

## Iraq's Surprise: The Persistence of Democracy. By Yaroslav Trofimov \*



In the years since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, American promises of turning the country into a model democracy, spreading freedom across the Middle East, have often seemed like cruel mockery. By the time the U.S. withdrew in 2011, Iraq had been ravaged by bloody insurgencies and sectarian massacres that killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and more than 4,500 American troops. In 2014, Iraq almost collapsed in the face of a blitzkrieg by Islamic State, as the extremist group reached the outskirts of Baghdad. There weren't many takers in the region for the Iraqi model.

Today Iraq's prospects are looking brighter. A resurgent central government has defeated Islamic State, thanks in part to renewed American military involvement, and has taken back lands lost to the country's Kurdistan autonomous region since 2003. And Iraq's improbable political experiment has endured. In an increasingly repressive and authoritarian part of the world, this nation of 40 million people stands apart as a rare—though still deeply flawed—democracy. Iraq's elected leaders insist that, despite their country's many travails, it still has something to teach the rest of the Middle East.

"I hope others in the region will see a lot of hope and positive tendencies in our democracy," Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said in a recent interview in his palace in Baghdad's Green Zone. He sees the country's multiethnic, multi-confessional makeup not as a fatal weakness but as a source of pride. "We have decided that we'll accept that we are different. We are very eager to keep and protect our diversity. We want to undo whatever the terrorists have done."

Iraq's democracy remains fragile and imperfect. Sectarian and ethnic divides between the Shiite Arab majority and the Sunni Arab and Kurdish minorities still dominate its politics. Violence and corruption are endemic. And Iranian-backed Shiite militias, empowered by war on Islamic State, control many levers of government and seek a greater role for themselves — and for Tehran.

Fostering democracy in the Middle East, in addition to eliminating Iraq's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, was a central plank of President George W. Bush's campaign to oust Saddam Hussein in 2003. "The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution," Mr. Bush said in a speech that year. "That success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran, that freedom can be the future of every nation."

After the invasion, millions of Iraqis repeatedly turned out to vote, raising their ink-stained fingers in celebration as they chose a new government and, in a 2005 referendum, approved the country's constitution. The celebrations proved fleeting, however, as the Sunni Arab minority, whose representatives had governed Iraq for most of its history, rejected their diminished role in the new order.

Iraq's three Sunni-majority provinces were the only parts of the country to vote "no" in the referendum, and a Sunni insurgency, in its various forms—from former members of Saddam's Baath Party to al Qaeda to Islamic State—has continued to ebb and flow ever since. American mistakes, from disbanding the Iraqi army in the early days of the occupation to misguided reconstruction efforts, often exacerbated the violence. Meanwhile, the fallout from the invasion spurred jihadist movements across the Muslim world, creating a new generation of battle-hardened radicals who destabilized other countries, especially in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring.

The awful toll of the invasion, in the eyes of many in the West and the Middle East, quickly discredited the Bush administration's talk of promoting democracy. But one fact remains: Iraq's post-invasion institutions of government and its 2005 constitution have largely survived the turmoil, helping to hold the country together despite formidable odds and repeated predictions of collapse.

"Iraq's democratic and more importantly constitutional structures that were put in place as a result of 2003 and U.S. direct involvement have weathered 12 years, ISIS seizing one-third of the country, a simultaneous drop by 50% of its main economic driver oil, and conflict with Kurdistan," points out James Jeffrey, a scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a former U.S. ambassador to Iraq. He cautions, however, that none of that justifies the "huge cost" of ousting Saddam in 2003.

Vindicating the invasion is "an unfairly high bar to impose" when assessing Iraq's current state, adds Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and the author of the 2005 book "Squandered Victory," on the failures of America's democracy-building exercise in Iraq. "Once the Iraqi state was shattered, our goal became trying to help build a viable democratic order," he says. Today, "Iraq has at least more political pluralism and civic space than most of its Arab neighbours, and that is something to appreciate and try to further support and nurture."

Indeed, the country is bucking the slide toward autocratic rule that has become the norm across the region, from Egypt to Turkey to the monarchies of the Gulf, since the mayhem unleashed by the Arab Spring.

Despite violence and intimidation, Iraq has retained a genuine political life and a relatively free press, with dozens of TV news channels, some of them virulently hostile to Prime Minister Abadi. With national elections scheduled for May, nobody can predict who will emerge as the winner. Despite his government's triumph in the war on Islamic State, Mr. Abadi's reelection is not at all assured.

Among other Arab states, only the smaller nations of Lebanon and Tunisia pick their leaders in truly competitive elections. Even pro-Iranian Shiite militias, which constitute a powerful (and, to the U.S., profoundly malign) force in Iraq and also operate as political movements, acknowledge that Iraq is much freer than their patron state. While Iran holds elections, real power there resides with the Shiite religious establishment, which strictly vets candidates for public office and makes all strategic decisions.

"It's hard for us to confess that America did something good for us because of so many mistakes that it committed here," says Qasim al Darraji, a member of the political bureau of Asaeb Ahl al Haq, one of the main pro-Iranian Shiite militias that fought against American troops a decade ago. "But it toppled Saddam. And now Iraq is for sure freer than Iran and then the rest of the region."

Mr. Abadi has pledged to bring all the Shiite militias under central government control or disarm them—a promise that may prove easier to make than to fulfill. He also has recently sought to balance Iranian influence by cultivating better ties with Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other Sunni powers. Still, despite signs of a renewed Iraqi nationalism after this year's victory over Islamic State, the nation and its political class remain deeply split. Sunni Arabs and Kurds, in particular, complain that the Shiite majority is abusing democratic institutions to monopolize political power.

"This is not the Iraq that we wanted. Are we teasing ourselves when we say that Iraq is a democratic country? That law and order prevails in the country?" says Eyad Allawi, a longtime opponent of Saddam's rule and prime minister in 2004-2005, who now heads a nonsectarian parliament bloc that attracts many Sunni votes. "Our political process is riddled with severe problems: sectarianism, disenfranchisement. It's a mess. If the political process is not rectified to be an inclusive one, then my fear is that Iraq will disintegrate one way or another."

Iraq's sectarian affliction was at its worst under Mr. Abadi's predecessor as prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, who governed from 2006 to 2014. Discrimination at the hands of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad at the time pushed many Sunni Arabs outside the political process, and, in the summer of 2014, paved the way for Islamic State to seize much of Iraq's Sunni belt with little or no resistance.

Mr. Maliki was forced to resign after these losses, in part due to pressure from the U.S. and Iran, but he still retains considerable sway, particularly in the Iraqi parliament. Though the combative Mr. Maliki and Mr. Abadi, a soft-spoken British-

educated engineer, technically belong to the same Shiite Dawa party, the two are likely to field competing candidates lists in the May elections. (The prime minister is chosen by parliament, and the president, by convention a Kurd, holds only symbolic authority.)

Mr. Maliki is still widely seen as Mr. Abadi's most dangerous rival for power—even though his ability to challenge the prime minister has been blunted by Baghdad's recent achievements against Islamic State and Kurdistan. "People say now that Maliki had lost provinces and Abadi has reclaimed them," points out Moeen al-Kadhimi, a leader in one of the most powerful Shiite militias, Badr.

The recent crisis over Kurdistan's Sept. 25 independence referendum highlighted how democratic legitimacy can turn into a potent political tool. The ease with which Mr. Abadi's government managed to reclaim the oil-rich province of Kirkuk and other strategic areas in Kurdistan was due, in large part, to widespread dissatisfaction within Kurdistan over the 25-year rule of the region's president, Masoud Barzani.

Unlike the elected authorities in Baghdad, Mr. Barzani—who finally stepped down as president on Nov. 1—had overstayed his term by two years. Presidential elections were repeatedly postponed, and Mr. Barzani's party used military forces under its control to keep the Kurdistan parliament not only from electing a successor but even from convening.

As the economy shriveled amid complaints about corruption and Mr. Barzani's heavy-handed approach, many Kurdish politicians—dismayed with Kurdistan's retreat from democratic rule—chose to cooperate with Mr. Abadi's federal government rather than their ethnic kin. As a result, federal forces seized Kirkuk without significant resistance shortly after the referendum, in what Mr. Barzani branded a historic betrayal by his Kurdish rivals.

"Barzani's policies damaged democracy in the Kurdistan region, which led to lack of transparency and the absence of legitimate institutions," said the Kurdistan parliament speaker, Yousif Sadiq. The solution to the Kurdish crisis lies in finally holding long-delayed elections in the Kurdistan region, empowering a representative government there, Mr. Abadi says now.

"Iraq is one country. If you revert to dictatorship in one part, people might copy that in another part of the country. This is very dangerous for us," he says. "We have suffered a lot under dictatorship. We should never allow dictatorship to come back."

While Mr. Abadi's popularity is now at its peak, particularly after regaining Kirkuk, the Iraqi leader seemed on the ropes just last year.

The struggle against Islamic State appeared to be stuck. Mass demonstrations convened by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—who exploited widespread anger over corruption—overran Baghdad's Green Zone, stormed parliament and pushed the country to the brink of revolution. Though several ministers lost their jobs, Iraq's institutions survived the challenge. As political rivals mobilized to defend the system, Mr. Sadr balked at escalating his attacks, and his movement's threat to the constitutional order receded.

These political developments have highlighted the political fragmentation of Iraq's Shiite majority, prompting rival Shiite groups to seek allies among Sunnis and Kurds. Such outreach could soften the country's sectarian divide and strengthen its democracy, but it also could create new, potentially violent fault lines. "People are scared of a new civil war, which may be a Sunni war against Sunnis or a Shiite war against Shiites," warns Mr. Maliki, who, as prime minister, sent the Iraqi military to reclaim the southern city of Basra from a militia loyal to Mr. Sadr.

In the coming elections, Mr. Abadi and Mr. Maliki are seen as offering starkly different visions. Mr. Abadi is pushing for a consensual approach, balancing rival interests in parliament and ensuring that all the major groups, including the Kurds, have adequate representation. Mr.

Maliki, by contrast, is heading into the May elections with a call to create a powerful political bloc that would establish a cohesive majority.

"If the current system of quotas and power-sharing continues, this will be the biggest threat to democracy," says Mr. Maliki. "One of the mechanisms to face challenges ahead of us is to have a strong government."

On one major issue, however, Mr. Abadi and Mr. Maliki agree: The elections must be held on time in May, despite calls from some politicians, particularly those representing Sunni provinces ravaged by the war against Islamic State, to postpone the vote by a year or more and to extend the current parliament's term.

"Not holding elections will be even more dangerous to us than ISIS," Mr. Maliki says, "because in that case the democratic process will end."



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