



POLICY BRIEF

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Anti-Americanism in Iraq: An Obstacle to Democracy?

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Executive Summary

The success of America's intervention in Iraq will depend on winning the "hearts and minds" of Iraqis. Yet with fighting continuing between insurgents and coalition forces, growing ethnic tensions in the north, and rising violence in the south, a silent majority of Iraqis has yet to commit to one side or the other.

That silent majority will have a first chance to express itself over the coming months. The United States, the Governing Council, and religious leaders are currently debating whether a transitional government scheduled to take power by July 1, 2004, should be chosen indirectly (see U.S. and Governing Council plans in Table I), through direct elections, or some combination of both. The selection of the transitional government will provide a first opportunity to find out where Iraqi hearts and minds lie.

What can we expect of Iraqi public opinion? One trend appears certain to persist: Iraqis will remain deeply suspicious of America. Years of government-sponsored enmity and broader Arab hostility

toward the United States, frustration with coalition performance and enduring fears about American dominance in Iraq and the region will continue to influence Iraqi attitudes.

However, anti-American sentiment need not translate into support for the insurgents or for a return to authoritarian rule. In fact, Iraqi support for democracy is still up for grabs. Polling conducted over the past few months suggest that Iraqis do aspire to the fundamental principles of democracy.

But a democratic system of government can only survive if Iraqis have confidence that it can meet three fundamental challenges: restoring security, preserving national unity, and identifying a suitable role for Islam in public life.

Rather than waste its time and dilute its impact by promoting favorable opinions of the United States, the coalition should direct its communications efforts through this crucial period at building Iraqi confidence in the capacity of democratic government to meet these three challenges.

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Table I:
Timeline to a Sovereign, Democratic and Secure Iraq

On November 15, the Iraqi Governing Council and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) agreed to a timetable for the establishment of a sovereign Iraqi government.

- By February 28, 2004, the Governing Council will approve a Transitional Administrative Law. This will serve as an interim constitution, guaranteeing basic rights, defining the structure of a transitional government and setting out procedures to select delegates to a constitutional convention.
- By May 31, 2004, local caucuses will be convened in each of Iraq's 18 governorates to elect delegates for a Transitional National Assembly.
- By June 30, 2004, the Transitional National Assembly will elect a transitional government to assume full sovereignty over Iraq. The Governing Council and the CPA will be dissolved.
- By March 15, 2005, delegates to the constitutional convention will be selected by universal suffrage. The convention will draft a permanent constitution to be submitted to a referendum.
- By December 31, 2005, national elections will be held, and a new Iraqi government will take power. The transitional government will be dissolved and the Transitional Administrative Law will expire.

Source: November 15 Agreement, at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/government/Nov-15-GC-CPA-Final_Agreement-post.htm, accessed January 13, 2004.

Iraqi Attitudes Toward the United States

Over the past few months, efforts to gauge public opinion in Iraq have produced worrisome results for the United States. An October poll by Oxford Research International suggested that an overwhelming 79 percent had no confidence in the U.S.-led forces.¹ An earlier poll by Zogby International revealed that half of all Iraqis feel that the United States will actually hurt Iraq more than help it over the next five years.²

What are the sources of Iraqi anti-Americanism? First, years of Saddam Hussein's propaganda have left their mark on the perceptions of Iraqis. Until recently, the only broadcasts they were allowed to hear told them that the United States was bent on world domination and on the theft of Iraq's oil resources. These preconceptions linger in the criticisms of America currently being broadcast into Iraq by *al-Jazira* and

al-Arabiya news channels. The widespread perception of the United States as a co-belligerent with Israel in its war with the Palestinians further poisons opinions.

This has produced an environment of deep suspicion of U.S. intentions in Iraq. In September, when the Gallup Organization asked residents of Baghdad why the U.S. and Great Britain decided to invade, 60 percent of them listed oil and other resources as the motivation. Only four percent believed that the invasion was prompted by concerns about weapons of mass destruction.³

Second, Iraqis appear to behave as citizens of any country do, judging the authorities less by past accomplishments and more by their current performance in improving their quality of life. Given the disruptions many have experienced since the war, it is hardly surprising that the authorities in question – coalition forces and the Coalition Provi-

sional Authority (CPA) – have borne the brunt of the blame (see Table II).

Third, Iraqi sentiment reflects anxiety over the power that a foreign country has over their future. It is not simply the military power of the United States that confronts Iraqis on a daily basis. U.S. economic power is visible in the mushrooming presence of American firms throughout Iraq. The vast investments of companies such as Bechtel and Kellogg, Brown & Root are helping to revitalize the Iraqi economy but also give rise to concerns about foreign ownership of Iraqi assets. U.S. cultural power is also omnipresent. While American music and clothing are available in much greater quantities than during the years of sanctions, less desirable imports such as alcohol or pornographic DVDs also flood Iraqi markets now. Iraqi society is changing rapidly, creating anxiety and also a degree of resentment toward the perceived source of that change.

Iraqi Attitudes Toward Democracy

The United States, however, did not invade Iraq to win popularity contests. After addressing the threat of weapons of mass destruction, its stated goal was to oversee the emergence of an Iraqi regime that is stable, democratic, and at peace with its neighbors.

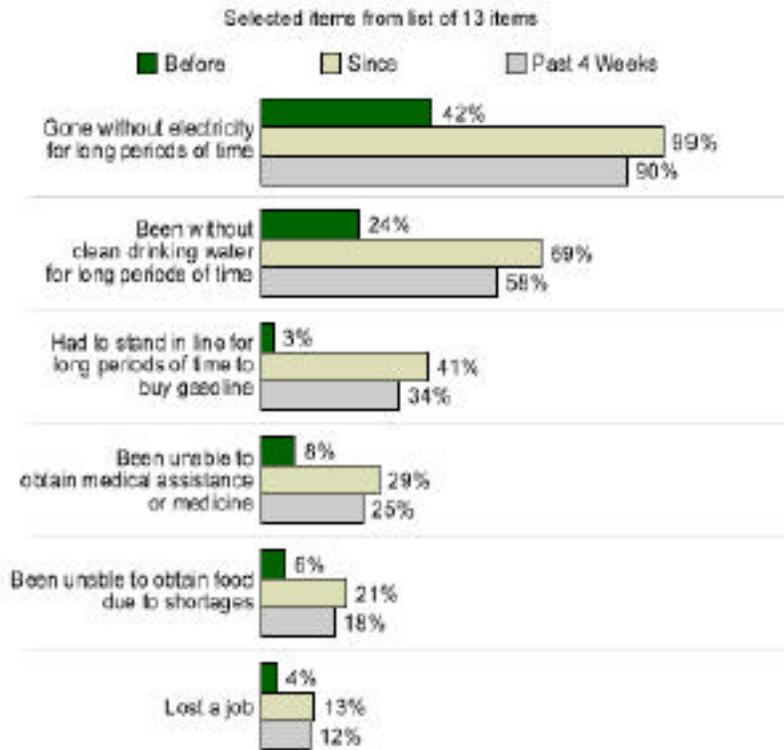
This goal is still attainable. After all, the fundamental principles of democracy are as attractive to Iraqis as they are to any other nationality. It is difficult to imagine a majority of Iraqis opposing the principle that all citizens should enjoy basic civil liberties, that they should be able to communicate their political preferences through representative institutions, or that there should be limitations on the power of those selected to implement those preferences.⁴

Polls confirm the appeal of democracy for Iraqis. When Oxford Research International asked Iraqis what their country most needs at this time, 90 percent said “democracy.”⁵ Other research

Table II:
Iraqi Quality of Life under Coalition Rule

Deprivation Before and Since Invasion by U.S. and British Forces

After the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and British forces, which of the following, if any, happened to you personally or to members of your household? Did this happen in the past four weeks? Did this happen before the invasion (one or two months before)?

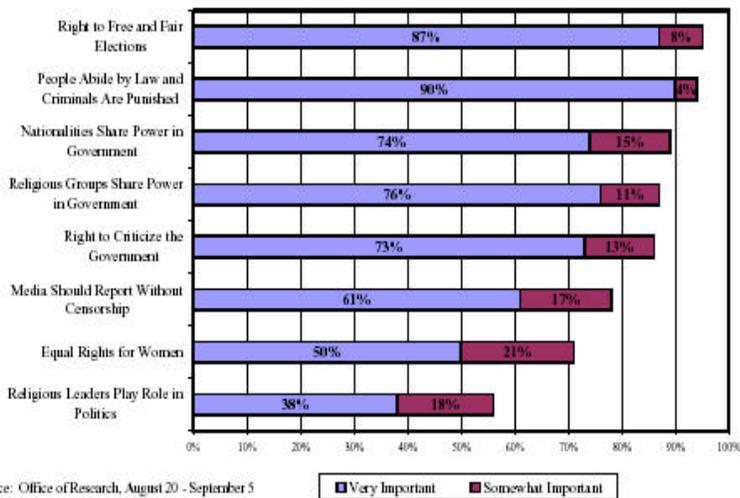


by the State Department showed a high degree of support for democratic principles (see Table III). It is not the desirability of democracy that is in question in Iraq, however, but its feasibility. After all, democratic regimes do not tend to fall because the citizenry opposes civil liberties and representative institutions. They fall when public opinion deems them too weak to deal with overriding societal priorities.

Three Key Tests for Iraqi Democracy

Under current proposals, Iraq will not have a democratic government until the end of 2005. According to the plan drawn up by the United States

Table III:
Importance of Selected Political Values in Iraqi Society



Source: Office of Research, August 20 - September 5

and the Governing Council last November, a transitional government will guide the country through a long period of constitutional negotiations. The performance of this transitional government will, however, have a major impact on the faith that Iraqis are willing to put in a democratic system of government.

In particular, the transitional government will have to demonstrate that it can manage three overriding priorities.

1. Security

Once it assumes full control of the country, the transitional government will have to prove it can maintain law and order. Should the insurgency persist after sovereignty is returned to the Iraqis, the government will have to demonstrate a capacity to maintain security.

Even more worrisome to Iraqis than the threat of political violence is crime. Organized crime was endemic throughout the sanctions period. Since the coalition took control, however, public fear of crime has risen to levels much higher than under Saddam (see Table IV). If this fear is not

addressed, Iraqis will look to leaders who can impose law and order by force or any means necessary, democratic or not.

The transitional government will require competent armed forces, effective police forces, and public confidence in both. Coalition training of the New Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps has met several obstacles, and coalition troops will be required to guarantee the stability of the transitional government and to train and oversee Iraq's newly formed security forces.

Iraqi police forces have been reconstituted, but training is often rushed in an effort to get cops on the beat. In a country where police forces – under Saddam – were employed to intimidate the population more than to protect it, and where corruption was rampant, significant retraining is required before Iraqi police can serve as an effective guarantor of law and order.

2. National unity

The popular Western conception of Iraqi society as inherently divided between Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurd is an oversimplification. Focus group testing conducted on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), found a strong sense of Iraqi national identity across the three groups and even a high degree of affinity among them.⁶

Nevertheless, the Ba'ath regime left some very serious fissures in Iraqi society as it set one group off against the other to bolster its own authority. Campaigns against the Kurds and the Shi'ites have also left bitter legacies.

There are any number of issues that threaten national unity. Shi'a domination of the central government could alienate other groups, encouraging them to take up arms against the state.

Kurdish leaders may seek to bolster the autonomy of the areas in the north that they have controlled in 1991, thus undermining the territorial integrity of Iraq. Their efforts to exert authority into areas previously outside their control could spark further violence by the Turkmen minority based in cities such as Kirkuk. Various groups might decide to fight their political battles through the proxy of armed militia that many have maintained in spite of coalition efforts to disarm them.

At present, the most serious challenge to the prospects of Iraqi democracy appears to stem from growing Sunni alienation. Less brutalized than the Shi'ite and Kurdish communities under Saddam, Iraq's Sunnis have been slow to organize themselves as a distinct political force. Disproportionately represented in the Ba'ath party, however, they have borne the brunt of the de-Ba'athification purges and provide the bulk of the forces fighting the insurgency against the coalition.

Sunni clerics have recently joined forces with the Sunni-dominated Muslim Brotherhood to form a consultative council known as the *shura*.⁷ While the *shura* may serve as a center of opposition to

U.S. influence, it does provide an interlocutor that the coalition and other Iraqi political groups can engage with to ensure that Sunnis feel they have a stake in the transitional government.

Though it may reopen grievous wounds in Iraqi society, the trial of Saddam Hussein and other former regime leaders could also assist the process of reconciliation. All groups in Iraqi society, after all, can claim to have been brutalized by the former dictator. If handled transparently and fairly, and in a manner that is sensitive and respectful of the requirements of due process, trials could offer a chance for victims to assign blame for their sufferings to the former regime rather than to rival groups in Iraqi society.

3. The Role of Islam

The third overriding societal priority for the transitional government will be to identify an appropriate role for Islam in public life. As Graham Fuller notes in a recent U.S. Institute of Peace report, "Islamism is destined to play a major role in the future of Iraqi politics."⁸

This does not mean that Iraq will necessarily become a theocracy. According to the Zogby International Poll, only three percent of Iraqis, including only thirteen percent of Shi'ites, believe the new government should be modeled on Iran's. The Gallup poll found that 86 percent supported freedom of religion.⁹ When Zogby's pollsters asked Iraqis to choose between freedom or religion and Islamic rule, twice as many opted for the former (see Table V).

Religion will nevertheless feature very prominently in Iraqi political life. A significant number of Iraqis are looking to Islam to provide a sense of guidance to their political life as well as their personal lives. In this environment, de-

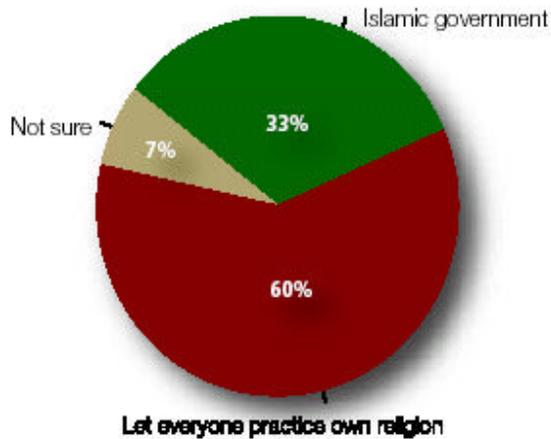
Table IV:
Safety Before and After the Iraq Invasion

After the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and British forces, which of the following, if any, happened to you personally or to members of your household? (If yes...) Did this happen within the past four weeks?

Which of the following, if any, happened to you personally or to members of your household before the invasion -- that is, in the final one or two months prior to the invasion?

	Past four weeks	At all since invasion	Final one or two months before invasion
Been afraid to go outside your home during the day for safety reasons	60%	70%	3%
Been afraid to go outside your home at night for safety reasons	66%	68%	6%
Had home burglarized	2%	3%	2%
Been physically attacked	1%	2%	1%

Table V:
Should Iraq Have an Islamic Government?



mocracy will only survive if it is seen to be compatible with Islam, making it essential that Iraqis find a way to enshrine Islam in their political life while retaining the individual rights and freedoms associated with democracy.¹⁰

In addition to making room for Islam, Iraqi democracy will also have to find a way to make room for Islam's interpreters. Clerics have played a prominent political role throughout Iraqi history. Even under the totalitarian rule of Saddam Hussein they were allowed a degree of political autonomy. While he kept both Sunni and Shi'ite Islamist movements under close surveillance, Saddam did allow both to mobilize their own followings as he tried to imbue his authority with the trappings of Islam.

Islamist movements are therefore much better organized than any secular political movements within Iraq. Pronouncements by figures such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, head of the Shi'a clerical hierarchy based in the holy city of Najaf, thus have an extraordinary influence on Iraqi public opinion.

U.S. authorities have been slow in recognizing the importance the Grand Ayatollah and may be repeating their error by rebuffing his demands for

direct elections for the transitional government. A government established over the objections of a man who commands the loyalty of a majority of Iraqis will exercise little authority. While difficult, it is imperative that the U.S. put more effort into engaging senior clerics such as al-Sistani to secure their endorsement of a transitional government. This may require that the United States demonstrate flexibility around the transition plan it has devised with the Governing Council.

Building confidence

The coalition's efforts thus far to develop its capacity to communicate with the Iraqi people have fallen short. It has organized the broadcasting capabilities of the previous regime into the Iraqi Media Network, and has set up a TV news channel under the name *al-Iraqiya* to get its message out. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer broadcasts a weekly radio address to the Iraqi people.

But these efforts appear to have very little impact on Iraqi public opinion. In polling data released in November, the State Department found that of those with access to several news channels, only six percent of Iraqis believed *al-Iraqiya* to be a reliable source.¹¹ It is viewed as a mouthpiece of the occupation, used primarily to promote favorable impressions of the United States and the coalition, at the expense of the insurgents, who are described as "murderers" and "evil-doers."¹²

For reasons explained above, Iraqi suspicion of the United States is too ingrained to be alleviated through standard public relations campaigns. The coalition would do better to marshal its communications efforts at the more achievable and urgent goal of fostering Iraqi confidence in the feasibility of democracy. Iraqis must be reassured that when they regain control of their country in the next few months, they can entrust it to a democratic system of government without sacrificing security, national unity or the Islamic nature of their country.

The following are examples of measures that would help increase the confidence of Iraqis that democratic government can meet the three challenges outlined above:

1) Security

- Ensure that Iraqi security forces are adequately trained to deal with threats to the security of Iraqis, such as organized crime and political violence.
- Focus on the security of Iraqis more than the security of coalition forces. This may mean increasing the frequency and range of patrols, with a more balanced approach to force protection.
- Deal swiftly with allegations of corruption and abuse within the police to ensure that Iraqis develop confidence in their security services.

2) National unity

- Intervene rapidly to stop inter-communal violence should it break out again, while ensuring that the U.S. is not perceived to be favoring any one group over another.
- Engage the *shura* to ensure that the Sunni community sees that it has a major stake in the new Iraqi political order.
- Identify appropriate means for the trial of Saddam Hussein and other former officials to serve as an opportunity for national reconciliation, while respecting requirements of transparency, fairness, and due process. One suggestion would be to allow representatives of all major groups in Iraqi society to bear witness to his crimes against them.

- Encourage *al-Iraqiya* to publicize stories of conciliation and cooperation between Iraq's various communities, and to increase the diversity of its news programming to enhance credibility.

3) The Role of Islam

- Engage in regular, detailed discussions with major clerics to ensure their views are adequately incorporated into governance planning and that major policy pronouncements do not take them by surprise as they have in the past.
- Sponsor discussions, conferences, and debates about various models for building legal systems that draw on a combination of Islam and other sources.

Conclusion

There are limits to the level of anti-Americanism the United States can accept in the transitional government and its successors. The United States will have to uphold its interests with Iraqi authorities to ensure that they cooperate with the United States in the global campaign against terrorism, that they do not call for a withdrawal of American troops without U.S. consent, and that they do not attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Short of these extremes, however, the United States should not be alarmed if political rhetoric in the lead-up to Iraq's first election turns critical of the country responsible for deposing and imprisoning the former dictator. While it must resist violence against its troops, the United States can afford to live with a degree of unpopularity in Iraq.

It may very well be that shared antipathy to the

major foreign military presence in the country provides an element of political consensus among the various political strands of Iraqi society at a time when national unity is sorely needed. The British faced a similar situation in the 1920s when the institutions they had created to guide Iraq's political development formed the nucleus of an Iraqi nationalist movement. While King Farouq's constant pressure on the British to devolve power and responsibility was a source of constant frustration, it provided the monarchy with sufficient legitimacy to keep Iraq relatively stable for a generation.

As frustrating as it may be, the United States does not need Iraq's gratitude for the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime and the imprisonment of its brutal leader. What it needs is a stable, democratic political system so that the country no longer poses a threat to international peace and stability. Helping the Iraqis to achieve this monumental task will require focus, determination, and a great deal of patience.

¹ "Poll: Iraqis Don't Trust U.S.," *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 2003 at 13.

² Zogby International poll, cited in "Inside the Minds of Ordinary Iraqis," *American Enterprise Magazine*, December 2003 at 29. It is highly unlikely that the capture of Saddam would have affected these figures. After all, Iraqi support for his removal from power eight months ago did not translate into support for the United States. As Thomas Melia of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy explained at a discussion hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on December 9, 2003, "there is no gratitude to the Americans and to the British for having effected his departure."

³ "Gauging U.S. Intent," Tuesday Gallup Briefing, October 28, 2003 (based on polling conducted in Baghdad in August and September 2003).

⁴ This three-part definition is frequently used in political science research on democratic systems of government. See, for example, the Polity IV dataset developed at the University of Maryland to track changes in the democratic or autocratic nature of regimes. Ted Robert Gurr, Keith Jagers, and Will H. Moore, "The Transformation of the Western State: The Growth of Democracy, Autocracy, and State Power since 1800" in *Studies in Comparative International Development* 25: 73-108 (Spring 1990).

⁵ "Poll: Iraqis Don't Trust U.S.," *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 2003 at 13.

⁶ The NDI report cites a Shi'ite from Diwaniya saying "we are all Muslims and we all have the same goals and direction and there won't be any division or separation" as well as a Kurdish man from Kirkuk who said "it would be better if we all belonged to an *Iraqi* democracy" as instances of affinity across communal lines. Thomas O. Melia and Brian M. Katulis, "Iraqis Discuss their Country's Future: Post-war Perspectives from the Iraqi Street," National Democratic Institute for International Affairs report, July 28, 2003, at http://www.ndi.org/worldwide/mena/iraq/1626_iq_focusgroup_072503.pdf, accessed January 15, 2004.

⁷ Alan Sipress, "Feeling Besieged, Iraq's Sunnis Unite," *Washington Post*, January 6, 2004 at A11.

⁸ Graham Fuller, "Islamist Politics in Iraq After Saddam Hussein," Special Report 108, United States Institute of Peace reports, August 2003 at 1.

⁹ "Baghdadis' Priorities for a New Constitution: Freedom of Speech, Religion, and Assembly." Tuesday Gallup Briefing, November 11, 2003 (based on polling conducted in August and September 2003).

¹⁰ Afghanistan has just gone through a similar debate in the process of devising its new constitution. The document approved at the national grand council, or *loya jirga*, describes Afghanistan as an Islamic republic. The constitution does not explain what this means, however, beyond a statement that no laws may be passed that are "contrary to Islam." The relationship between secular and religious sources of law will have to be determined through the judicial process. See "A Fillip for Kabul," *Economist*, January 10, 2004.

¹¹ "INR Media Survey: TV is Crucial Info Source," Office of Research, Department of State, November 17, 2003, at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/audio/20031117_Nov-16-INR-media_habits_survey.html, accessed January 15, 2004

¹² "You, the Good People of Iraq," Bremer weekly address, November 28, 2003, at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/transcripts/20031128_Nov-28-Bremer-Address.htm, accessed January 15, 2004.

Table I Source: November 15 Agreement, at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/government/Nov-15-GC-CPA-Final_Agreement-post.htm, accessed January 13, 2004.

Table II Source: "Shortages Test Baghdadis," Tuesday Gallup Briefing, December 2, 2003 (based on polling conducted in Baghdad in August and September 2003).

Table III Source: "Opinion Analysis: Iraqi Public Has Wide Ranging Preferences for a Future Political System," Office of Research, Department of State, October 21, 2003.

Table IV Source: "Iraq's Police - Now Targets Themselves - Are Key to Security," Tuesday Gallup Briefing, November 4, 2003 (based on polling conducted in Baghdad in August and September 2003).

Table V Source: Zogby International poll, cited in "Inside the Minds of Ordinary Iraqis," *American Enterprise Magazine*, December 2003 at 29.