals, and forming artistic organizations—and who are committed to working for democratic change. Little

mention has been made of public opinion polls in Iraq that show consistently strong support for the idea of creating a democratic Iraq. There are numerous English-language websites on Iraq, including translations of Iraqi newspaper articles, which do note these phenomena, but they are underreported in the Western press. And, of course, the substantial participation of the Iraqi electorate in the January 30, 2005 National Assembly elections is yet another indicator of the populace's commitment to democracy.

### **Historical Memory Revisited**

In post-Baathist Iraq, historical memory could have a powerful political impact by demonstrating four elements critical to the process of building democracy. First, the pre-1963 Iraqi nationalist movement was characterized by *a history of cross-ethnic cooperation*, including a wide variety of social and political efforts by Sunni and Shiite notables prior to World War I to create a national education system, and by Shiite clerics to protect Iraq's independence from British occupation forces both during and after that war. Nationalist demonstrations against British influence in Iraq throughout the period between the 1920s and 1958 were characterized by cross-ethnic cooperation and devoid of significant sectarian influences.

Second, Iraq has *a history of associational behavior*. Already before World War I, Iraqis demonstrated a strong desire to join political and civic-minded organizations. One of the most impressive indicators of associational behavior was the establishment of a large number of labor unions beginning in the late 1920s. These unions supplemented preexisting artisan associations in many Iraqi cities and towns, which themselves formed a national association in 1930. Especially noteworthy about those Iraqi labor unions, whether in the oil sector, the state railways, or the port of Basra, was their ethnic diversity and the solidarity that members maintained during lengthy strikes, despite the fact that the majority had little education and were often illiterate.

Third, a historical study of the nationalist movement indicates *a desire to promote cross-ethnic and regional communication*, namely the yearning to create a public sphere. Here we see, beginning with the period after the so-called Young Turk Revolt of 1908 against the Ottoman regime, a flourishing of newspapers and journals, indicating that Iraqis wanted to share political, social, and cultural views.

Fourth, the nationalist movement encouraged *widespread artistic creativity and innovation*. The enormous strides made by Iraqi artists and writers prior to and after 1963 evidence a desire to challenge tradition, or to reinterpret it, and to maintain porous cultural boundaries, the exact opposite of the effort of the Baath and sectarian regimes, which sought to rigidify such boundaries.

What all four processes demonstrate is that the Iraqi nationalist movement, especially its Iraqist wing, involved in Iraqi politics from the early 1900s

until being suppressed in 1963, always maintained a commitment to participatory politics, cultural tolerance, and social justice.

Of course, the Iraqi state itself, as well as democracy advocates, needs to take historical memory more seriously. While the Iraqi government's first concern has to be suppressing the insurgency, in order to ensure the long-term success of democracy it needs to convince Iraqis that democracy will work in their country by restoring historical memory. Government agencies, such as the Ministries of Education, Higher Education, and Culture, and state television and radio could take several steps to mobilize historical memory:

1) *Rewrite Iraqi secondary-school textbooks and design new introductory textbooks in the social sciences and humanities at the university level.* Rather than being written by foreign experts, these texts would be written by Iraqis and draw upon modern Iraqi social and political history to elucidate concepts designed to promote better understandings of civic responsibility and democratic politics.

2) *Use the mass media to promote better understandings of the past, with a strong emphasis on folklore.* The Baath Party's Project for the Rewriting of History used television effectively to stress Iraqis' common folkloric heritage (*al-turath al-shabi*). Extremely popular, for example, was a television program called *Baghdadiyat* (Aspects of Baghdad), which emphasized the folk history of Baghdad's popular quarters and folk poetry and music. The Baath Party created sectarian subtexts when sponsoring folklore, where Qasim had earlier used folklore in a unifying fashion that emphasized ethnic solidarity and tolerance. Iraq's new government could use folklore to stress the commonalities of Iraq's major ethnic groups and minority populations, as well as to educate the populace as to the unique cultural characteristics of the country's diverse ethnic groups and traditions.

3) *Bridge the intellectual heritage gap.* The state could bring together older intellectuals, artists, and political activists to discuss, in nationally televised town meetings, the unity that Iraqis demonstrated following World War I and in the context of Iraq's pre-1963 nationalist movement. Because many intellectuals wrote on political events and processes that occurred prior to 1963, these discussions would not only serve an educational function, but help bridge the political and cultural gap that separates these older intellectuals from a younger generation of Iraqis who have known only Baathist rule.

4) *Organize conferences.* The state could mount conferences of intellectuals committed to democratic change to help promote a corporate sense of identity and to solicit written works from them. These conferences could document not only activities related to the building of civil society, but also the manner in which many Iraqi intellectuals engaged in resistance activities under Baathist rule, to record that not every Iraqi submitted to Saddam and his henchmen.

5) *Promote coffeehouses.* Finally, the state could offer low-cost loans to increase the number of coffeehouses, especially those devoted to promoting

poetry, music, and the arts. Historically, the Iraqi coffeehouse has been one of the cornerstones of Iraqi civil society.

An Arabic saying states that, “The Egyptians write, the Lebanese publish, and the Iraqis read.” Iraq has the capability to become one of the most advanced countries of the Middle East. It has a large and highly educated middle class, a tradition of a flourishing civil society, an agricultural sector whose potential is greatly underutilized, one of the world’s great civilizational heritages, and a rich base of oil wealth. Once no longer at odds with its neighbors in the Gulf region, it will be able to cooperate with them to produce serious economic development. The demonstration effect of a functioning Iraqi democracy can have a salutary impact on neighboring authoritarian regimes.

What would an Iraqi democracy look like? Because Iraq is a multi-ethnic society, it would undoubtedly have a rough-and-tumble quality. With its wide variety of political parties and strong inter-elite competition, Iraqi democracy will most likely resemble Italian democracy. Rather than viewing this as a negative comparison, I would offer the argument of many Italian political scientists, that Italy’s frequent rotation of governments signifies less political instability than much greater opportunity for political participation by a wide variety of political actors than is possible in countries like the United States, where two major parties dominate the political landscape. Numerous Iraqi political parties will no doubt vie for power. However, a federated country in which the Sunni and Shiite Arabs and the Kurds, as well as other minorities, can feel that their traditions are respected and not subject to state repression, and in which economic development assures every citizen a decent standard of living, will work to offset the political strife that facilitated the rise of the Baath Party and its authoritarian policies.

Creative uses of historical memory will not provide a panacea for Iraq’s political problems. However, effective mobilization of the past, if done in a straightforward and non-romanticized fashion, can help to inspire Iraqis to regain a sense of civic pride and trust in their ability to forge ahead with democratization. Historical memory can help deprive those who seek to return Iraq to an authoritarian past of the ability to exploit elements of *fear, suspicion, and distrust* that are so corrosive to attempts to bring about democratic change.

