9 The transition to democracy in Iraq

Historical legacies, resurgent identities and reactionary tendencies

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Freedom is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity; the birthright of every person—in every civilization. Throughout history, freedom has been threatened by war and terror; it has been challenged by the clashing wills of powerful states and the evil designs of tyrants; and it has been tested by widespread poverty and disease. Today, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further freedom’s triumph over all these foes. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.

George W Bush, September 17, 2002

The United States’ strategy for regime change in Iraq was arguably one of the most ambitious programmes of political engineering witnessed since the immediate years following the Second World War. From being identified as a founder member of the ‘axis of evil’ in President Bush’s State of the Union address of January 2002, Iraq was a primary influence behind the formulation of the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the ‘Bush doctrine’ of preventive war – of acting against emerging threats before they are fully formed. The NSS, however, was not purely about defeating potential enemies. It also envisaged the promotion of American values throughout the world. Not only was Iraq going to undergo democratic transformation, it also marked the ‘first phase in a grand design for the moral reconstruction of the Middle East’. It was considered that Saddam’s demise would herald a new era for Iraq, one in which its long-suffering peoples would live in harmony and peaceful coexistence, and the nurturing of democracy in Iraq would become an example to the rest of the region of the benefits of embracing American ideals. Indeed, it was envisaged that as a ‘beacon of democracy’ Iraq’s example would penetrate like a search-light into the darkest despotic corners of the Middle East, vividly illustrating to the oppressed and marginalized what government should be like, albeit with US colouring. In the president’s own words, ‘a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region’.

What was rarely said, however, was the unwritten caveat that any new regime which emerged, including Iraq’s, would need to be acceptable to US interests, if not actually designed by the US government itself. Two sets of ‘freedoms’ can therefore be identified. One is a freedom satisfying the demands of a nation
newly liberated from the grotesque barbarities of a brutal dictatorship. The other is freedom as interpreted, portrayed, and accepted by the US administration and its electorate. As we shall see in Iraq, the two do not always coincide.

Whether this grand plan is considered to be a work of visionary genius or one of monumental folly remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that if this plan is to have any chance of success, the political reconstruction of Iraq cannot be seen to fail. Speaking in November 2003 at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington DC, President Bush said, ‘the establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution’. Indeed it may be, but the failure of this policy would be an even greater watershed as an already destabilized Middle East would be plunged into deeper instability. The US position in the region would be undermined; states neighbouring Iraq would be sensitized (Syria, Turkey) and potentially destabilized (Saudi Arabia); and there would be a ready supply of proxy forces in Iraq to take up arms for initiatives planned in other regional capitals. Countries in the Middle East would become riddled by transnational forces, impervious to the constraints imposed by state boundaries. Shi’ism in the Gulf and Kurdish nationalism across the Zagros Mountains are but two distinct possibilities which could accompany the more widespread pernicious threat from Al-Qaeda-associated activities.

With so much seemingly at stake both for Iraq and for the United States, an obvious question to ask is: ‘what would it take for this policy to work?’ Yet it is a question that has rarely been seriously discussed as many analyses understandably become engrossed in the vivid day-to-day events of contemporary occupied/interim Iraq. The answer to the question differs depending on where the question is asked. One would, at the very least, expect a successful policy to result in a stable, consolidated democracy, with a constitution enshrining the rights of individuals and recognizing the multi-ethnic nature of the state. Such requirements are easily stated, but they have rarely, if ever, appeared in Iraq’s tortured eighty-year political history. Assuming that democracy will emerge as the natural state of being for the people of Iraq, the basic building blocks of democratic order will therefore have to be created from scratch rather than rediscovered in the wreckage of Iraqi political culture. Andreas Wimmer ominously contends that ‘the seeds of democracy may have difficulties to germinate in the sandy soils of Iraq’, and Daniel Byman asks whether the ideal of a democratic Iraq is at all possible, noting that the question raises up grave concerns regarding whether Iraq has the necessary prerequisites for democracy. Developing this already bleak picture, Byman further asserts that deep divisions exist between Iraq’s communities, and the role outsiders play in imposing a political order could potentially destabilize the situation further.

These concerns are important to address. It was initially thought that the desires of the Iraqi people would ultimately match the plans of the United States dreamed up in the decision-making halls of Washington DC, those being namely a willingness to embrace a US-inspired and influenced system of government. Instead, the United States has been faced with a multitude of
normative viewpoints as to what Iraq should ‘be’, and what democracy in Iraq should look like. With the removal of the sinister Ba’athist regime, previously subdued primordial identities are now flexing their political muscles. The Shi’a, mobilized by figures within the religious establishment (the Hawza al-Marja’iyya), including Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, or by popularist radicals such as Muqtada al-Sadr, are not naturally predisposed towards a democratic political system, although recognize the benefits of elections in order to prove their majority. The Kurds, similarly, consider it their democratic right to express their desire for autonomy within Iraq. This expression of the rights of self-determination by a considerable proportion of Iraq’s population (around a quarter) presents the United States, the non-Kurdish Iraqis and the region with a peculiarly difficult problem which could be the precursor to a potent manifestation of Kurdish nationalism across the Middle East. Sunni Arabs are associated with the growing insurgency against occupying forces, and it would not be overly pessimistic to suggest that a Sunni Islamist-coloured rebellion could easily turn its attention to a government perceived to be dominated by Shi’i clerics in the future. These positions are certainly polarized and may not reflect the huge swathe of moderate political sentiment which likely exists in Iraq, but these groups, through their own organizational abilities and the willingness of the United States to empower them in the ethnically and sectarian designed Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), are the current dominant political forces within Iraq. As such, they warrant close attention.

Events in Iraq can now be classified according to the triumvirate of dissonance which has haunted the state since its inception: the traditional role of leadership for the Sunni has resulted in a Sunni-associated insurgency through fear of disempowerment; Kurdish nationalism is fuelling a drive for autonomy with hints of possible secessionist tendencies; and Shi’i marginalization under the Sunni is now forcing their leaders to attempt to impose their will over the institutions of the new Iraq. As these new manifestations of historical dissonance become apparent to the US public, the political need to avoid the appearance of failure has pushed the United States to undertake several sharp policy transformations. Each transformation has had as much to do with satisfying US public perceptions as with creating the necessary requirements for the introduction and consolidation of democracy in Iraq. From the targeted, limited, policies of General Jay Garner’s Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) in April 2003, through to the wide-ranging and comprehensive agenda of Ambassador L. Paul Bremer’s Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in May 2003, and then the subsequent retreat by Bremer on issues relating to the transition of power in November 2003 and February 2004, it can be argued that with the November 2003 presidential election looming, US policy development stems more from satisfying US public perceptions that Iraq is, at least, better than it was under Saddam by doing whatever is necessary to react to immediate events on the ground – this is certainly not the same as making progress towards a consolidated democracy. The price of this inconsistency is potentially devastating for Iraq as the transitional period is governed more by reaction to
immediate events which are often characterized by the actions of extremists
rather than by a planned agenda with the greater picture in mind. US policy
modifications have witnessed a move towards either attempting to match, or
dilute, certain Iraqi political realities such as Ayatollah Sistani's demand for elec-
tions, or ignoring other political realities which are of such magnitude that
involvement would place US policy in an even more intractable position within
Iraq and the region at large (such as Kurdish demands for autonomy).

This chapter addresses concerns about the transition to democracy in Iraq,
and the possibilities of consolidating any such democracy in the ‘post-transition’
future. It does so by comparing US policy, as viewed through the matrix of the
record of US actions in Iraq since the removal of Saddam, and the activities,
actions and aspirations of the principal Iraqi political groups. I commence with
an assessment of the ‘raw materials’ available to the engineers of the new Iraqi
state, assessing the legacy of decades of authoritarianism and particularly
focusing upon resurgent national and sub-national identities. I will then elabo-
rate upon the theoretical conditions deemed necessary to ensure that democracy
can be established and consolidated, drawing particularly upon the work of Juan
Linz and Alfred Stepan, and Francis Fukuyama. With an assessment of the
political characteristics of Iraq in place, and a theoretical understanding of what
is needed to ensure democratic consolidation, I will then analyse the record of
political development in Iraq since the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.

The historical legacy of state building, part I
(1919–2003)

From its inception, Iraq was an artificial British creation. This statement presup-
poses that some states are inherently ‘natural’, but, if one were to construct the
theoretical parameters of an ideal state, it is reasonable to assume that Iraq
would be somewhat removed from them. The most obvious fact of its artifi-
ciality is evident in the apparent allegiances of its citizens. While arguments can
be constructed to support the notion that an ‘Iraq’ identity was evident before
the creation of the state in 1920, it is obvious that a sense of belonging to the
Iraq state was not an initial characteristic of its varied peoples in the formative
years of the state. In terms of absolute numbers, Hanna Batatu provides a
rough estimate of Iraq’s ethnic and religious composition in 1947 as follows: 51
per cent Shi’i Arab; 20 per cent Sunni Arab; 19 per cent Kurdish; Christians, 3
per cent and Jews 2.5 per cent. The figures suggest a diverse society, but does
this necessarily mean that Iraqi national identity was weak? The first British-
implanted monarch of Iraq, King Faisal I, certainly thought so. Reflecting on
this mosaic of discord, he commented that ‘there is still – no Iraqi people but
unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued
with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie … prone
to anarchy and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatever’. Although referring to 1930s Iraq, King Faisal’s lament may still be echoing in the halls of the CPA some seventy years later.
The sociologist Andreas Wimmer identifies two factors which encourage ethnic heterogeneity to promote competition and violence within nascent states. Firstly, no strong networks of civil society organizations develop prior to the introduction of the modern state, and, secondly, the incipient state is weak and cannot enforce equality before the law, democratic participation, protection from violence and access to services, for all the citizens of the state. Such conditions encourage elites to discriminate between groups and promote patron–client relationships, giving preference to members of their own socio-political group, with groups bridging these divides either too small or even non-existent. Political authority therefore becomes quickly divided according to communal solidarities. For Wimmer, Iraq fills these conditions admirably, with identity in the year of independence (1932) commonly associated with ethnicity (and particularly Arab, Kurd and Turkmen) or religion (Sunni Muslim, Shi‘i Muslim, Christian and Jewish). Wimmer develops this argument by noting that Iraq had an absence of civil society organizations with a trans-ethnic reach, and ‘traditions of statehood’ were hardly going to be strong in this ex-backwater of the Ottoman Empire.

As a modern state, Iraq was encumbered with two attributes which together condemned its people to a painful future as ‘the state’ strove to control a fractured and violence-prone society. The first of these was the continuation by the British of the previous Ottoman method of governing the region – through Iraq’s minority Sunni Arabs. Indeed, the association of Sunni elites with the institutions of state led the Shi‘i to protest that ‘the taxes are on the Shi‘i, death is on the Shi‘i, and the posts are for the Sunni’. The second, often overlooked, decision of the British was to attach the Kurdish-dominated province of Mosul to the Arab-dominated provinces of Baghdad and Basra. The British legacy to Iraq was therefore the formation of a weak state with a political system dominated by an inbuilt Sunni minority government (and associated disempowerment of the Shi‘i majority), and a recalcitrant Kurdish nationalist movement which would fight stubbornly against any government in Baghdad in an attempt to gain autonomy. The Shi‘i political problem was essentially of an internal nature – over who would control the state of Iraq. The Kurdish problem was the opposite and external – over how the Kurds could escape the authority of Baghdad.

The history of the political development of the Iraqi state is one of a central government seeking to manage/manipulate the cleavages apparent within Iraqi society. It is also one of the institutions of state becoming wholly Arabized. However, even though state institutions were the preserve of an increasingly select clique of Sunni Arabs, a sense of an Iraqi identity did develop, particularly from the 1950s onwards. Influenced greatly by the wave of pan-Arabism which swept over the region following the creation of Israel in 1948 and the rise of Nasser in Egypt, an Iraqi identity became prominent particularly among the Arab secular classes, if not among the Kurds, but the old loyalties were never far in the background and Iraqi governments remained ‘minority’ affairs, favouring particular sections of society over others. In such an environment of
distrust, ‘the state’ sought detachment from society. From 1958, this task of detachment was made considerably easier due to Iraq benefiting from the independent control of its oil resources. By the early 1970s, Iraq received an estimated average of US$ 600 million per annum. By 1980 this figure had reached US$ 26 billion. With the government financially independent from society and benefiting from immense amounts of revenue, it could embark upon a further method of controlling the fractious state – the now infamous use of carrot and stick, the carrot being the expansion of the public sector, the stick being the expansion of the security services. The historian of Iraq Toby Dodge notes that between 1958 and 1977, the number of state employees increased from 20,000 to 580,000, with a further 230,000 people employed in the armed forces and 200,000 people receiving a state pension. By 1990, 21 per cent of the workforce and 40 per cent of households were directly dependent upon the state for their well-being.

For the development of representative government, the impact of this grandiose rentier system on Iraq was devastating. With the Ba’athist-controlled state assuming the position of benevolent supplier to the vast majority of Iraq’s social groups, there was little incentive for individuals to subscribe to political groups pursuing an agenda attempting to change the status quo. While state patronage was undoubtedly effective in limiting political opposition, Saddam’s regime also remained wholeheartedly committed to the more violent attributes of state control. A long-standing opponent of Saddam’s regime, Kanan Makiya, meticulously breaks down the numbers of armed men relative to population in 1980, coming to the conservative conclusion that one-fifth of the economically active labour force of over 3 million were institutionally charged, during peacetime, with one form of violence or another. In such an environment, Makiya despondently opined, ‘opposition can no longer arise except in people’s mind, and then it is not really an opposition at all.’ Stories regarding the brutality of life under Saddam’s pervasive security measures are well documented, and the ease by which the ‘Butcher of Baghdad’ could be demonized was eagerly seized upon by the spin doctors of London and Washington. What has rarely been addressed (owing to the near-impossibility of conducting meaningful research on political issues in Saddam’s Iraq) is the legacy such oppressive measures have left behind.

In the introduction to his detailed analysis of Iraq’s security and intelligence network, Ibrahim Marashi lists the five primary agencies that constituted the security apparatus: Jihaz al-Amn al-Khas (Special Security); al-Amn al-'Amm (General Security); al-Mukhabarat (General Intelligence); al-Istikhbarat (military intelligence); and al-Amn al-'Askari (Military Intelligence). In addition to these principal, heavily overlapping groups, there also existed a plethora of party security agencies, police forces, paramilitaries and special units, all armed to protect the regime from any actual, perceived or threatened form of opposition. These organizations formed an Orwellian web of mistrust, fear and coercion which comprehensively permeated every aspect of Iraqi life. Few formations of civil or political life could exist in such an environment, least of all the fragile institutions necessary for representative democracy to emerge.
To establish and consolidate democracy in post-Saddam Iraq, the traumatic psychological legacies of Iraq’s history are major hurdles to overcome as the CPA and fledgling Iraqi institutions seek to identify, empower and, at times, create the building blocks of the new state. Indeed, ‘create’ is not too strong a word to use in this regard as Iraqi society has increasingly been ‘atomized’ by the effects of the Ba’athist regime’s political and economic structures and actions. The Iraqi academic Isam al-Khafaji stresses that ‘the success of Ba’athism in subjugating the Iraqi people to its rule for a relatively long period lies precisely in its ability to atomise the population and link each individual vertically to the patron-state’.

In such an individualistic environment dominated by one powerful party, other political identities are easily overshadowed and, sometimes, eradicated. Class-based political organizations in particular struggled to survive, as the very notion of horizontal linkages in society were targeted and weakened by the regime. Those that did manage to maintain some semblance of organizational structure, including communists and socialists, gained themselves the attention of the regime’s omnipotent security services. It would seem that the institutions of civil society deemed necessary for the initial emergence of democracy rarely have existed in Iraq, and have struggled to emerge beyond anything but a superficial measure in a post-Saddam Iraqi society.

If the basic structures of civil society are difficult (or perhaps impossible) to find in the immediate-aftermath environment, it is logical to ask what exactly does exist ‘on the ground’ and what raw materials have emerged from the wreckage of regime change that can be used to reconstruct the state. Such a question brings us around full circle in historical terms, and back to the creation of the Iraqi state in the aftermath of the First World War. From the perspectives of both Iraqis and their occupiers, the situation is a historical rerun. The American analyst Judith Yaphe cuttingly notes that ‘when the Arabs of southern Iraq saw the American and coalition forces enter Iraq in March 2003, it must have been with a curious sense of historical déja vu’. If the US and coalition forces also possessed an institutional memory spanning back to the 1920s, they too would have been hit by some striking similarities. Then, Iraq was clearly less than the sum of its three parts. The provinces (vilayet) of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra each had a distinct ethnic or sectarian identity. Further, each would develop differing positions as to what their own position should be in relation to the state and how the state itself should be constructed. Indeed, the failure of the Iraqi state has been that its ‘state-builders’ have been unable to develop an entity that was more than the sum of its three basic parts and that enjoyed any measure of longevity.

Throughout the twentieth century, groupings of ‘primordial’ movements have sporadically challenged the dominance of the Sunni-dominated state, starting with the Kurdish and Shi‘i rebellions of 1919 and 1920, and continuing unabated throughout the decades. Indeed, Saddam did not create this antipathy towards the centre – it was an inbuilt structural weakness of the state itself, given to the unfortunate Iraqis by the Ottomans and then the British. All Saddam did was manage these inherent weaknesses in a far more brutal (and bloodily effective) manner and use the weaknesses endemic within a fragmented
society to strengthen the position of his Ba’athist regime as the one truly unified political entity. A palimpsest of interlinked identities therefore existed in Iraq, with sectarian, tribal and ethnic bonds overlaid with identities of modernity such as class, trans-regional (pan-Arab in particular), nationalist (Iraqi) and a range of different interests. With the removal of Saddam, the palimpsest has been scratched back, uncovering the raw, traumatized sectarian and ethnic identities with which the United States and its allies have to work. The task of the United States therefore remains the same as that which has confronted every Iraqi government – to weld together an entity greater than the sum of its disparate parts. Whether the United States can achieve this when all others have failed remains to be seen.

The building blocks of state building. part II (2003–?)

The initial US plan for governing Iraq after the removal of Saddam Hussein was quite simple – the man himself, along with his high-ranking colleagues in the Ba’ath Party and state institutions, would be replaced, allowing the long-established administrative structures of the state to continue operating, albeit with new leadership. The plan was elegant in its simplicity, but, with hindsight, it is clear that is was fatally flawed. Ironically, by removing the Ba’ath Party, the United States effectively eliminated the one organization that could perhaps claim a national support base and had the means to project power (at least among the Arab population, if not with the Kurds). The demobilization of the national army, similarly, eradicated the most capable of organizations available to post-Saddam Iraq and allowed a security vacuum to develop which has proved impossible to fill. It also flooded the ‘Iraqi street’ with thousands of trained, armed and, most importantly, disgruntled ex-soldiers shamed by their failure to protect the state against the forces of imperialism, complete with the extensive arsenal of the military. Whether they supported Saddam or not (and many did not), it would be a reasonably straightforward progression to go from being a disgruntled ex-serviceman to be reborn as a freedom fighter against occupying forces, using stockpiles of ex-army weaponry. The liquidation of the ‘Iraqi state’ and its agents of control (whether of an administrative (government), political (the Ba’ath Party), security (e.g. the mukhabarat) or military (the army) nature) also released the patrimonial and coercive pressure which had successfully kept Iraq’s fractious communal ‘mosaic of discord’ together. Without these consolidating and centripetal features of the Saddam era, political authority became localized overnight, facilitating the resurrection of socio-political forces previously subdued by the combined effects of state patronage and state coercion.

Nearly a hundred years earlier, the British military entered Iraq in 1914, finding a society characterized by ‘isolation, political disarray, tribal unrest, social chaos, and economic uncertainty’. The comparison between the experience of the British in 1914 and the Americans in 2003 is an obvious one to draw. Iraqi society of 2003 exhibits many similarities to that of 1914 – it has been isolated
both internationally by sanctions and internally by ‘atomization’; it is in political
disarray with the elimination of the Ba’athist regime and the trauma implicit
with life under Saddam; the tribes are again powerful across the county after
many were reinvigorated by Saddam; and uncertainty in all sectors of life
appears to be the norm. There are, however, two significant differences
between 1914 and 2003. Firstly, oil has transformed Iraqi society. Secondly, the
state of Iraq has existed for nearly a century and has created its own realities on
the ground. Both of these two differences sharpen the problems already faced.
Oil revenue can indeed be used to benefit the entire society if distributed
correctly, but in the short term it is seen as little more than the reward for
securing power. The existence of the Iraqi state also could be a seen in beneficial
ways, if the experience of living in that state had been positive. On the whole,
however, apart from isolated times of peace and prosperity, it was not and
considerations of the state (particularly from those oppressed by it in the past)
are commonly of a more negative hue. Because of these considerations, the US
position is far more complex than that faced by the British. Furthermore, the
United States no longer has the privacy of operation enjoyed by its imperial
predecessor. In today’s media-saturated world, US actions in Iraq are being
played out in front of a news-hungry audience of millions.

Before Saddam’s regime was removed, how Iraqis identified themselves was a
focus of heated academic debate. Some experts spoke of an overarching sense of
Iraqi nationalism, capable of bridging sectarian and ethnic cleavages in the state,
others contended that communal and local identities remained strong, but were
cowed into submission by the invidiousness of Saddam’s regime. One would
expect that the argument would have been resolved once Iraqis had the opportu-
nity to organize themselves free from the bondage of dictatorship. It has not
been. Instead, as occupying forces faced an increasingly capable insurgency, and
political life became dominated by parties/groups representing particular
segments of society (e.g. Kurds, Sunni and Shi’i) academic arguments evolved to
fit the new developments. For some, the insurgency was representative of a true
Iraqi nationalist drive against occupation. For others, it was evidence of a reac-
tion by Sunni Arabs to their perceived disempowerment with the removal of
Saddam and the threat of a Shi’i theocracy. The emergence of a strong Kurdish
movement and a vociferous Shi’i religious trend was considered as proof of the
vibrancy of sectarian and ethnic identity within the state on the one hand, or as
an extreme rebound against the chauvinistic policies of Saddam, to be calmed at
a later point when common sense would prevail. There is also a prescriptive
mechanism to feed into what is already a decidedly complex picture. The US
administration, after dealing with a Sunni-Arab-dominated government for
decades, and then Iraqi opposition forces in the 1990s (and principally Kurds), in
addition to fearing the association of Iraq’s Shi’a with those of Iran, had and
maintains a natural propensity to view Iraq according to its parts, rather than the
sum of them. It should therefore have been of little surprise that one of the first
acts of the Americans upon entering Baghdad was to select an Iraqi Governing
Council (IGC) according to ethnic and sectarian identity. As with virtually every
consociational power-sharing system, it would not take long for IGC members to begin acting according to their local parochial interests, rather than the greater Iraqi national concern. The empowerment of groups associated with a communal identity is currently the norm within Iraq. As such, it is necessary to investigate the personalities and dynamics of the groups contending power at the present time. These groups are (in no particular order) the Shi‘i Arabs, the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds. Of course, many other communal groups exist in Iraq, including Christians and Turkmens to name but two; however, they are not contenders for power in the same way that the former three are. The positions of each of these groups are complex, and often display considerable internal differences. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify certain incontrovertible demands.

The Shi’a have emerged in the post-Saddam environment as being the most powerful of all Iraq’s communal groups. This should not be surprising. If Iraq was truly democratic, it is highly likely that it would be a Shi‘i-dominated state as it is commonly assumed that the Shi’a constitute a numerical majority within the state (at around 60 per cent of the population). While being ethnically Arab (although there exist a significant number of Shi’a Kurds), the Shi’a have been politically marginalized throughout Iraq’s history. In addition to being considered heretics by hard-line Sunni clerics, the Shi’a were also feared due to their natural ties with the Shi’a of Iran. Indeed, the policy of marginalization pursued by the Ottomans because of religious reasons (as the Ottomans were Sunnis) was taken up by the British (as they already had dealings with the Sunni), only to be magnified by successive Iraqi regimes and politicized when war with Islamic Iran broke out in 1980.

The Shi’a are represented primarily by religious groups, and most notably influenced by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Najaf, the most senior marja’ of Iraq. He maintains his fundamental belief in the separation of clerical and political responsibilities, but in the atmosphere of heightened political aspirations, he is often drawn into making political judgements, most notably enunciating the demand for democratic elections to take place, rather than the selection of prominent individuals as proposed by the United States. Other Shi‘i groups and leaders include the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) led by Sayyid Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim and al-Da’wa. SCIRI has strong links with the Iranian government, but tends to support the lines taken by Sistani. Al-Da’wa has a much stronger base within Iraqi society and is headed by a collegial leadership. Both SCIRI and al-Da’wa have representatives on the IGC. With the removal of Saddam, many Shi’a have found the quietist approach of Sistani and the association of SCIRI and al-Da’wa with the forces of the occupation have prompted many younger (and more radical) Shi’a to support more militant (and Iranian-style) groups. Chief among these is the Sadriyyun of Muqtada al-Sadr. With his power base in the Sadr City quarter of Baghdad, Muqtada has managed to carve out an ever-growing niche in Iraqi politics, and his movement is home to the many Shi’a who believe that the time has come to exert their authority over Iraq. As such, Muqtada’s political lines are often non-negotiable,
and he has been brought into conflict with other Shi’a groups (including SCIRI), and is viewed with trepidation by the United States. A summary of the generic Shi’a position in Iraq would include:

1 recognition (for now) of Sistani as the pre-eminent figure of authority;
2 a demand that the Shi’a are proportionally represented, thereby ensuring their dominance over institutions of state; and
3 maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq.

It is this third factor which brings the Shi’a into conflict with the Kurds. As stated previously, the experience of the Shi’a and the Kurds in Iraq has only their suffering in common. Their actual demands are in opposition to each other and inherently non-negotiable. For the Shi’a the issue is about who controls Iraq; for the Kurds it is about whether they should even be ‘in’ Iraq. For the Iraqi Kurds, the US use of the phrase ‘self-determination’ for Iraqis was received with a great degree of hope. For decades, the leadership of the Kurds, along with the majority of Kurdish society at large, had longed for a time when a ‘Great Power’ would return to revisit and correct the state-making process of the early twentieth century when the Kurds were denied statehood and divided between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.42 The fact that the world’s superpower in the form of the United States had indeed returned to Iraq, driven by what was perceived to be a barely hidden agenda to redraw the map of the Middle East, initially gave the Kurds hope that they would, at last, be granted a homeland, or at least ‘something’ in Iraq. However, these hopes quickly turned to fears as US policy moved from being seemingly ‘pro-Kurdish’, to then pursuing a political solution which would see the Kurds kept in their provincial marginalized position in the north of the country.

The Kurds entered the post-Saddam political game as the strongest domestic actor in military terms. Since 1991, they have etched out an autonomous Kurdish region in the north of Iraq which is now home to approximately 4 million people. During this time, the two principal parties of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani have presided over an increasingly efficient and institutionalized state structure, resplendent with a legislature, executive and judiciary.43 Kurds now speak Kurdish as their first language, with Arabic perhaps coming third to English, and now consider themselves to be Kurdish rather than Iraqi. The baseline requirements for the Kurdish leadership are as follows:

1 to maintain at least the level of autonomy the Kurds currently enjoy (which is considerable) and to augment it with control of Kirkuk;
2 to secure control of oil resources in Kurdish territory (including the major oilfield of Kirkuk); and
3 to control a Kurdish military force, and have the power to block the military deployment of Iraqi forces to the north (which would, in effect, make Iraqi Kurdistan an independent state in all but name).
For the Kurds, this is the most significant moment in their recent history and they are determined to achieve their aims, making their position again inherently non-negotiable.

If anything, the Shi’a and the Sunnis are united in an Arab position against Kurdish demands, as if the Kurds are successful they fear it is the first stage in the Balkanization of Iraq. The Sunnis, as a group, are more difficult to define owing to their current level of disorganization. Since the removal of Saddam, the Sunnis in general have suffered from being associated with his regime, the Ba’ath Party and the atrocities of both. Early US policies of de-Ba’athification and demilitarization impacted the Sunni Arabs particularly heavily. This tendency towards victimization was compounded by the fact that they were comparatively poorly represented on the IGC. Although the IGC includes six out of twenty-five Sunni Arab members, virtually all of them were selected from exiled returnees, religious groups or tribal formations. The IGC therefore presented two problems for the mainstream Sunni Arab Iraqi nationalists. The first was that, for the first time in the history of Iraq, power no longer resided solely in the hands of a Sunni clique. Second, the Sunni representatives on the IGC enjoyed little, if any, popular support and therefore lacked legitimacy. This perceived disempowerment was arguably responsible for the emergence of a well-armed and highly motivated insurgency, focused in Sunni areas (the now infamous ‘Sunni Triangle’) against occupying forces, and Iraqis collaborating with them. At this moment in time, it is difficult to identify the Sunni agenda. If history is to be our guide, it is reasonable to presume that

1. the Sunnis fear the dominance of the state by the Shi’a;
2. they demand that the territorial integrity of Iraq should not be threatened by Kurdish autonomy.

However, the Sunnis at present lack a truly representative political force capable of pursuing a popular agenda in post-Saddam Iraq. As such, the danger is that any decisions made in their absence will not be accepted by a significant (and traditionally powerful) proportion of the Iraqi population which will almost certainly enjoy a political resurgence in the future.

The domestic political situation in Iraq is therefore unstable and dangerous. It is difficult to be optimistic about the country’s future when faced with the unpalatable fact that the primary political communities (Sunni, Shi’a and Kurds) have adopted non-negotiable positions on their demands for how Iraq should be structured. Indeed, the ‘triumvirate of dissonance’ which exists with Sunni traditional aspirations and fear of the Shi’a, Kurdish nationalist demands for heightened autonomy, and the Shi’a desire to dominate at last the state would seem to suggest that the future of Iraq is going to be rather traumatic. The direness of the situation is only magnified when the Iraq situation is compared with other examples.
How is democracy created and consolidated?

This is a particularly pertinent question, particularly when states with no previous track record of democracy, such as Iraq, are considered. Speaking in November 2003, President Bush triumphantly proclaimed that ‘we have witnessed, in little over a generation, the swiftest advance of freedom in the 2,500 year story of democracy’, noting that, in the early 1970s, there were ‘about 40 democracies in the world’, and, as the twentieth century ended, there were nearly 120 ‘and I can assure you more are on the way’.44 Indeed there may be, but optimism regarding the ease with which previously undemocratic states can be ‘democratized’ in what Samuel P. Huntington was to name ‘the third wave of democratization in the modern world’ has to face an uncomfortable empirical reality.45 Of nearly 100 countries considered to be moving towards democracy, fewer than one-fifth are moving in the right direction, and Amitai Etzioni notes that of the eighteen forced regime changes in which US ground troops have been committed, arguably only three deserve the ‘democratic’ title – Germany, Japan and Italy.46 Most either regress to former levels of authoritarianism, or are stuck in a grey area where ‘liberalization’ (a mix of policy and social changes in a non-democratic setting) in various sectors is deceptively championed as proof of ‘democratization’ (open contestation through free competitive elections over the right to win control of the government).47 Where transitions are successful tends to be in culturally specific environments such as Central Europe and Latin America and historically have occurred in opposition to external powers rather than under their guidance. Etzioni identifies most nations of Latin America, Asia and the Balkans as evidence of this process in action, with what he terms ‘artificial constructions’, including India, Yugoslavia, Nigeria and Iraq, as being ‘held together only under the thumb of a tyrant’.48

Democracy therefore seems to be somewhat difficult to introduce into multi-ethnic–sectarian states emerging from the shadow of authoritarianism even in the best of circumstances. With the IGC already constructed according to ethnic and sectarian identity,49 and with CPA plans going nowhere fast with regard to moving towards ‘democratization’ compared with ‘liberalization’, neither empirical evidence nor academic theory augur well for the emergence and consolidation of democracy in such a socio-politically disparate state. As Patrick Basham observes, ‘a foreign power can do little to advance democracy’s evolutionary clock beyond the limits imposed by the domestic society’s economic and cultural development’.50 However, a foreign power could do much to set back the progress of democracy in a fragile setting such as Iraq.

Thomas Carothers identifies five core assumptions which define the ‘transition’ paradigm of successful democratic consolidation necessary for a state to move from dictatorship to consolidated democracy:51

1 A country moves away from dictatorship towards democracy.
2 Democratization unfolds in a sequence of stages including an ‘opening’ (liberalization); the ‘breakthrough’ (collapse of regime and emergence of new democratic system); ‘consolidation’ (a slow process in which democratic
forms are transformed into democratic substance through the habituation of society to democratic norms).

3 A belief in the determinative importance of elections.

4 Underlying socio-political conditions will not be major factors in either the onset or the outcome of the transition process.

5 Democratic transitions are built on coherent, functioning states.

Already, it is possible to identify certain problems with applying these assumptions to Iraq. The first assumption, at first sight, appears to be appropriate to Iraq – after all, it is difficult to imagine a situation emerging whereby a Saddam-esque figure comes to power. Or is it? If it were possible to argue that Saddam was an anomaly in the history of the Iraqi state, then perhaps we could be confident in accepting that Iraq must be moving towards democracy. However, if it were accepted that he was, in fact, a product of the political dynamics of the Iraqi state, the appropriateness of this assumption needs to be questioned. In other words, the ‘triumvirate of dissonance’ as defined previously exerts pressures to dictatorship of one sort or another as the only set of mechanisms which have proven capable of maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq and the subservience of all communal groups to the state have been those of patronage, coercion and fear.

The second assumption outlines the sequence of events a transition should follow. Again, on one level, Iraq can be seen to match the requirements, but problems are apparent if we simply look at the chronology of events. Firstly, the influence of outside powers with particular interests in the removal of the dictatorial regime has rushed the agenda considerably. Secondly, it is questionable whether there has been an emergence of new democratic systems, or newly liberalized ones. The order of events also seems to be inchoate in Iraq, with little liberalization under Saddam, with regime collapse occurring first, and with consolidation of democracy and liberalization arguably being concomitant, rushed and confused.

The third assumption is challenged both by the United States, which seems to be set on promoting selections rather than elections, and the fact that religious groups in Iraq, while calling for elections, may not have democratic development in mind. It is useful to remember that Saddam also held elections, enjoying an immense turnout giving him 99.99 per cent of the vote, yet he used elections to bolster the legitimacy of his dictatorship rather than promoting representative government.

The fourth assumption is obviously flawed for Iraq. Underlying socio-political conditions are arguably pre-eminent factors in both the onset of the transition and its subsequent outcome. The fifth assumption appears to be acceptable, until the Kurdish position is raised. For over a decade, the Kurds have effectively operated autonomously from the rest of Iraq and are now promoting a federal initiative which would see the cohesiveness of Iraq weakened. Larry Diamond notes that ‘democracy can be consolidated only when no significant collective actors challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions or regularly violate its constitutional
norms, procedures, and laws. … There must be no “politically significant” anti-system (disloyal) parties or organizations.\textsuperscript{52} The Kurdish movement, with its demands for considerable veto powers within the state, heightened autonomy and the creation of a ‘Kurdish national guard’ clearly constitute a significant collective actor capable of challenging the legitimacy of future institutions of state.

Even if the concerns of applying Carothers’ assumptions regarding the conditions necessary for transition to consolidated democracy are overlooked and we accept US claims that ‘democracy’ has been established in Iraq,\textsuperscript{53} the process of consolidating a democracy established in the aftermath of the collapse of a dictatorship appears to be a rather arduous task, as Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan warn: ‘after a democratic transition has been completed, there are still many tasks that need to be accomplished, conditions that must be established, and attitudes and habits that must be cultivated before democracy could be considered consolidated’.\textsuperscript{54} For Linz and Stepan, a democracy is consolidated when it has become ‘the only game in town’. They judge this from three perspectives:

1. \textit{Behaviourally}, no significant actors attempt to usurp the democratic regime, or secede from the state.
2. \textit{Attitudinally}, a strong majority of the population believe that democratic procedures are the most appropriate way to govern collective life in society.
3. \textit{Constitutionally}, all actors within the state become habituated to the resolution of conflict through laws sanctioned by the democratic process.\textsuperscript{55}

In the case of Iraq, it is difficult to argue that any one of the three perspectives has much chance of occurring. The non-negotiable stances of the primary political groups means that it is hard to imagine a democratic regime and procedures emerging which have the support of the majority of the population. There are therefore behavioural problems to overcome, as it is not too extreme to consider that any one of the three major groups may attempt to usurp a regime if dominated (or perceived to be so) by an opposing group, and the Kurdish polity continues to nurture its seed of individualism which could quite easily manifest itself as a secessionist tendency. Attitudinally, there exists serious problems. While democracy is currently banded around Iraq as the panacea curing the trauma caused by years of dictatorship, it is necessary to be brutally realistic about the setting in which this hope is being placed – Iraq and Iraqis have no history of democratic procedures, and it is highly questionable whether the powerful Shi‘i leaders are really committed to democracy as an appropriate method to govern collective life. Even in the often-described Kurdish de facto state, democracy Kurdish style is characterized by the continued dominance of two leaders, with little evidence of political decision-making going beyond the political bureaux of the KDP and PUK. Finally, with the endemic instability apparent in post-Saddam Iraq, it is unrealistic to presuppose that, constitutionally, all actors within the state will adopt a non-violent method of resolving conflict – at least in the short and medium term (including several years after any elections). Democracy is therefore far from being ‘the only game in town’ in Iraq.
Francis Fukuyama develops a similar model of democratic consolidation to that of Linz and Stepan, identifying four levels on which consolidation must occur, but introduces a temporal element which gives a useful structure by which to classify developments in Iraq.\textsuperscript{56} Going from the shortest to the longest time-frame, level 1, the most superficial level, involves a normative commitment to the notion of democracy. Level 2 sees democracy consolidated in institutions (constitutions, electoral systems, etc.). Level 3 requires the existence of civil society, existing outside the realm of state control. Finally, level 4 is the realm of political culture – family structure, religion, ethnic consciousness. With this model, two issues are apparent. The first is that as we progress from the merely superficial into the realm of habituated action, change becomes slower and more difficult to achieve. As we shall see, the focus of US actions has been almost wholly in the realm of the most superficial levels (1 and 2). The second issue is that democracy cannot be considered fully consolidated until it is rooted in the political culture of the society, and this long-term characteristic is beyond the ability of social engineers to produce. Only a stable, liberalized, political environment existing over a considerable period of time would realistically allow the development of civil society and the trickle-down effects of political culture to become features of the Iraqi state. It is unlikely that (1) such an environment will come into being, and (2) that the United States is operating with such a timeframe in mind. Rather than giving cause for optimism, appraisals of the theoretical literature expose the sheer scale of the task confronting the democracy-builders of the new Iraq. How the United States has chosen to recreate Iraq as a ‘beacon of democracy’ in the Middle East illustrates clearly the problems faced, and the trends emerging for the future.

**From Iraqi democratic needs to American democratic needs**

It has been said by a variety of commentators that the real battle for the United States would not be the overthrowing of Saddam’s regime but its replacement. The speed and efficiency by which the coalition military invaded Iraq and deposed the incumbent regime is only matched by the ineptitude and inconsistency by which new authorities have been established, legitimized and empowered. Indeed, consistency of US policy direction in this regard has been sorely lacking, at least from an Iraqi perspective, and has instead been dictated more by the rapidly approaching US presidential elections, and the need to be seen as pursuing a successful policy of transition in Iraq. For the United States, this has effectively meant focusing on the easiest elements of establishing and consolidating a democracy – on normative commitment and institutional arrangements. It has not meant attempting to influence the ‘deeper’ requirements as identified by Linz and Stepan, and Fukuyama, of civil society promotion and encouraging changes in political culture – both of which would require a considerable investment of time and resources. Furthermore, this policy of increasingly focusing on the more superficial aspects of democracy-building has meant that
the United States has to work within the historical parameters of the Iraqi state. As such, the United States has refused to acknowledge the inherent structural weaknesses of the state (whether minority governance, Shi’i aspirations or Kurdish distinctiveness), and ignored the fundamental instability that the unresolved legacy of these issues will continue to rouse.

Perhaps it was understandable that the United States went into Iraq totally unprepared for how to manage the post-conflict environment. Prominent political leaders in the United States, led by the neo-conservatives who have an inordinate amount of influence over the US administration, held a particular view as to what would happen in Iraq with Saddam’s overthrowing: US forces would be welcomed into the country, democracy would be embraced and the peoples of Iraq would come together in a unified state, enjoying the benefits of a US-style economy, cathartically embracing Israel and being a frontline ally in the US war against terror. Exiled Iraqi political groups, and especially the Iraqi National Congress (INC) of Dr Ahmed Chalabi, played on strong links with the neo-conservatives and fed this belief with timely interjections from dissidents fleeing Iraq, who were themselves expertly cultivated by the INC to encourage the United States in its determination to oust Saddam.57 The two principal Kurdish parties, similarly, could point to their ‘democratic experiment’ in Iraqi Kurdistan as evidence of democracy not being an alien concept to Iraqis, and received the adulation of several prominent Republican and Democrat politicians, including Senator John Kerry.58 Even though the modern history of Iraq would tend to suggest that invading powers have never been made welcome, there was such confidence in the US administration, it seems, that Iraqis would embrace coalition forces, that the level of planning invested into ‘regime replacement’ was criminally negligible. US policies since Saddam’s removal have been inherently reactive, with little evidence of the implementation of a proactive or preconceived plan. For this reason, US actions have morphed over time, often in response to the activities of one of the three major communal groups. Three distinct ‘plans’ (with a fourth on the way) can be discerned since US forces entered Baghdad and an official end to military operations was declared on 1 May 2003.

**Plan A**

Retired General Jay Garner was tasked with establishing the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (OHRA). The role of OHRA was to bring law and order back to Iraq as early as possible. Garner, who established a good working relationship with many of Iraq’s communal leaders, sought to maintain as much of the previous state apparatus as possible, including the army, and undertook only a limited ‘de-Ba’athification’ process of the top two tiers of the party apparatchiks. Garner’s approach, while certainly winning converts in Iraq, obviously came into conflict with what was desired in Washington, perhaps due to the lack of progress OHRA made with bringing stability to Baghdad (which was gripped with looting in the immediate aftermath of regime change).
and the fear surrounding the emergence of a strong and virulent Shi’i religious identity (which, somewhat surprisingly, took the United States by considerable surprise).\textsuperscript{59} Garner, and most of his staff, were unceremoniously recalled to Washington in mid-May.

**Plan B**

General Garner and the OHRA were replaced by Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) on 12 May 2003. Bremer was tasked with pursuing a much tougher line within Iraq than that pursued by Garner. For the United States, it was essential that the rising tide of militant activity against coalition forces could be labelled as being the actions of a specific group – most notably pro-Saddam militias with support from Islamist organizations associated with Al-Qaeda. As such (and playing to US public opinion more than Iraqi), Bremer outlawed the Ba’ath Party and purged nearly 100,000 people from the newly formed offices of government of ex-Ba’ath Party personnel. He also disbanded the Iraqi Army, putting 400,000 soldiers on the street. Civilian unrest was targeted by US military forces as the United States sought to establish security in Iraq by the barrel of a gun. The result was quite predictable – anti-occupation sentiment was heightened and militant activity increased. Politically, the United States needed desperately to show that a new Iraqi government, staffed by Iraqis rather than by coalition civil servants, was in existence and preparing to take over the administration of Iraq when US forces leave. Many local groups were established, with responsibility to work alongside CPA officials in the administration of localized regions. At the highest level, the CPA selected an Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), constructed according to ethnic and sectarian identity, including many of the exiles who had previously been counselling the US administration.\textsuperscript{60}

Three problems have haunted the existence of the IGC. Firstly, all of its decisions had to be ratified by the CPA and signed off by Bremer. Secondly, it had no popular legitimacy within Iraq, and the Sunni Arabs felt immediately disempowered as there were no Sunni leaders of any particular standing within the council. Thirdly, IGC members, selected because of their communal identity, would soon act according to that identity, rather than in the interests of greater Iraq. ‘Plan B’ required the IGC to draft a constitutional law which would prescribe a mechanism by which delegates would be elected to a constitutional convention by 15 December 2003. The Constitution would then have been legitimized by a referendum. Elections would then be held and sovereignty transferred. Worryingly (though somewhat predictably), ‘Plan B’ never got past stage 1 as the communally minded IGC could not agree on the mechanism by which the constitutional convention would be identified. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most senior Shi’i cleric, demanded that delegates be democratically elected – obviously hoping that the Shi’i majority would result in their dominance in this crucial arena. The Kurds, who headed the drafting committee, expected their autonomous demands to be included in the draft and in any
structure of convention, and obstructed negotiations when they considered that their views were being ignored. Meanwhile, the Sunnis began to express their own political position via the ever-growing insurgency against occupying forces and IGC institutions. Faced with a deadlock in the IGC and a deteriorating security situation, Bremer scrapped ‘Plan B’ and introduced ‘Plan C’.

**Plan C**

From being described by Bremer as ‘straightforward and realistic’ as late as September 2003, it was something of an about face when ‘Plan B’ was replaced by the much more complex and unrealistic ‘Plan C’ on 15 November 2003. With the number of US casualties hitting new heights in early November (with forty US troops dying in the first ten days of that month alone) and with political negotiations stalling over deep-rooted ethnic and sectarian aspirations, the United States responded by moving away from the longer-term agenda of nation-building, to the much shorter-term task of state-building, and focused particularly on the establishment of an interim Iraqi government and the transfer of sovereignty. In effect, ‘Plan C’ represented the retargeting of US efforts onto the more superficial elements of democracy-building – normative commitment and institution-building, rather than to the deeper and more taxing considerations of civil society and political culture.

Plan C required a ‘Basic Law’ to be drafted by 28 February 2004 which would act as an interim constitution. A Transitional National Assembly (TNA) was then to be formed via a highly complex three-stage selection process. Each of Iraq’s eighteen provinces was to select an Organizing Committee of fifteen members appointed by the IGC and approved by the CPA that would then convene a Governorate Selection Caucus (GSC). The GSC would then elect representatives to the TNA by 31 May, assuming full sovereign rights on 30 June. A permanent constitution would then be drawn up, with final elections taking place before 31 December 2005.

In addition to being fiendishly complex, ‘Plan C’ failed owing to exactly the same reasons that ‘Plan B’ collapsed – the non-negotiable positions of each of Iraq’s leading communal groups failed to find a compromise position. Most notably, Grand Ayatollah Sistani again insisted on the need for the TNA to be democratically elected. This demand developed into a serious stand-off with Bremer, as the United States struggled to come to terms with the fact that the seemingly traditionalist Ayatollah had ‘played the democracy card’ against the United States, making the occupiers appear to be distinctly undemocratic both to Iraqis and to the international community. In the north, the Kurds stubbornly refused to budge on their autonomous demands, requiring that the Basic Law should define the position of the Kurds in Iraq, and enshrine their autonomous status at least at the level enjoyed in the 1990s, if not more (including control of Kirkuk). Meanwhile, the Sunnis remained distinctly unrepresented in the negotiations as it increasingly appeared that the Shi’a and Kurds were carving up Iraq according to their own interests. The result was,
again, predictable. Even though Saddam was captured alive in December 2003, the insurgency against coalition forces and IGC associated groups continued unabated, with several considerable ‘victories’ being achieved, particularly against nascent Iraqi security organizations.

A new plan

Again faced with deadlock in the IGC, the United States had to react to Iraqi politics, rather than follow a preconceived plan. With the US election campaign starting in the spring of 2004 with the Democrat primaries, the timeframe to deliver success in Iraq was beginning to get perilously tight. With these considerations in mind, the United States turned to the United Nations (UN) to secure a compromise with its fractious Iraqi associates. The UN’s Brahimi Report on elections in Iraq gave a certain amount of credence to the US position on the impracticality of holding early elections, but clearly supported the Shi’i determination to have elections at the earliest opportunity. Realizing that the selection of the TNA according to Plan C was never going to happen, the United States moved ahead with the necessity of drafting an interim constitution, and extending the duration of the IGC. Faced with an opportunity to wrestle sovereignty back from the United States, the IGC agreed on certain fundamental issues, but in reality simply froze political negotiations until a later time. The Kurds succeeded in keeping control of their autonomous region (without Kirkuk), and the Shi’a compromised in having Islam as ‘a source of legislation’, rather than ‘the’ source. The Sunnis, as usual, remained more noticeable by their absence. The future looks decidedly uncertain. The coalition is proclaiming the interim constitution to be evidence of a successful compromise garnered between the fractious political forces in Iraq. In reality, these political forces are simply waiting for the next round of constitutional discussions when there will be less of a US-inspired urgency to secure agreement.

Conclusion

For the United States, it now appears to be the case that the removal of Saddam, the recreation of institutions of government and the planning of elections are of themselves considered evidence of democracy emerging within Iraq. Such an interpretation of grand facts has led to the common US-held assumption that daily life for Iraqis must now be considerably improved when compared with life under the authoritarian Saddam. Therefore any US-installed government in Iraq need only measure itself next to the yardstick of Saddam’s grievances in order to be presented to the US electorate as at least ‘moving towards democracy’ – hardly the most testing of scales to be measured against.

In August 2003, the US administration published a document listing the successes of 100 days of progress in Iraq. In it, the United States advertises a ten-point list by which to support its claim that Iraq is being democratized.\textsuperscript{61}
1 A 25-member national Governing Council includes three women and Kurdish, Sunni, Christian, Turkmen, and Shi‘i representatives. The establishment of this body is a first and important move toward Iraqi self-government.

2 The Governing Council is creating a Preparatory Commission to write a constitution. After a constitution is approved, elections will lead to a fully sovereign Iraqi government.

3 There are municipal councils in all major cities and 85 percent of towns, enabling Iraqis to take responsibility for management of local matters like healthcare, water, and electricity.

4 Provisional councils have been formed in Najaf, Al Anbar, and Basra.

5 The Baghdad City Advisory Council was inaugurated on July 7, 2003. Its 37 members were selected by members of the city’s nine district councils, who themselves were selected by Baghdad citizens in 88 neighborhoods throughout the city.

6 Local governance councils are robust in Basra and Umm Qasr, helping to identify areas for immediate humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.

7 The Office of Human Rights and Transitional Justice is working to locate missing persons, investigate, analyze, and exhume mass graves, archive past human rights abuses and promote civic education/public awareness about human rights.

8 To facilitate voluntary resolutions of property claims, the Property Reconciliation Facility is being created.

9 The Coalition is helping fund and train Iraqis wanting to create their own non-governmental organizations. These new NGOs include public policy think tanks and an association of former political prisoners.

10 More than 150 newspapers are now published in Iraq offering Iraqis access to many different kinds of information. Foreign publications, radio, and television broadcasts are also available.

The ten points are highly indicative of the focus being taken in Iraq by the US administration. The majority of the points relate to a primarily institutional (superficial) aspect of democracy-building, with points addressing the deeper aspects of Iraq’s political development (civil society and political culture) to be sorely limited. Furthermore, there is an obvious and potentially devastating exclusion: at no point are the structural weaknesses which exist within the construct of the Iraqi state acknowledged. These weaknesses have arguably endowed the state with an unfortunate deterministic proclivity for dictatorship to emerge as the most durable and, in terms of continuity, successful form of government.

Andreas Schedler notes that ‘regime transitions … do not lead inevitably to democratic government. They represent risky journeys from authoritarianism “toward an uncertain something else”’.62 Even in the most favourable of circumstances, regime change is a decidedly risky undertaking and, as we have seen, Iraq seems devoid of the most basic requirements for democracy, whatever
viewpoint is taken. Guillermo O’Donnell and Phillippe Schmitter ominously contend that, in transitions from authoritarian rule, ‘the unexpected and the possible are as important as the usual and the probable’. In the case of Iraq, the likelihood of the once-deemed probable transition to democracy successfully occurring appears to be slipping into the realms of implausibility. As the Shi’a continue to press for control of the state, the Kurds seek to redress the injustices of nearly a century ago, and the Sunnis struggle to come to terms with their disempowerment, a political solution needs to be found which is based upon consensus, an understanding not to resort to violent means, and compromise – hardly defining features of Iraq’s political history. Far from being the ‘beacon of democracy’ in the Middle East, Iraq now has every potential to become a catalyst for further volatility across an already unstable region.

Notes and references

12 Ibid.


15 Ibid.


17 Sami Zubaida discusses this idea but in different terms: ‘The modern Iraqi state at its inception was a “weak” formation, structurally and institutionally “external” to the society over which it was imposed.’ Sami Zubaida, ‘Community, Class and Minorities’, in A. Fernea and R. Louis (eds), *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, London: I B Taurus, 1991, p. 207.


21 Ibid., reference at p. 114.


28 Extensive original documents illustrating the mechanisms and actions of the Iraqi security services can be found online at the Iraq Research and Documentation Project (IRDP) at: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~irdp/> (accessed 2 July 2004).


35 Ibid.


Ibid., p. 6.


While not an admission of such a strategy, the INC leader Dr Ahmed Chalabi made his position clear in a recent interview with the Daily Telegraph, in which he remained unrepentant about the possible errors in intelligence forwarded by the INC to the US administration. See Daily Telegraph, ‘Chalabi stands by faulty intelligence that toppled Saddam’s regime’, by Jack Fairweather and Anton La Guardia, 19 February 2004. For an example of such material, see Khidhir Hamza, Saddam’s Bombmaker, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.


For example, Deputy Secretary of State for Defense Paul Wolfowitz, speaking in March 2003, seemed to be oblivious to the importance of the Shi’i holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala when he referred to Islamic holy places only existing in Saudi Arabia. See Juan Cole, ‘Shi’ite Religious Parties Fill Vacuum in Southern Iraq’, Middle East Report Online, 22 April 2003.


