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Iraqi Voices Entering 2010

Summary

- Successful attacks on key government buildings underscore worries about whether Iraqis can manage their own security. They mask, however, something new in Iraqi society: an emerging vox populi that found potent expression in provincial elections last January, despite the odds. As national elections approach in March, political leaders are realizing that they ignore this growing voice at their peril.
- Aware that American attention is shifting towards other problems at home and abroad, Iraqis are nervously contemplating how much U.S. support they can expect going forward in their fragile experiment in democratic governance. The U.S. role in helping Iraqis prepare for national elections has been crucial and largely welcome—it should continue through the transition to a new government. Successful complete withdrawal by 2012 depends on an Iraqi government that is responsive to its people’s basic needs and capable of evolving peacefully via fair elections.
- Longer term, there are several critical areas on which a distracted and resource stretched America should focus. These include intensifying efforts to help Arabs and Kurds resolve disputes and forestall the need for an extended U.S. military presence in northern Iraq. Helping Iraq protect its borders – a vulnerability highlighted by Iran’s recent incursion—and nudging the Gulf Arab states to more actively engage Iraq as an emerging partner in regional security and economic structures will also be key to stability inside and beyond Iraq’s borders.
- If water is the “new oil” in terms of its resource value and potential to create conflict, that future is now playing out in Iraq. Shortages and poor quality are already causing serious health and economic problems, displacement and raising tensions with Iraq’s neighbors. The U.S. can help here on both the diplomatic and technical sides of the issue.

An Iraqi acquaintance once characterized his country’s trajectory over the last six years since the U.S. invasion as “always halfway down a path to either democracy... or total collapse.” Recent high profile attacks and the Iraqi government’s incapacity to prevent them raise the specter of the latter scenario. Yet the horrific bombings on Iraqi institutions over the last several months mask something nascent but increasingly audible in Iraqi society: an emerging vox populi that found potent expression, as in provincial elections last January.

We heard these voices in Baghdad last month in our discussions with Iraqi civic leaders. The message is unmistakable: we are sick of sectarian driven politics and the havoc they have wrought on our nation and social fabric. We want access to clean water, competent schooling for our kids, access to healthcare and jobs.

Aware that American attention is shifting elsewhere—the Afghan war, economic woes at home, ongoing and emerging threats from countries like Iran and Yemen—Iraqis are nervously contemplating how much U.S. support they can expect going forward. On what essential issues should an overburdened America concentrate in order to leave behind a stable, secure Iraq that is at peace with its neighbors, and just and accountable to its own citizens?

Provincial Elections: A Bar Is Set

While not unblemished, the election last January was notable for three reasons: participation was broad, the execution and aftermath were peaceful, and—most important—voters sent a message that extended rule by the “powers that be” is no longer sacrosanct. Incumbents lost in provinces like Baghdad and Ninewa where glaring imbalances on provincial councils had caused large numbers of voters, mostly Sunni Arabs, to be underrepresented. Voters also punished parties that they perceived as failing to provide basic services or promoting sectarian agendas, including the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in their former strongholds such as Baghdad and Basra.

This is clearly a very fragile moment in Iraq’s history. Iraqi leaders, activists, and the average citizen are quick to point out the hurdles they face going into and beyond national elections. Women leaders of various political, ethnic and confessional stripes echoed a common view: “On the surface, things are much better—we can move around after 5pm, go to the theater, attend weddings, even visit a club without fear of immediate violence,” noted a prominent civil society leader. But, she concluded, Iraqis do not yet have what she characterized as “human security,” particularly the ability to speak one’s convictions freely and without fear of reprisal.

Expressions of worry and disgust over security lapses (which many Iraqis attribute to poor coordination within the security apparatus rather than to penetration by extremists) are accompanied by similar sentiments towards Iraq’s political leadership. Iraq’s politicians are perceived to be stubbornly out of touch with the aspirations of the population. Our Iraqi interlocutors regularly depicted their leaders as cleaving to ethno-sectarian based constituencies and being more preoccupied with trying to ensure their own political survival than with rebuilding the country.

Parliamentarians and government officials themselves acknowledge this. One legislator recounted sitting in on the recent election law deliberations and passing a note to a United Nations adviser with the rhetorical question, “so, how can we design this thing so I can stay in power?” He also handed us a list of twenty prominent, former Baath Party members he said were targeted for harassment in order to exclude them from competing in the upcoming elections. “We don’t have a government, just a collection of parties that rule over the ministries,” lamented Dr. Hanna Edwar, director of a women’s nongovernmental organization.

But even as they tick off the shortcomings of their leaders, these same Iraqis speak with surprising optimism of what independent politician Mufid Al-Jazairi describes as “the new hidden hand of power” in Iraq: a popular political consciousness. Even though turnout was only 51 percent, participation in elections last January stretched across Iraq’s socio-political bandwidth, including Sunnis who boycotted the January 2005 elections, and a new class of post-Awakening Sunni leaders. That is a much more legitimate—and therefore more resonant—indicator of popular will that elected officials can no longer afford to ignore, even if the conditioned response of many is to grope for ways to rig the system.

Perhaps most significantly, the January 2009 outcome established a clear bar for electoral politics in Iraq, in contrast to national elections happening in parallel across the border in Iran. “The very fact that we truly have no idea what the outcome of these [upcoming] elections will be is an

indication of some real progress towards democracy—it's the first time this has happened before in our history," says Lamia Talabani, director of the Voice of Independent Women organization.

What Do Iraqis Want from the U.S.?

Iraqis we spoke with uniformly cite the pullback of U.S. forces from cities last July as a positive indicator of America's intent to keep to the terms of the security agreement – itself a major win for Iraqi sovereignty – mandating withdrawal by the end of 2011. At the same time, they express anxiety at what they view as increasing American ambivalence towards Iraq.

Asked to describe what Iraqis want from America now that formal occupation has ended and the relationship is moving to more level ground, a source in the Maliki government turned the question around: "I think the issue now is, what does America want? Would the U.S., for example, be satisfied with a dictator who could ensure security and help guarantee key U.S. interests in the region?" We said no. Further, Kurdish regional autonomy, religious authority in Najaf and the general diffusion of power in today's Iraq are powerful counterweights that make that outcome highly unlikely.

The question, however, gets at a deeper issue: what priority does the U.S. government put on political development inside Iraq? Does something resembling real democracy in Iraq really matter, if only for its own sake? If so, what attention and resources is the administration willing to commit to nudge Iraqis in that direction?

Iraqis would like us to continue assisting with preparations for national elections scheduled for March 7. These elections have the capacity to consolidate—or undo—the gains that Iraq has made towards truly representative governance. They are crucial to stability and thus crucial to ensuring full U.S. withdrawal on schedule by 2012.

Though senior U.S. officials in Baghdad and Washington had to spend significant political capital to get Iraqis to pass enabling legislation—including lengthy phone calls from both President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden to Kurdistan Regional Government President Masud Barzani—this was effort well worth it. Most Iraqi leaders we spoke with recognize and accept the role of U.S. power to convene (and arm twist) in helping them achieve consensus on such vital matters.

Iraqis want the U.S. to continue shoring up and developing their security forces. Emerging from recent closed-door testimonies from the prime minister and his cabinet on the security situation, a senior parliamentarian described herself as being "more disturbed than when I went in." A lagging capacity to acquire and act on timely intelligence is magnified by the absence of a coordinated strategy among the various responsible agencies. As noted, the pullback of U.S. forces has been salutary for both the appearance and the reality of Iraqi autonomy—but it has also left a security gap that terrorists and other malcontents are trying hard to reoccupy. Sheikh Fariq al Ghereri, leader of a mixed Sunni-Shia tribe in South Baghdad, confirmed that al-Qaida is creeping back into his region, killing former Sons of Iraq members and trying to reassert its authority.

The period around elections—especially after—has the potential to be unstable, with one representative from Diyala expressing doubt that a new government could form before September. The system of concentric security rings by Iraqi police, army and U.S. forces (with the U.S. on the outer perimeter) around polling sites in vulnerable areas worked well for provincial elections—a similar version will be needed for March elections. Longer term—well beyond 2011—the train and equip mission of Iraqi forces by the U.S. military will be a key component to security and stability internally, and a deterrent to threats from outside.

Most Iraqis recognize the need for a continuing US role keeping Kurdish and Arab tensions from getting out of hand. Former U.S. commander in Northern Iraq, Major General Robert Caslen, sees

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report is based on a visit to Baghdad in December by William B. Taylor, Jr. and Rusty Barber during which they met with a broad crosscut of Iraqi political and civil society leaders and with U.S. and international officials. Since 2004, USIP has maintained an office in Baghdad staffed by Iraqis and Americans and dedicated to helping Iraq achieve peace and stability through reconciliation, expanded civil society and improved self-governance.



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Arab-Kurd conflict as the primary immediate and longer-term threat to peace. He recently cited eight incidents over the last year when friction between Kurdish peshmerga and Iraqi security forces nearly erupted into violence, and would have had not U.S. forces intervened. The military has since facilitated joint patrols and operations liaisons, steps that Kurdish, minority, and some Arab representatives in Baghdad view as helpful given the stakes involved and the lack of trust among the stakeholders in the disputed areas of Ninewa, Diyala and Kirkuk provinces. U.N. efforts to clarify the issues and facilitate a negotiated settlement have also been important, but intensive U.S. diplomatic muscle must be applied as well. As one senior Iraqi made clear, "blue helmets are not going to succeed in keeping the peace on the ground, only U.S. forces can do that." At the same time, an extended U.S. mission in Northern Iraq beyond the current security agreement, even if the Iraqi government were somehow open to it, would be highly problematic for both countries.

Iraqis expect the U.S. to help them secure their borders, a key stipulation of the security agreement. Iran's recent incursion into an oilfield in southern Iraq that is generally considered Iraqi territory (though under some dispute with respect to exact markers) is evidence that it is prepared to go beyond covert tactics to make mischief. Whether to send a cautionary message to international oil companies just emerging from a successful round of contract negotiations in Baghdad last month, intimidate Iraqi politicians against straying too far from the fold in the run-up to elections, or tempt Americans into a confrontation, Iran's intent appears to be to keep the pot boiling. Iraqi leaders were seriously alarmed by this event and critical of the government's hesitancy in showing a strong face to such provocations. While praising General Odierno's refusal to take the bait and send U.S. forces to confront the Iranians directly, senior Iraqis were surprised and disappointed at what they viewed as the mild reaction this incident elicited from the U.S. government.

Beyond Iran, Iraqis expect U.S. support as they reestablish themselves in the region. A senior Iraqi official noted that, while Turkey, Iran and Syria (sometimes in less than positive ways) engage with Iraq, the Gulf Arab neighbors are largely absent. This is a major impediment to acceptance and eventual inclusion into regional economic and security structures. Iraqis are especially keen for U.S. support in lifting sanctions under Chapter VII of the U.N. charter, resulting from Iraq's 1990 occupation of Kuwait, which includes reparations of a crippling five percent of Iraq's yearly oil revenue paid to Kuwait (with roughly \$24 billion still owed). A senior U.S. official in Baghdad suggested that the U.S. visit Riyadh, Kuwait, Doha and the other Arab capitals to encourage Arab states to treat Iraq as a maturing neighbor and future regional partner.

Iraqis also look to the U.S. for support on technical and diplomatic efforts to resolve Iraq's water problem: If, globally speaking, water is the conflict driver for the coming decades, such is already the case in downstream Iraq where it is far more precious than oil to the average citizen. The low quantity of water coming from Turkey, Syria and Iran is already causing massive hardship, including health problems, poor crop yields and population displacement. While U.S. efforts to promote political agreements over water use are underway, technical support is still needed, according Iraqi Minister of Environment Narmin Othman. The U.S. can and should increase its support here.

Conclusion

Iraq could become a responsible nation in the Middle East. Its security forces are taking over for U.S. troops across the country. Its people are demanding good governance, better services, less corruption. A prominent parliamentarian chided us, "You brought democracy to us...you should not now abandon us."

She is right.