

# Rebuilding Iraq: Prospects for Democracy

**O**n June 26 the Cato Institute hosted a half-day conference, “Rebuilding Iraq: Prospects for Freedom and Democracy.” The first panel looked at economic issues; the second explored the prospects for democracy. On the second panel were Patrick Basham, senior fellow with Cato’s Center for Representative Government; Radwan Masmoudi, president of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy; and Michael Hudson, professor of Arab studies at Georgetown University. Excerpts from their remarks follow.

**Patrick Basham:** My nomination for the political understatement of the year already goes to President Bush, who on May 2 told the world that in Iraq the transition from dictatorship to democracy will take time.

The president believes that an Iraqi democracy will serve as a model throughout the Islamic world, something of a democratic domino, in fact. But is Iraq really capable of moving smoothly from dictatorship to democracy? In my opinion, the White House will be gravely disappointed with the result of its effort to establish a stable democracy in Iraq or any other nation that is home to a large Muslim population.

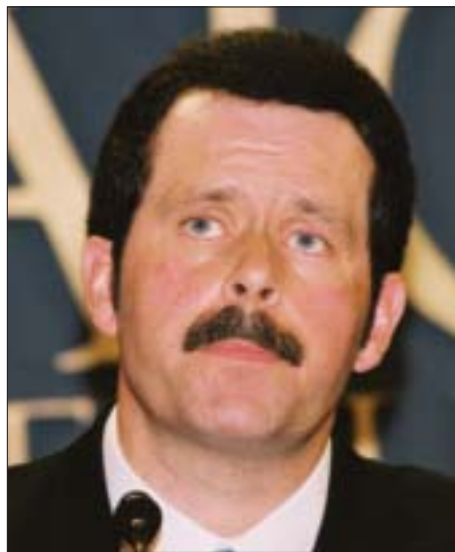
According to Freedom House, not a single Arab country qualifies as an electoral democracy. It is hard to be optimistic about the chances of Iraq establishing a stable, democratic political system, at least in the short to medium term. My pessimism also stems from reflection on what causes democracy to flourish in a society. There is a vast body of quite rigorous scholarship already assembled on how societies democratize.

Political scientist Ronald Inglehart studied the past 21 years of responses to the World Values Survey, which measures the values and beliefs of people in 70 countries, from established democracies to authoritarian dictatorships, including 10 Islamic nations. Inglehart analyzed the relationship between the survey responses within each society and each society’s level of democracy as measured by Freedom House. He concluded that the prospects for democracy in any Islamic country seem particularly poor.

The building blocks of a modern democratic political culture are not institutional in nature. By that I mean the building blocks are not elections, parties, and legislatures.

Rather, the long-term survival of democratic institutions requires a particular political culture, one that solidly supports democracy.

So what are the cultural factors that play an essential collective role in stimulating and reinforcing a stable democratic political system? The first is political trust, the assumption that one’s opponent will accept the rules of the democratic process and surrender power if he or she loses an election. The second is social tolerance, the acceptance of traditionally unpopular minority groups such as homosexuals. The third is popular support for gender equality. The fourth is widespread recognition of the importance of basic political liberties such as freedom of speech and popular participation in decisionmaking.



**Patrick Basham:** “The Iraq democratic reconstruction project will be a good deal harder than White House theorists expect.”

Unfortunately, in Iraq as in many neighboring countries, most of the ingredients critical to the development of a civil pluralist society are either absent or diminished by years of neglect. Iraqi political culture is still dominated by identity politics, the elevation of ethnic and religious solidarity over all other values, including individual liberty. In this deeply paternalistic political culture, most people adopt a political passivity that acts as a brake on the development of ideas, such as personal responsibility and self-help, that are central to the development of economic and

political liberalism. Hence, political freedom is an alien concept to most Iraqis.

Although recent Kurdish experience may be reason for cautious optimism in some quarters, it also demonstrates how slowly the collective mindset changes. The largely autonomous regions of the Kurdish-controlled north were relatively freer and better off than the rest of Saddam’s Iraq, but Kurdish political culture remains largely mired in authoritarianism. Frank political debate, for example, was almost unheard of as tribal leaders from respective parties dominated specific regions and exhibited the top-down leadership style characteristic of the old Baathist Party elite.

Political culture is clearly related to the level of economic development, specifically, rising living standards and a large middle class. Both the historical record and three decades of empirical research have demonstrated repeatedly that democratization is much more likely to occur and much more likely to take hold in richer than in poorer nations. A higher standard of living breeds values that demand greater democracy.

Turkey, the most economically developed, secular, and socially tolerant Islamic country, is currently progressing into what is referred to as a democratic transition zone. The Turks are not where we are, but they are not where they were. Meanwhile, as we are witnessing day by day, the Iranian political culture increasingly exhibits signs of popular pressure for democratization, as befits the second most economically developed Islamic country. But, like so many of its poorer brethren, Iraq won’t be a stable democratic nation until it is much, much wealthier.

The realization of Iraq’s democratic potential will depend more on the introduction of a free-market economic system and its long-term positive influence on Iraqi political culture than on any U.N.-approved election. But the Bush administration’s plan for the democratization of Iraq is premised on the rapid adoption of a new constitution that will be successfully implemented by groups of Iraqi elites bargaining among themselves. The White House, in my view, is placing an extremely large wager that the formation of democratic institutions in Iraq can stimulate a democratic culture. What President Bush seeks to achieve in Iraq has never before been accomplished.

## “In the Islamic calendar, this is the beginning of the 15th century, not the 21st century. The Iraqis are at a different stage of political evolution.”

In post-Saddam Iraq, vivid demonstrations of religious fervor and, in some cases, undemocratic intent, in tandem with clerics who have taken the political initiative by gaining control of numerous towns, villages, and sections of some major cities caught our political leadership completely off guard. Whether by setting up Islamic courts of justice or applying pressure against liquor distributors, music stores, cinemas, and unveiled women, religious fundamentalists are coercing their communities into a stricter Islamic way of life.

How did the White House stumble into this predicament? The Bush administration believed that Iraq was too secular a country to foster a populist, religious-based antipathy to American interests. In reality, however, the notion of a secular Iraq requires considerable qualification. Over the past 35 years of Baathist rule, Iraq's outward appearance of religious moderation largely reflected the Hussein regime's preference for institutionalized thugery over religious fanaticism.

The Baath Arab Socialist Party that provided Saddam's political backbone was philosophically and operationally fascist, inspired more by the muscular Arab nationalism adapted from European national socialism than by dreams of an Islamic afterlife. Saddam himself springs politically from Iraq's minority Muslim population, the Sunnis, who are considered moderate in comparison with the Shia Muslim majority, a sizable proportion if not a majority of which adheres to the faith promulgated by Iran's fundamentalist Islamic leadership.

So, can Iraq be democratic? In the very long term, perhaps it can. But the Iraqi democratic reconstruction project will be a good deal harder, I believe, than White House theorists expect: The project is not just about establishing electoral democracy. It is about establishing liberal democracy. So there is a real danger, for example, in holding national elections too soon.

Before elections take place, the tangible foundations of a free and open civil society need to be built in Iraq. It is critically important that Iraq's first national election not be its last.

Optimists about Iraq and democracy should consider Bernard Lewis's reminder: In the Islamic calendar, this is the beginning of the 15th century, not the 21st

century. The Iraqis are at a different stage of political evolution. We are attempting to sow the seeds of 21st-century political institutions in the soil of a 15th-century political culture. Hence, my forecast that in coming seasons a bountiful democratic harvest in Iraq is quite an unrealistic prospect.

**Radwan A. Masmoudi:** In Iraq, I believe that we have won the war but may be losing the peace. Iraq is quickly becoming a quagmire. Peace and security cannot be established, according to many military experts, with fewer than 250,000 troops, not the present 150,000. At the same time, we cannot withdraw because we would appear to be losing face or leaving Iraq worse off than it was before the war.



**Radwan A. Masmoudi: “The Iraqis are very interested in and capable of developing their own government and their own democracy.”**

The situation in Iraq today appears to most Iraqis—and I am in touch with many of them—more an occupation than a liberation. Most Iraqis in the beginning, and I think most of them until now, welcomed us as a liberating force: we were there to liberate Iraq, to build democracy, to get out as soon as possible, and to give Iraq back to the Iraqis.

But it appears that we are shifting toward trying to impose our values and our views on the Iraqis, and many of them are resenting it. I am very sorry, for example, that we used the word “occupation” in the latest

U.N. resolution. To us, it seems like a technical term that we have to use for legal reasons, but that word really resonated in Iraq and in much of the Arab world.

What they are saying in the media is, aha, the United States is finally admitting that it is here to occupy Iraq, not to liberate Iraq. If our presence is seen as an occupation, then I think we can expect mounting resistance.

The last 30 years have been very oppressive, but Iraq has a proud history of tolerance and civil society. In the middle of the 20th century, Iraq was a very progressive and a very liberal state. So I don't think that it is true that there is no political development in Iraq or in the Arab world. Yes, there was a big setback during the last 30 years. But the Iraqis are very interested in and, I think, capable of developing their own government and their own democracy. In fact, they are eager to do so.

That democracy will be slightly different, maybe very different, from our own democracy, but that is the whole point of democracy. Not all democracies are similar.

Despite the recent problems, and the security problems in particular, major Iraqi groups are working today to establish an Iraqi government. Even though Paul Bremer cancelled the elections—in fact, that has infuriated most of the Iraqi groups, including the secularists, that were supporting the U.S. government—the groups are working together to develop their own platform and their own government.

It might be even better for democracy if the Iraqis took their own initiative instead of waiting for a green light or permission from Bremer or anybody else. That would show that the Iraqis are capable of working together despite their religious and ethnic differences. Kurds, Shia, and Sunni work together in the Iraqi groups. They are capable of building a coalition government that is democratically elected and accountable to the Iraqi people.

Another positive note is that Iraqi Shia are very different from the Iranians. They don't want a theocracy. Iraqis are learning from the Iranian experience. They see that, even in Iran, most Iranians including the clergy are now convinced that too much mixing of the religious establishment and the government is bad for both the government and Islam.

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**“We need to convince the Iraqis that democracy is compatible with Islam. That is the only way they will accept democracy.”**

**POLICY FORUM** *Continued from page 9*

What should we do? First, it would be a tragic mistake to be afraid of elections. There is no doubt that the Iraqis are ready for democracy. All the experts who have visited Iraq before or after the war keep saying that Iraqis want democracy. They are ready for democracy. Their nascent democracy will probably not be a perfect democracy, but they are ready for democracy.

They have suffered for a very long time under one of the most oppressive and brutal regimes in the world. And because of that they have been vaccinated against oppression and against dictatorship. I don't think they will allow anybody, religious or secular, to oppress them again because they have seen what oppression does to them and to their families and to their societies.

Third, most analysts estimate that moderate Islamic parties are probably going to win the elections in Iraq. I would venture to say that that will be the case whether

we have elections today or 20 years from now. The reality is that secularism is very unpopular in the Arab world and in most of the Muslim world. And in any real elections, the secularists will not win more than 10 or 20 percent of the vote.

That is the case, by the way, even in Turkey, where in election after election the Islamists have been winning. They are moderate Islamists. They are not radicals, they are not extremists, but they are Islamists. Right now we have a moderate Islamic party that has accepted secular rule in Turkey. After 20 or 30 years of being allowed to participate in the political process, the Islamists themselves are seeing that secularism is beneficial.

In Iraq and the Arab world, secularism has been discredited in the last 30 years, thanks to Saddam Hussein and other secular dictators, who, in the name of secularism, have tortured people and killed religious leaders.

We at the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy organized three workshops

October year in Morocco, Egypt, and Yemen and invited leading secular and moderate Islamic leaders to talk with each other about democracy, secularism, the role of religion, and women's rights. We were very surprised that all the parties that we thought were secular without exception asked us to please not call them secular. "Call us anything else you want, but do not call us secular."

So it would be an extremely tragic mistake to focus on secularism as if it were the necessary condition for democracy. If we do, we will not have democracy in Iraq. Let us not forget that religion played a big role in the establishment of democracy here in the United States.

What Iraqis need is help in building their institutions. That will take years, it might even take decades, but it can be done. They need help in building democratic institutions. They need help in learning to be nonviolent and to solve political conflicts through peaceful means. They need help in understanding democracy,

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## “If we look at the history of Iraq, we find an extremely complicated society. It is not just a nation of sheep being led around by the nose by some leader.”

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women's rights, and human rights. And I think they will welcome such help.

Most important, I think we need to convince the Iraqis that democracy is compatible with Islam. That is the only way they will accept democracy. If democracy is seen as something that is alien to their culture or to their religion—95 percent or more of Iraqis are Muslim—they will reject it. It does not matter how good democracy is. If it is against Islam, they will reject it.

Fourth, reforming the educational system is going to be extremely important. Teaching people from kindergarten through elementary and high school about democracy, tolerance, respect for differences of opinion, and respect for other religious minorities and ethnic minorities is going to be extremely important. There is a huge need for appropriate classroom materials not only in Iraq but throughout the Arab world.

It is important to realize that not all Islamists are fundamentalists or radicals. Yes, there are some fringes, but the overwhelming majority of Islamists in Iraq and everywhere else in the Arab and Muslim world are moderate and nonviolent. They are very willing and able to work within a democratic system and to respect others' opinions.

My last recommendation is that we need to involve other Arabs and Muslims, especially supporters of democracy, in the reconstruction of Iraq so that it is not seen as solely a U.S. effort.

To conclude, the Muslim world is in turmoil. A major reason is the perception that the United States has provided uncritical support for Israel and for oppressive regimes in the Arab and Muslim world. There is also a desire for social, economic, and political freedom in the region. The challenge for American policy is to understand the progressive nature of the contemporary Islamic resurgence and to support real and meaningful reforms, good government, and respect for human rights and dignity.

Muslim groups, in particular in the United States, are trying to exert leadership and provide guidance on how Muslims should live and develop their societies in the 21st century. What happens in Iraq will have huge repercussions all over the Arab and Muslim world. It is critical for our national security, and for the sake of peace and security in the region,

that we help to build a real democracy in Iraq, “give Iraq back to the Iraqis,” and leave as soon as peace and security are restored.

**Michael Hudson:** To cut to the chase, if I had to give a clear answer about what should be done, I would say we ought to get out of Iraq as quickly as we can. We ought to immediately set up a transitional regime that will, within a very short period of time, lead to a constitutional convention and the establishment of a permanent, legitimate Iraqi government. I am afraid the longer we stay, the more problems we are going to have. I think we are perhaps truly on the horns of a dilemma in Iraq.

There is no easy way out. Leaving precipitously may well lead to chaos or to



**Michael Hudson:** “The longer we stay, the more we will be disliked and the higher will be the cost of maintaining our presence.”

political outcomes that are incompatible with American interests in the region, such as Israel's security and the suppression of nationalism in the region.

But if we stay for a long time, I am seriously doubtful that we can do as well as the British did. Everybody is going back to history, looking at how Britain not only created Iraq but also then dominated it by mostly indirect means for decades before finally the British postcolonial experiment was overthrown in a violent, nationalist revolution in 1958.

What we are looking at in Iraq, if I may be a cynical academic for a moment, is the

most expensive political science experiment in a long time. We political scientists, especially those of us who work on the Middle East and have been studying what we call the Mukhabarat state—a national security, very authoritarian state—in the Middle East and especially in the Arab world for many years, have often wondered what would happen if a *deus ex machina* should parachute into a place like Baghdad and blow it all away. And Saddam's Iraq was the quintessential Mukhabarat state. What is underneath? What would happen? Well, we are finding out.

There are various models that political scientists have drawn on as they try to interpret the landscape of political change and the possibilities for democratization in underdeveloped regions. Students of political philosophy will remember John Plamenatz's famous article back in the 1950s about the economic and social prerequisites for democracy—that a certain degree of education and economic well-being will produce democracy.

We have different models from our own history, of which the most famous is perhaps the Westminster model: democracy means rule by the majority.

For societies that are kind of “lumpy,” in the sense that there are solidarity groupings that do not easily break down into rational individual units, another kind of democracy was proposed a number of years ago, mainly by the Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart, who coined the term “consociational democracy.” In a consociational democracy specific groups would be guaranteed proportions of power and influence in order to depoliticize the inevitable tensions and rivalries among the various groups.

Lebanon is an example of consociationalism in the Middle East. And depending on how you look at Lebanon, the glass was half full until 1975; there was a boisterous kind of political system. Even though that system broke down into 20 years of civil war, the Lebanese decided they liked it anyway, and when the civil war finally ended in exhaustion for all parties, they reconstituted it and they are living with it. So that is a model.

But the dominant, historical reality of this region is an authoritarian state, a Mukhabarat state. There are two variations of these states. One is the tradition-

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al authoritarian monarchy and the other is the revolutionary, nationalist presidential system. And we have had our share of both of those in the region.

One of the things that both the monarchical and the presidential variations share is a certain intolerance of genuine dissent and an allergy to actually changing through electoral means the real executive power in the government. Genuine executive transfers almost never have happened in the modern Middle East.

So one has to acknowledge that the climate in the region does not look terrifically hopeful. But if we look at the history of Iraq as detailed by my late colleague at Georgetown, Hanna Batatu, we find an extremely complicated society. It is not just a nation of sheep being led around by the nose by some leader. It is not just a collection of ethnic groups or religious groups; hence, possibly the inapplicability of a consociational or a religious kind of model for Iraq.

In the era before the Baathists took over in 1963, Iraq had other social and political forces. So, for American administrators to come in and think that they are dealing with a bunch of folks for whom politics is a totally alien concept is quite wrong. In fact, there has been plenty of politics, maybe too much politics, in Iraq over the years.

What the British were able to do is really quite interesting. When the country was created out of three former Ottoman Turkish provinces after World War I, the British were able, by the judicious and deft use of patronage and force, to establish a monarchical system, an authoritarian system certainly, but one in which there was at least space for maneuver. And the Iraqis were very ready to take advantage of that space. Hence, the history of the country after 1920 was marked by extreme political activity and, occasionally, extreme political violence.

Iraq is a place that has social forces, not just religious people, not just ethnic people, but social forces—the labor force, workers, farmers, a middle class with political aspirations of its own—all of which were reflected during the pre-Saddam period in various kinds of political movements and parties. So there is a history of great political activity, of a certain political sophistication, and a lot of political contestation. There is no denying that politics in

Iraq can be nasty. And maybe there is in Iraq, more than in some other places, a need for a government that can crack down in order to keep things from boiling over entirely.

But there is a history here. There are groups, parties—communists, liberals, nationalists of various kinds—that were very active and the remnants of which are very much there. And they are all beginning to come back now that the lid has been lifted.

I cannot tell you whether, when the United States gets out, if it gets out anytime soon, there will be a happy ending. But what I can say is that you have a political society there that has all kinds of ideological tendencies, all kinds of values, and there is an urgent need somehow in the post-Saddam period that those tendencies and values be allowed to express themselves.

Perhaps there comes a point when you should just leave the government of a country that you have no business being in to the people there and let them work it out for themselves.

One other point: We go into this operation with certain real disadvantages. We are coming into the region with certain political baggage that the Brits didn't have back during and at the end of World War I.

We come into an Iraq, and indeed into a broader Arab region, in which the leitmotif of the history of the 20th century was the struggle for liberation from imperial, foreign, Western rule. The region has been politically radicalized and poisoned.

And one of the things that have most poisoned the political atmosphere against us is, of course, American support for Israel. The Israeli forces' ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories now looks, to many Arab viewers of al-Jazeera television, virtually indistinguishable from what American forces are doing in Iraq.

*Ihtilal* (occupation) is a very dirty word in the Arab and especially in the Iraqi political vocabulary. If we lack the foresight, the ability, and the determination to organize Iraq and hand it back over to the Iraqis, we are going to have a much rougher ride than the Brits had. And they had a pretty rough ride at various times.

So it seems to me that the longer we stay, the more we will be disliked and the higher will be the cost of maintaining our presence. That is why we should be prepared to take the risk and be out of Iraq within a year. ■

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