TAKING DEMOCRACY SERIOUSLY IN IRAQ

by Eric Davis

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In May, Professor Davis will be one of seven speakers addressing our 2003 History Institute for Teachers on "The American Encounter with Islam" (details on our website at www.fpri.org).

Americans share two misperceptions of Iraqi politics and society. One is that ethnic conflict is endemic to Iraqi society. Another is that Iraqis lack a tradition of civil society, cultural tolerance, and political participation. Both perceptions are contradicted by the historical record. These faulty premises lay behind Washington's unwillingness to support the Iraqi uprising of 1991, which came close to ousting the Ba'athist regime. It would be a great tragedy if the United States were to make the same mistake in 2003.

THE RISE OF IRAQI CIVIL SOCIETY

Having studied Iraqi politics and society since first visiting Iraq in May 1980, I have been struck by the resilience of Iraqis and their unwillingness to submit to Ba'athist authoritarianism. Indeed, the Iraqi nationalist movement, which 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 June-October 1920 Revolt against British rule in Iraq. Sunni and Shi'i Arabs joined forces, praying in each others' mosques and celebrating together their respective holidays while Iraqi Muslims went to the houses of Christians and Jews (who were 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 the British installed during a rigged national referendum in 1921 undermined the Iraqi nationalist vision as a "big tent" which, while recognizing Iraq's predominantly Arab character, would offer cultural and political space to all Iraq's ethnic groups. The Iraqi 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 and instead emphasized a chauvinist interpretation of Arabism, emphasizing Sunni Arab domination of Iraqi politics and society. Under the Hashemite monarchy, the Iraqi government attempted to inculcate a Pan-Arabist consciousness among Iraqi school children. 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 Muhammad.

In contrast to the Pan-Arab tendency, many of whose members developed during the 1930s proto-fascist organizations such as the al-Muthanna Club and its al-Futuwwa movement, and participated in an attack on Baghdad's Jewish community in June 1941, the Iraqi nationalist movement developed a broad political coalition encompassing members of all Iraq's ethnic groups, including Sunni and Shi'i Arabs, Kurds, Jews, Christians, Armenians and other minority groups. Political, parties, such as the National Party, Jami'at al-Ahali (the People's Organization), the National Democratic Party, the Iraqi Communist Party, student and professional associations, artisans organizations and labor unions, 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, maintaining solidarity during numerous labor strikes during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, which called for better working conditions. They also organized broad-based uprisings against the monarchy and the British in 1948 and 1953, known as the Wathba and Intifada, respectively.
In the 1920s, a flourishing Iraq civil society began with the formation of numerous professional associations, including a highly respected legal profession, a vibrant press, political parties, artist ateliers, writers associations, labor unions, and an extensive coffeehouse culture. This nascent civil society expanded greatly after the end of World War II. During the 1950s, 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. In 1954, with the temporary relaxation of state control, a coalition of Iraqi nationalists and moderate Pan-Arabists competed in the June elections, running a highly professional campaign and scoring impressive victories in 13 of the country’s most important electoral districts in 2 of Iraq’s main cities, Baghdad and Mosul. Efforts by sectarian elements, during the electoral campaign, particularly those from the Ba’ath Party, 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. Poets such as Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, Nazik al-Mala’ika, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, and Buland al-Haydari, short story writers such as ‘Abd al-Malik Nuri, Mahdi al-Saqr, artists such as Jawad Salim and Isma’il al-Shaikhly, and historians such as ‘Abd al-Razzak al-Hasani and Faysal al-Samir became famous throughout the Arab world.

Iraqi nationalism received a strong impetus from the regime of Staff Brigadier 'Abdal-Karim Qasim, 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 state, he favored a federated entity, much along the lines of the European Union. Under Qasim, sectarianism disappeared as a key element in recruitment positions within the state bureaucracy, 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 Ba'athist regime in February 1963, it was discovered that he had no personal wealth, having donated his military pension and his two government salaries as prime minister and defense minister to the poor.

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. These included Kamil al-Chadirji, head of the National Democratic Party; Muhammad Mahdi al-Kubba, head of the Independence Party; Siddiq Shanshal; Fai’q al-Samarai‘I; Muhammad Hadid; and others. Unfortunately, after consolidating his power, Qasim felt he could dispense with the cabinet, thereby foregoing the opportunity to have institutionalized a moderate, non-sectarian government committed to political pluralism and social reform. While others have argued that Qasim feared that a democratic political system would allow either the Pan-Arabs, who had many followers with the Sunni Arab-dominated officer corps, or the powerful Iraqi Communist Party, the fact remains that power corrupts. No matter how well intentioned Qasim was in trying to bring about better living conditions for the Iraqi populace and 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 BA’ATH AND THE END OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The Ba'athist regime that came to power in February 1963, and its brutal National Guard militia, foreshadowed the extensive human rights abuses that would characterize the Ba'athist regime that seized power in a July 1968 putsch. Counting petty criminals among its members, the new regime quickly tried to undoe 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 Husayn’s security apparatus, the regime was toppled by the military in November 1963. Iraq was ruled by a number of weak Pan-Arabist regimes until Saddam, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Ba’athists drawn largely from the rural tribal areas around the town of Takrit in the so-called sunni Arab triangle of north-central Iraq seized power in 1968.

The second or Takriti Ba’athist regime that came to power in 1968 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 Ba’athists until 1973, when the chief of the security apparatus, 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 and give the regime 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 co-opt large numbers of middle class and educated Iraqis.

Just when the Takriti Ba’ath seemed to have consolidated power during the late 1970s, after having eliminated the communists through executing party members in 1978 who had become government ministers, Saddam Husayn ousted Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and seized the presidency in 1979, and invaded Iran in September 1980 to seize territory from the new Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khumayni. The war turned into 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.
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 Ba’ath Party members and security forces operatives by allowing them to plunder Kuwaiti society. His "Project to Rewrite History" had seduced Saddam into believing his own rhetoric, namely his status as a semi-deity, his foreordained role as leader of a Pan-Arab state, and Iraq’s military invincibility.

THE 1991 UPRISING

The 1991 Intifada almost led to the collapse of the Ba’athist regime. Suddenly the historical memory of the Iraqi nationalist movement reinserted itself into Iraqi political discourse. For the first time in modern Iraqi history, Iraqis openly discussed sectarianism. Opposition groups met to develop ways of promoting civil society in a post-Ba’athist Iraq. One of the results was Charter 91, produced at a conference in liberated Kurdistan in 1991 and 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. The rule of 'Abd al-Karim Qasim was reexamined because 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 that argued that the Iraqi Jewish community had contributed much to Iraqi society in all walks of life. While some Iraqi Jews had been sympathetic to Zionism, the vast majority considered themselves Iraqi citizens and fully integrated members of Iraqi society.

This effort had a powerful impact on Saddam and the Ba’ath. A long series of articles attributed to Saddam and published in the Ba’ath 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 Shi’a in the 1991 uprising. While Saddam tried to tar the Shi’a, Kurds, and other oppositional forces, what was noteworthy was that 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 Takritis, led him to rely increasingly on his immediate family and clan members, leading to what Falih 'Abd al-Jabbar has called, "the family party state" (dawlat hizb al-usra). As Saddam's two sons, 'Uday and Qusay, acquired greater power, the focus of the Project for the Rewriting of History all but disappeared with the regime increasingly appearing to Iraqis as a criminal syndicate rather than a functioning state. In an act of desperation, Saddam even revived the moribund system of tribalism in the countryside so that tribal shaykhs took control of the rural populace to replace the many Ba’athist leaders killed during the 1991 Intifada.

INKLINGS OF DEMOCRACY

At the same time, a democracy, albeit not perfect, developed in liberated Kurdistan in Iraq’s northern provinces. Landlocked, having no economic resources to speak of and suffering from a blockade from the Ba’athist 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 Ba’athist-controlled areas, the opposite trends were the case. The Kurdish experience clearly demonstrated that, once freed from Ba’athist repression, Iraqis were perfectly capable of ruling themselves.

An Arabic proverb 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 (which can be documented in school history textbooks after Saddam and the Ba’ath are ousted), an agricultural sector whose potential is greatly underutilized, one of the world’s great civilizational heritages (after all, history as we understand it began in ancient Mesopotamia), and a rich base of oil wealth, which can provide the resources for ambitious development projects. 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. However, countries like Italy also have such democracies and have remained relatively stable over time. To the riposte that Italian governments are constantly changing, Italians often respond that this only means that many people have access to governing the country. After all, they point out, Italy has one of the world’s most prosperous economies and a strong civil society. Numerous Iraqi political parties will also vie for power in a post-Saddam Iraq. However, a federated country in which Iraq’s main ethnic groups, the Sunni and Shi’i 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 strife that facilitated the rise of the Ba’ath Party. Taking democracy seriously in Iraq will go a long way toward winning the hearts of minds of Iraqis.