



Iraq's Elections: Prelude to Dissolution or Last Chance at Nationbuilding?

On November 16, CSIS and the Open Society Institute co-hosted a panel discussion featuring Yahia Said, Eleana Gordon and Morton Halperin. Jon Alterman moderated the discussions. While the panelists differed in their level of optimism, they agreed that increased Sunni participation in the constitutional referendum represented progress. Their remarks focused on the implications of Iraq's upcoming parliamentary elections for both Iraqi politics and the future of the U.S. occupation.

Said began by highlighting the difficulties posed by the constitution's ratification. He argued that widespread Sunni rejection of the constitution embodied the failure of the United States and the constitution's authors to integrate the Sunnis into the post-Saddam political process. Additionally, he maintained that Iraq's weak federal structure would hurt the country, dividing the provinces not only along sectarian lines, but also dividing the Shia community between oil-rich and oil-poor areas. Said also argued that the government's willingness to allow the constitution to be amended after the election of the Iraqi parliament was little more than a "fig leaf" to co-opt the Sunni community. Realistically, the issues that the Sunnis would like to see modified, including provisions about Iraq's federal structure and distribution of oil revenues, will not be open for debate.

Gordon's view was much more positive; she pointed to several examples to suggest that sectarian division were in fact decreasing and that Iraqis were increasingly optimistic about the future of their country. She said that Iraqi politics no longer divide among sectarian lines, but that sectarian communities are dividing along secular and religious lines. She anticipated that cross-sectarian alliances would soon develop. Differing from Said, Gordon argued that the ambiguity of the constitution has given the Sunnis a stake in the political process, therefore giving them incentive to turn away from violent "rejectionist" politics, embodied by violent groups like those led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Halperin focused on the U.S. role in Iraq. Faced with an increasingly skeptical American public, he submitted that the U.S. must remain engaged, but that the U.S. must change the nature of its engagement. American policymakers have long suggested that Iraq's problems cannot be solved purely by military means, yet the military continues to be involved in high-profile counterterrorism campaigns. Simply put, U.S. policymakers should follow their own rhetoric and allow Iraqis to govern their own country; the recent U.S. statement that human rights abuses within the Iraqi Interior Ministry would not be tolerated, for example, added to the impression that the Iraqi government remains controlled by the United States. Halperin judged that a stabilizing military force remains necessary in Iraq. He suggested that the United States should approach Iraq's neighbors

for support, much as it did during the Afghan military and reconstruction campaigns.

Despite outward signs of progress, such as the constitution's approval and continued Sunni participation in the political process, the panelists agreed there were many causes for concern. For example, even if Iraq's constitution were amended to distribute oil revenues more evenly, the Iraqi energy sector would first require heavy investment to reach maximum output. International companies capable of providing such investment are wary of the security situation in many areas, broader political risk, and corruption within the country. Additionally, there are multiple sources of authority within the country that seem ambivalent toward the Iraqi state. Said estimated there may be as many as 20-30 distinct militia groups currently active in Baghdad alone. Finally, panelists agreed that national politics in Iraq needed to be widened to incorporate those whose were not among the narrow groups of formerly exiled elites that the U.S. government has relied on since the fall of Saddam Hussein.