

PRELIMINARY DRAFT

IRAQI PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY

Findings from National Focus Groups on Democracy,
June 29 – July 9, 2003

by

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I. Introduction

A set of 15 focus groups conducted across Iraq from June 29 to July 9 provides some fresh insights into how ordinary Iraqi citizens – men and women, Kurds and Arabs, Sunni, Shi'a and Christians – perceive the new political dynamics in Iraq.

The sessions, commissioned by the National Democratic Institute, give voice to Iraqis' concerns about the current situation and provide a sample of opinions about the political situation from Iraqis who are not deeply or directly involved in politics. Organized in seven different locations across the country – Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, Diwaniya, Kirkuk, Mosul, and the small village of Sehil El-Hamad, the research also offers some insight into popular expectations – as well as the limits of Iraqis' commitment to political democracy as it is understood in the West.

II. Executive summary

Three months after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, a set of 15 focus groups reveals important insights about Iraqi public attitudes in this crucial early period. The main findings of the research include:

1. Iraqis are finished with Saddam Hussein and do not want a return to the past. Iraqis are grateful for the ouster of Saddam Hussein, who is universally reviled as a criminal whose principal legacy is "mass graves."

2. Iraqis have a strong desire for order and governance. While some lingering anxiety over the fate of Saddam Hussein and his henchmen remains, most Iraqis have already moved on with their lives and are focused on the major problems they confront – namely establishing law, order, and new forms of governance, revitalizing the economy, and creating jobs.

- The American-led forces and governing authority have naturally become a lightning rod for criticism in this context, with no one else available to respond to complaints and take responsibility for current problems.
- At the same time, the recurring attacks against Coalition forces finds virtually no support, though signs that some Iraqis' patience is wearing thin have appeared, and a few participants say that Coalition forces only understand the language of force.

3. Iraqis feel a mix of excitement and fear about the prospect of freedom and democracy. Iraqis are excited about the prospect of their newfound freedoms and anxious that too much freedom may lead to chaos. Many Iraqis want to be sure that there are "rules" in the new democracy that is created in Iraq, and there is a strong degree of support for writing a new constitution.

4. Iraqis have mixed views on Islamic rule. Some, but by no means all, Iraqis support the notion of Islamic rule. There is a broad sense that Islamic values should infuse the new political order. At the same time, hesitation about whether religious leaders should have a predominant say in political matters is present in almost every community interviewed, especially among women, and even in south central Shi'a regions of Iraq.

5. Iraqis remain strongly nationalistic. Iraqis evince a strong commitment to the integrity of Iraq – including a substantial portion of those Kurds who lived under Saddam's rule over the past decade. While some non-Kurds indicate qualified support for federalism as a measure to accommodate diversity, Iraqi Arabs are generally nervous that autonomous regions may lead to the break-up of the country, which they strongly oppose. Tensions between Kurds and Arabs lurk beneath the surface in northern Iraq, where land disputes have the potential to spark conflict.

6. Iraqis are skeptical about political parties. Although Iraq has seen an explosion in the creation of new political parties, most participants say that parties are only working for their own benefit, and no one sees them as essential to building a new democracy and government. In fact, several participants think that it would be better if parties were not involved in the next government. Iraqis have not seen anything yet from these newly emerging parties.

7. Iraqi women face particular challenges in ensuring their full political participation in a new Iraq. There is strong support for a woman's right to vote, but Iraqis are divided on the question of whether women are qualified to hold senior leadership positions in politics and government.

8. Iraqis are living in a fog of disinformation. Even as they rejoice in the demise of Saddam Hussein, the people of Iraq are still encumbered by much of the vitriolic propaganda he drummed into them over the past decades. Despite Iraqis' hatred for Saddam, they still believe a lot of what he told them.

- For instance, a strong antipathy for the United States and Britain is not overcome by the fact that these two countries are responsible for the country's liberation from the tyrant they despise.
- Fantastic stories about Osama bin Laden (and even Saddam) as agents of American imperialism are widely believed, as are tales of Zionist machinations.
- People distrust most forms of news media – and many people say with pride that they rely principally on word of mouth to gather their news –

but they do not appear to have much of a factual base on which to develop informed opinions about the world.

Iraq faces a unique opportunity to transform its politics and create a new democratic government. Though the country bears the visible scars of a quarter century of tyrannical rule by Saddam Hussein and is plagued with sporadic fighting and the disruption of basic public services, the political situation in Iraq is evolving rapidly. Political parties and civil society organizations are forming each day, and Iraqis have opportunities to express themselves more openly than they have in decades. Dozens of new media outlets have emerged in a matter of weeks.

Around the country, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) has appointed new local councils to govern local affairs. The formation of a new Iraqi governing council on July 13 (as this report was being finalized) marks a new stage in the attempt to foster democracy in Iraq. If men and women across the country come to believe their voices will be heard and their basic needs met in a newly democratic Iraq then the overall project may well succeed.

III. Strong Support for Demise of Saddam Hussein's Regime

There is absolutely no desire among the Iraqi public for Saddam Hussein to return. Most participants say that the best thing about the current situation is that Saddam is gone. His removal from power is the best thing that the Coalition forces have accomplished, say the participants. Saddam and his Ba'ath party are almost unanimously hated, and the focus groups serve as an opportunity for Iraqis to vent about the injustices they suffered. We had to stop the session in Karbala briefly when one woman wept at the mention of Saddam Hussein's name – she said that he had her son killed right before her eyes. The list of the regime's crimes seems endless.

If Iraqis yearn for the days of Saddam, it is only when they talk about the lack of security. The only good thing that participants have to say about Saddam Hussein is that there was at least some order and security during his time. A few participants were pleased that Saddam distributed food – more than what the Coalition authorities are distributing, some claim. But most say that Saddam Hussein did nothing but steal from the country. A few participants claim that he helped the Palestinians more than he helped his own people.

Out with the old and in with the new, Iraqis are saying, and they have high hopes about what the new government will provide. Yet without some visible success in the areas of security and basic services, the effort to restructure Iraq's government will be more difficult.

IV. Desire for Order and Governance

The Iraqi public has a strongly negative outlook on the current situation – most participants in these baseline focus groups say that the country is headed in the wrong direction. Baghdad residents have the most negative outlook, and participants in the northern areas of Mosul and Kirkuk are somewhat more positive about the situation.

The public's concerns are centered on three main issues – security, basic services, and rebuilding the economy. Security tops the list of concerns among Iraqis in these focus groups, and trepidation about the absence of law and order threatens the entire prospect of building a new democratic Iraq.

At the core of the public's concerns is the lack of clear governance structures to respond to the public's demands. Iraqis want to know who is in charge, and they are looking for the right place to file their complaints, register a marriage certificate, or settle a land dispute.

If there is one point that shines though in these sessions, it is that Iraqis want governance. When asked what should be the first priority of the CPA, the leading responses are security and basic services, which Iraqis connect to the need for better governance:

There is no place to go, no one responsible – there is no police, no one to take your problems to. (Shi'a Women, Sadr City, Baghdad)

We need the government right away. We need facilities where we can go and talk to someone about the negative things in our lives and tell them our problems. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

This is the main problem. There is no one who is responsible for all of these things. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

We want a responsible person to lead us; now there is nothing at all leading us. (Shi'a Women, Sadr City, Baghdad)

If someone stole something from you, where do you go to complain about that? Who will listen to you and give you your rights? (Shi'a Women, Najaf)

Over the last two months, the CPA set up local councils that are representative of various communities around Iraq. Most of these leaders have been appointed by the CPA, although in some cases a form of elections among elites and opinion formers was a part of the process.

The research uncovers two primary concerns about these experiments in local government. First, in several of the areas, there is a perception among some participants that the Coalition authorities are not sorting out the right individuals to serve in the regional and local governments. In Najaf, there was some discussion about Abdul Munim Abud, the American appointed mayor who was arrested a few days before the session on charges of corruption and kidnapping. One Shi'a man in Najaf says, "When the Americans appointed the mayor in Najaf, people demonstrated for his removal, but the American forces insisted on keeping him. He was one of Saddam Hussein's right hand men, but the Americans insisted on keeping him, because they wanted to make the Iraqis angry and drive them to the edge and create a reason for Iraqis to attack them."

Shi'a men in Sadr City also voice similar complaints about three people from the previous regime picked to work on their local council. Sunni men in Mosul complained about the composition of the regional council, and one woman said, "When they chose the city council here in Mosul, they only picked old men, and no women at all."

Comments such as these are not to be unexpected, given the competing political, ethnic, and tribal rivalries that existed beneath the surface even during the repressive Ba'athist rule. It is only natural for some people to complain about the composition of their government, however it is formed. But allegations that some current appointees have ties with the previous regime are potentially serious, with the CPA's intention to prohibit these figures from holding power.

The second concern that Iraqis have about these local councils is connected to their desire for more governance – some participants complain that the local governing councils have been given no authority to respond to the public's concerns:

There is no real governor here. When you go to the governor to tell him your complaints, he has to take the Americans' advice before doing something. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

In Karbala, they started a local council to deal with this situation, but it hasn't done anything. The main problem here is that we have no order here. We have to have some plans and rules so you can walk outside. I am one of the people who do know what will come in the next few days. Who knows? We might have electricity and water tomorrow, or not. It is total chaos. Just like any ship, if it didn't have a strong captain, it will sink.
(Shi'a Men, Karbala)

In the coming months, it will be important to effectively devolve power to these local governments and help them succeed in responding to the public, so that Iraqi local government officials win the credit and credibility for achievements made at the local level.

Tackling the law and order problem. The CPA has begun to take its first steps in creating an Iraqi force to respond to the law and order challenges that Iraq faces. The participants generally have a positive impression about the new Iraqi police, but they are concerned that it is not enough. Their complaints parallel concerns about the lack of governance – things are not happening quickly enough, and the police do not have enough power:

Where are they? We want them so we can be secure and feel safe in walking the streets. Of course, even if they were in the streets, the people would not be afraid of them, because they have no authority. (Shi'a Women, Najaf)

If there is an officer standing there, no Iraqi would be afraid of him. But if an American soldier were there, they would be afraid of him. (Shi'a Women, Diwaniya)

Rebuilding the economy. The CPA, the new interim Iraqi government, and the local councils face daunting challenges in restructuring Iraq's economy and putting people back to work. Along with security and reestablishing basic services such as electricity, the economy is a leading concern:

Fifty percent of Iraqis are out of jobs – especially the former armed forces personnel. Bremer put them out of work, but the Iraqi army did not commit crimes. They were trying to defend Iraq and not Saddam. (Kurdish Men, Sehil Al-Hamad)

We can take the shortage of water and electricity, but we can't take the lack of money in our pockets. We can't buy food for our family. My husband is an employee, and he used to take 75,000 Dinars a month and we have a big family. Now he is waiting for work.
(Shi'a Women, Karbala)

I am afraid because maybe the situation is not completely stable. This makes me afraid. I want the situation to calm down, and I want there to be no more fighting. If the fighting stops, then everyone will get a chance to work. (Kurdish Men, Kirkuk)

For many Iraqis, the economic concerns are even more basic, and several participants worry about the food that they are receiving. Most seem to make do with what is available, from the United Nations and charitable organizations or in the market. One Shi'a man in Karbala does not understand why certain goods are flooding the market while

many Iraqis lack the means of basic survival: "The main problem of the Iraqi people is the lack of food. We don't want dishes, clothes, or even freedom, we want food. In most Iraqi markets, there are air conditions, televisions, satellites. What are these? People are tired, and they are looking for food and rice."

Redemption of the 10,000 dinar bill is also at the forefront of many of the participants' concerns, and the move to establish a new currency will help address this problem, though a discussion of the issue points to another problem, on which we will expand later. In Mosul, three days after Ambassador Bremer announced in a press conference that the 10,000 dinar bill would be honored at full face value, none of the focus group participants had heard this news and many complained that it was a major problem for them, because money exchangers were only honoring it as 6,000 dinars. The fact that no one in the focus groups seemed to know about the announcement demonstrates the challenge the CPA faces in communicating with the public, and underscores that the public will judge by what they see in their lives, rather than announcements they may not or may hear in the media.

Rising frustrations, but no support for current attacks. The American-led military and civilian authorities have naturally become a lightning rod for criticism in this context. Although tensions with the current situation are on the rise, hardly any focus group participant supports attacks against Coalition forces, with most saying that it is further destabilizing the country. The few who support the attacks say that the attacks are the only way for the CPA to get their message that Iraqis do not want to be ruled by foreigners, through the language of force. But by and large, participants do not support the attacks, and instead talk about their rising frustration and what may come to pass if things do not change:

There will be a revolution in Iraq. It is like a volcano, and it may blow like an atomic bomb, boiling and then an explosion. There may be an explosion inside of us. This is a bad thing. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

We want to warn them, we are the owners of this country. We are Shi'a, and don't think that we are going to be quiet for a while. We have our limits, and we are going to explode after a while. The religious men are advising us to be patient and wait – they say maybe the Americans will accomplish something." (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

If they keep treating Iraqis this way, it means they are lighting a fire that can't be extinguished, because the Iraqi people cannot be patient. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

Though several Iraqis are angry with the CPA for what it perceives as a slow response to the country's growing problems, most Iraqis expect that the Authority will remain in Iraq to fix things and maintain some semblance of peace and order:

Just like they have led us to this problem, they have to get us out of it. They have to fix it and then leave. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

Where are the principles of the Americans if they leave here after creating chaos? As long as they are here they have to finish the job. (Kurdish Men, Sehil El-Hamad)

We need the Coalition forces because there are too many problems – salaries for the retired need to be paid, and there are no chances for work. They need to reconstruct buildings, and deal with health and education. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

Indeed, a tension exists between Iraqis' desire for national independence and self-determination and Iraqis' fears about what might happen if the Coalition forces leave too soon. As one Shi'a woman in Baghdad says, "If the Americans are not here, everyone will kill one another, so they are good for the security."

V. Excitement and Fear about Democracy and Freedom

Iraqis have mixed feelings about democracy and all of the things they associate with it – there is a mixture of excitement, fear, and concern for defending their culture. Overall, the participants have positive associations with the word democracy, and many think that it is desirable and feasible for Iraq to develop a democratic system.

Some of the associations with democracy are strongly positive, and a full fledged electoral democracy is what a few of the participants call for:

We have to have a democratic government – this is the first thing. A government elected by the people themselves. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

It was something that we have heard about, and we want to try this thing, and see what it is about. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

If we want to choose a party that represents us, there has to be voting, elections, and some democracy, so we can choose who will represent us. I think that the people are the only ones who can decide who will represent them. We think that we should choose someone from our own, who lived with us, and suffered with us. That doesn't mean that we just get some guy without education and put him in power. We need an engineer, doctor, lawyer, or teacher. If he is good enough, we will judge him by his opinions, promises, and what he plans to do. Let them bring us some nominees and we will choose one of them if he is good enough. Then we will choose if we want an Islamic government or to be ruled by a king or a republic. (Shi'a Women, Diwaniya)

We wish that democracy could be achieved here in Iraq. We don't want a total opening for democracy. At the same time, we don't want a limited democracy. Right now, we don't have the ability to choose. We wish that we would get this in the future. (Shi'a Women, Diwaniya)

Several participants have a more circumscribed view of what democracy means to them, usually not involving a system with all of the trappings of democracy. These include "freedom of thought and speech," "respect for the rights of others," and "respect for others to practice their own religion."

Others say that Iraqis do not know enough about democracy, and that they need help understanding how to put it into practice:

Democracy in Iraq – everyone talks about it, but no one knows what it means. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

Democratic principles must be known to everyone. People need someone to educate them and push them and help them become more self-confident. Before we used to say we had democracy, but we didn't see this, the only democracy we had was Saddam. We need someone to teach us what democracy means. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

Finally, there are a handful of participants who have a mostly negative association with the term democracy – this sentiment is largely concentrated in the more traditional Shi'a cities of south central Iraq, but even within this community there are important cleavages. For some of these participants with negative associations, it is in part linked to Saddam Hussein's cynical use of democratic lingo in an attempt to build credibility and legitimacy. It was "used as a curtain to cover the dictatorship," says one Shi'a women from Diwaniya. Iraqis have been living for over three decades with Ba'athist democratic rhetoric, and the gaps between theory and practices have been very wide. Others fear the limitless freedom that democracy offers in many other countries, particularly in the West.

Some Iraqis worry that a Pandora's Box of democracy is about to be opened in Iraq, an opening that will destroy the country's culture and moral values. Some of the participants equate democracy to total freedom, and they link total freedom to the chaos that surrounds many Iraqis' lives these days:

It (Democracy) is a door that will be opened that you can't close again, so we are afraid of it. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

(Democracy is) anyone can do anything they want. You don't be afraid from God or anyone. It's not good. (Shi'a Women, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*The Iraqi people have lived for thirty-five years under a dictatorship, and it is not good to give them freedom too fast. It should be called chaos, not freedom. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)
We want freedom of opinion, but that doesn't mean that anyone can act the way they want to act. (Shi'a Men, Karbala)*

Of course now it is 100 percent freedom, and in the previous regime we did not have this, and we want something in the middle – not totally free, and not totally controlled. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

Democracy does not mean that a person can walk naked in the streets. Of course there are going to be limits and rules. Even in England, almost everything is allowed there, but there some rules and limits. In England, you can kiss a lady while in the park, while you are parking the car. You can buy beer wherever you want, but it is forbidden to drink on the street, or in the car. There are signs on the iron fences, whoever drinks in the street, they will fine them 50 pounds. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

A point of consensus for Iraqis is the need for a democracy with defined rules of the game, a constitution that not only ensures rights of citizens but also protects Iraq's religious values and culture.

The CPA and Iraq's interim governing council are constructing an airplane just as it is barreling down the runway about to take off – it will be working to set up the governing structures of Iraq just as it is responding to immediate crises in security and basic services. This presents a daunting challenge on many fronts and raises several sensitive questions.

Strong desire for a constitution and a rule-based society and government.

Iraqis express a strong desire for a new constitution, and a new basic law that will set the rules of the game in Iraq. After living for decades under a regime where the rule of law was absent, Iraqis express strong support for building a new constitution to bring order to Iraq. As one Sunni man in Baghdad says, the first priority of the new Iraqi government should be to “put a constitution into place.”

Though most of the focus group participants would rather have elections as soon as possible rather than waiting for a period while things get organized, most participants also recognize the “chicken and egg” conundrum that exists – the tension between the impulse for immediate democracy with elections now versus the desire to first establish a constitutional and electoral framework that sets fair rules for everyone in Iraq. The desire for a constitution that is respected by the government is strong:

We want a constitution that represents the people's interests – the economy, trading, agriculture, everything about our country. (Shi'a Women, Diwaniya)

The Iraqi people are sick, and they cannot choose right now. We can choose the government according to the plans they are going to have. We have to do it on a constitutional basis. But that does not mean that we can have freedom to do whatever we want. (Shi'a Men, Karbala)

They should put the primary objectives of the constitution so it can be voted on by the people. We have to establish a congress to write a constitution and show it to the people so that they can vote for it. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

I want the right law. If it is Islamic or Jewish, or whatever it is, we just want a good law. (Kurdish Men, Sehil El-Hamad)

We want an American constitution, put by Americans. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

We have to elect some Iraqis and then choose the people who are going to write the constitution. If the Americans pick the people who write the constitution, then another Saddam Hussein will come to power. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

The unchecked and unaccountable rule of Saddam Hussein evokes a desire among Iraqis to set clear term limits to keep them in check:

We want a small point in the next constitution, which would determine the period of the ruling president, like in the United States. There are elections every four years, and they have a democratic way of choosing their leaders. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

I think the elections should be every six months so the leaders would be afraid that they might lose the positions that they have. (Christian Women, Baghdad)

The focus groups demonstrate that although Iraqis want immediate answers to some of their most pressing problems right now, there are voices that understand that the overall project to rebuild Iraq with a new face will take some time:

Democracy is like raising a little child. When he grows up and becomes an adult, he needs some time, so he can get more strength and confidence in himself. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

The Iraqi government organization is going to take a long time because there are a lot of divisions between different Iraqis – Shi'a, Sunni, and others. I think that the Iraqis can't choose for themselves. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

The political situation in Iraq is not clear. Political loyalties are not clear, and we do not know who is good and who is corrupt. (Sunni Men, Mosul)

We have waited for thirty years, and we can wait another five years. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

We need a two-year period so we can know what parties are thinking about, what their principles are, and what are their goals. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

We would like the temporary government for two years, so we can have more time to organize our thoughts and choose wisely. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

VI. Mixed Feelings about Islamic Rule

Some, but by no means all, Iraqis support the notion of Islamic rule. There is a broad sense that Islamic values should infuse the new political order. At the same time, hesitation about whether religious leaders should have a predominant say in political matters is present in almost every community interviewed, especially among women and even in south central Shi'a regions of Iraq.

Just as Iraq is geographically located between Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, its national mindset on the proper mix of religious life and government probably lies in a similar middle ground – not as secular as Turkey, and not as strict as the Shi'a rulers found in Iran or the Sunni rulers in Saudi Arabia.

This research indicates that Iraqi Sunnis and Christians more strongly support a secular form of government, though there are problems with the use and translation of the

word "secular." Several focus group participants seem to interpret the word "secular" as similar to "atheistic" or the complete absence of religious values – the separation of religious belief from self, rather than from government.

Scholars may debate whether or not Islam and democracy can mix, but it is a political reality in Iraq that many future voters believe that Islam serves as a basis for democracy. This has practical implications for international organizations working to foster and strengthen democracy in Iraq. In the focus groups, several participants, particularly Shi'a participants, call for an Islamic form of government:

Because the Islamic religion covers these things and is established here, the constitution must be written by the Iraqis. The Americans have their own religion, we are here in Iraq, we are Sunni and Shi'a, and our constitution is the Koran. We should create an Islamic government, one that ensures the rights of all of the Iraqi people. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

Religious people will put rules that will serve everyone in an organized way. There is a perfect constitution, and this is of course the constitution of God. (Shi'a Men, Karbala)

The constitution should be established after taking into account the people's opinion, and of course that means as an Islamic country, we will take Islamic rule as a principle. The religious men's opinions will be above all. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

America and Britain want us to have a secular constitution, like Turkey, which is a secular country that is drifting away from Islam. If there is an Islamic constitution, the first thing we will face is another war with America, because they will not allow it. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

We want to have Islamic law, but we do not want an extremist version. We want something in the middle. (Kurdish Men, Sehil El-Hamad)

Islamic democracy is a "brand" that has penetrated the mindset of Iraq's Shi'a community, to varying degrees. Some put a blind faith in religion and their clerical leaders and see it as the answer, while others in the Shi'a community hold more nuanced views about the relationship between religion and democracy.

Democracy is here. It is in our values. We want the old democratic basis, not the new democratic basis, the one based on Islam. (Shi'a Women, Najaf)

Democracy is an Islamic idea, because Muhammad used to consult his people, even though he was the Messenger of God. (Shi'a Men, Diwaniya)

(We want a) democracy based on the true Islamic foundations. I think that such democracy should be created. But other democracies are not consistent with Islam. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

The best democracy is the religion of Islam. (Shi'a Men, Karbala)

We don't want the foreigners' democratic system. We want the Islamic democracy, which is of course the respect of the social rights and another's opinion. (Shi'a Women, Diwaniya)

Democracy is good, but it may bring corruption and immoral behaviors. Religious democracy brings safety. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

When asked about what the first priority of a new Iraqi government should be, one Shi'a woman in Najaf said, "Establishing a government based on Islamic principles, so they could be afraid of God and they could put God up front as they take decisions." But the participants offer few ideas on how this would work in practice, even after the moderator probed for more specific details on how this would be implemented and who should lead it. The only clear idea that we have received so far is from a Shi'a man in Diwaniya, who suggests that a consultative council with several committees – a committee for ordinary people, a second committee for the educated people, a third committee for the Shi'a, a fourth for the Sunni, a fifth for the Kurds. "Of course this has to be an Islamic council," he says.

These focus groups offer signs that Sunnis and Christians are concerned about a religious takeover – even a handful of Shi'a expresses this sentiment. The Sunni Muslim and Christian focus group participants expressed similar sentiments about the need to build a society that keeps religion separate from state politics:

We should rule as a secular society. Of course you are going to pray, but this is something between you and God. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

Religion has to be separate from politics, so everyone can practice their own religion freely. (Sunni Women, Mosul)

The Shi'a Muslims shouldn't be given power because if they get it, there would be problems with the Christians and the Sunni. Religion is supposed to be separate from the government. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

The government should be secular. Religion should be put on the side. The separation between the religions was created in the last few years. Before Iraqis used to love Iraqis, but feelings of enmity are growing between us. Religion should not be related to the government. (Christian Women, Baghdad)

If it is Islamic, we fear that it will be extremist. (Sunni Women, Mosul)

Ruling by the religion of Islam is the worst rule that you can get. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

If it is an Islamic government, there will be divisions between religions. The religion doesn't create this division, but the people in power use it to create divisions. (Kurdish Women, Mosul)

One Christian woman speaks about the problems her daughter has had because she refused to wear the Islamic head cover. Another Christian woman talks about the pressures she feels from Muslims to stop selling alcohol out of her house, something she says she does to feed her children.

Support for Religious Freedom. One common point in the discussions on this complex question is the need for religious freedom, and most participants say that every Iraqi should have the freedom to practice his or her religion. Belief in the freedom of religion and a moderate form of government cuts across all communities in Iraq:

Let anyone be in power, but I don't want them to interfere with my religious values.
(Christian Women, Baghdad)

We have witnessed how Saddam has destroyed us. But that doesn't mean that ruling under secular basis is bad. We think it is good. It is better than Islamic rule. (Shi'a Women, Diwaniya)

Since the Americans entered here, they have not gotten involved in religious affairs here. I mention this as an example. They have left the Sunni and Shi'a free, and the point I am leading to is that freedom of religion has to be given to people. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

Islam is the main religion for this country. But of course we have to take care of the other religions. Not secular or an Islamic government – just not totally Islamic but not totally secular. (Kurdish Men, Sehil El-Hamad)

We have to take selected persons from each of the different religions. Even if there are Iraqi Jews – they should be a part of the new government. There are Arab Jews in the Knesset in Israel. Because there is justice in Islam, we do not reject Christians and Jews in our religion. We have to make sure that their opinions are included. (Kurdish Men, Sehil El-Hamad)

VII. The Enduring Strength of Iraqi Nationalism

One lingering impact of Saddam Hussein's rule is the strong sense of Iraqi nationalism that exists among all groups in this research – Shi'a, Sunni, Kurdish, and Christian.

The symbols of Iraqi nationalism matter and remain relevant. A Shi'a man in Diwaniya expresses his disappointment that the Iraqi national football team played in uniforms that did not have the Iraqi national flag. Despite the horrors and agonies of Saddam Hussein's rule, Iraqis remain proud of their national identity as Iraqis, and it is a common ground where Iraqis of different backgrounds meet.

A fear of a divided Iraq exists – suggestions that the Kurds or any other group might have a strong degree of autonomy in a decentralized federal system raised concerns that Iraq would become divided “like Palestine” or that Iraq would not attain democracy. Iraqis fear the Humpty Dumpty scenario – separating the country would make it hard to put it back

together again. As one Shi'a man from Najaf says, "Of course if they come here and separate Iraq into different parts, and it would be hard to put Iraq back together again."

The Shi'a participants in particular express a strong connection with Kurds and describe them and their leaders (Talabani and Barzani) as "fighters." In fact, the Shi'a focus group participants seem to have a more positive view of these two Kurdish leaders overall than do the Kurds, who are divided in their allegiances. Any discussion of the Kurds breaking away from Iraq causes an uproar. As one Shi'a man in Baghdad says, "Iraq is a body, and you can't cut one of the limbs of the body." Many participants see any divisions that might exist between Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds as something fabricated in part by Saddam Hussein, a strategy of divide and conquer.

All of this does not mean that ethnic and religious divisions are absent in Iraq. Rather, there is a danger that these divisions could bubble up in a period of crisis.

Tensions in the North. The most acute source of tension seems to exist between Arabs and Kurds in the north. A Sunni man in Mosul calls Massoud Barzani a racist, and another one calls him a "Kurdish dictator." Another Sunni man in Mosul says, "All of the Kurdish parties are racist." As a Sunni woman in Mosul says, "He destroyed the Iraqi people in the north, and put them in great pain. In Kirkuk he created racial problems between Kurds and Arabs."

Property disputes seem to be at the core of the problems in these northern territories. Several Kurdish participants say that in order to feel welcome in Iraq, the land taken from Kurds needs to be given back. One Sunni man says, "Let's go back to the registration of the lands and see what the records say about who owns the disputed land." Balancing the competing interests of Iraq's diverse population could be a major challenge as work moves ahead on writing the constitution and setting up the government.

VIII. Political Parties' Fight for Credibility

The Ba'ath party has destroyed the credibility of political parties – both old and new. The focus group participants uniformly reject the political parties that have sprung up in Iraq. Most participants say that parties are only working "for their own benefit," and no one sees them as essential to building a new democracy and government. In fact, several participants think that it would be better if parties were NOT involved in the next government. Iraqis have not seen anything yet from these parties:

What is their role? What is their purpose? What do they want to do for us? (Shi'a Men, Karbala)

It is not fair that there are too many political parties. These should be set up according to the constitution – there should be rules to establish new political parties. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

They are just talking nonsense, and they have done nothing. Shouting and screaming, but doing nothing. (Shi'a Women, Najaf)

Any person who holds a high position in the next government should not be a member of a political party. (Christian Women, Baghdad)

It is just as if they were not here. They are not doing anything. They are just symbols and names on the walls. Where were they when we were suffering? (Christian Women, Baghdad)

What are their plans for the future? What are their activities? We don't know. They were hiding in Saddam's era. We think they are going to cause problems in the future. (Shi'a Women, Diwaniya)

Even the more organized parties that have existed for some time in Iraq are panned by the participants. One man in Karbala says about the Islamist Dawa' party, "We don't know their goals, their purposes, and results. What are they going to develop? Even the basics, we don't know."

The parties have a lot of work to do to win the voters over. As one Christian woman in Baghdad says, "These parties have to walk on the streets and meet with the people and the leaders in each of the communities to explain their goals and principles and values so we can know who they are and choose. We should kick them out of the places they took over because we don't know what they are doing."

The main point here is that political power has not coalesced just yet in Iraq. As one Shi'a man in Karbala says, "I haven't heard about anyone yet who can represent me in the next government. There isn't anyone I would vote for in elections." There are many new options popping up, but these parties' roots are not very deep in society. These roots will deepen as time passes, work is conducted, and the interim government moves forward in its work on rebuilding Iraq.

IX. Challenges Facing Women in a New Iraq

Iraqi women, like many women around the world, face special challenges in their quest to fully participate in their country's politics. The challenges became evident in the conduct of this research project – getting a full turnout for the women's groups was a greater challenge than it was with the men's sessions. Furthermore, several women seemed more reluctant than their male counterparts to talk about issues related to politics and the future Iraqi government. Some of the women, particularly those with less education, professed ignorance on many of the topics – something one rarely sees in sessions with men.

A great deal of the problem seemed to be related to self-confidence. One Christian woman in Baghdad said in response to a question, "I don't understand the basic principle of democracy. My husband is a college graduate, and he could explain it better." A Shi'a woman from the Sadr City district of Baghdad tried to turn questions on politics back to the

female discussion moderator and get the moderator to answer her own questions. Another woman from Sadr City said, "We are simple people – we take care of the house and we are setting cake and tea for others." So, for many average Iraqi women, the first barrier to full participation may be centered on basic issues of access to information and self-confidence.

Despite these challenges, Iraq is not Kuwait – no one in the focus groups thinks that women should be barred from voting in the election. This is not even a question for the most conservative male focus group participant.

The question of women serving as political and government leaders is more complicated. Most male participants – and a few women, too – did not think that a woman could lead the country or hold senior positions in the government, mostly on the basis that women are too emotional and not capable of handling leadership positions:

Women work from their heart, not from their brains. Men are efficient and can manage.
(Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

In Najaf, I don't think that (having a female political leaders) could be accomplished here. Maybe in other places, but here in Najaf, families are very religious, and the father can't allow their daughters to go out. It is not socially accepted. (Shi'a Women, Najaf)

As an Islamic country, it would be hard for a woman to rule in Iraq. Men are better than women in holding such strong positions, because women are emotional. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

On the other hand, there is support among both men and women for having women in leadership positions in the new government. In fact, one Shi'a woman in Diwaniya believes that women would be better leaders than men, saying, "We think that in the current circumstances, women are more reasonable than men. Men are reckless, angry, upset always, and taking reckless actions... Women are reasonable. Men here in Iraq are more revolutionary than reasonable."

Working with women to overcome the obstacles to their equality and full political participation will be a key challenge in building a new democratic Iraq.

X. Iraqis Living in a Fog of Disinformation

Despite Iraqi's hatred for Saddam, many still believe a lot of what he told them. The lack of reliable media sources has made it difficult for the CPA's messages to penetrate. According to the participants, the best sources of information include Al-Arabiya Satellite, the radio, and the word on the street. A Shi'a man in Najaf says that he sits in the mosque and hears a lot of news from the Hawza, the leading Shi'a religious school.

Hardly anyone mentions Iraqi media sources, including the twenty or more newspapers now published in Iraq. The exceptions to this are found in the northern city of Mosul, where a few participants cite Radio Sawa as one of their favored sources for

information. Also, a Shi'a man in Najaf mentions the local television channel as a good source.

Conspiracy theories. In the current context, the rumor mill is strong, and Iraqis' frame of reference for interpreting current events remains grounded in the past. Though Saddam may be gone, his propaganda lives on in the minds of Iraqis. The anti-American and anti-Jewish vitriol remains embedded, helping to inform their worldview and shaping how Iraqis' interpret current events.

According to some participants, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are doing the bidding of Jewish or Zionist interests, and Israel is buying houses and land here in Iraq. One woman in Najaf says that a majority of the American soldiers here are Jewish, which is further evidence of a plot to keep Iraq down while the Coalition, backed by Israel, steals the wealth of Iraq. When asked about the recent audiotape purportedly from Saddam Hussein, some participants thought this was part of a U.S. plot. As one Sunni man in Mosul says, "It is another American game – the CIA is trying to make the Iraqi people frightened. They are trying to blackmail the Iraqi people to make them fear."

In several groups, particularly in the south, participants mentioned the rumor of an American tank driving around Baghdad with a sign saying, "If you give us security, we will give you electricity and water." The actions of the soldiers on the street serve an important role in creating the image of the CPA, and Iraqis almost seem bound to misinterpret any gesture. A Shi'a man in Diwaniya complained about the fact that soldiers are giving children chocolates, saying that they were trying to humiliate Iraqis by taking pictures as the children bend over to pick up the candy at their feet – he says that the soldiers want to show the world that Iraqis are beggars.

Whether or not these rumors are true, one point is clear from these comments – a significant chunk of the CPA's public information campaign lies in the troop presence, and Iraqis are prone to misinterpret things. Not one participant says that the CPA is communicating clearly with the public. As one woman in Mosul says, "Until now it (the CPA's communications) is not clear. All we have seen from them are the soldiers in the street." Some other comments on the difficulties people have in hearing the CPA's message include:

He (Bremer) is separated and isolated from the Iraqis. (Sunni Men, Mosul)

Bremer is appearing every Saturday and announcing problems, but unfortunately, there is no central channel so we don't hear what he says. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

Like a piece of furniture from the Pentagon, it (the CPA) was put here in Iraq. (Shi'a Men, Karbala)

Transition from liberators to occupiers. In part because of these deeply held attitudes, the United States has in the minds of many made a quick transition: from enemy to liberator and back to enemy, in the form of occupier. It has not met Iraqis' sky-high expectations, expectations anchored in the language of liberation used by Coalition forces to justify the war:

They said they would come as a liberator, but if they said they were coming as an occupation force, we would have defended Iraq. Not defending Saddam Hussein, but defending Iraq. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

Are they occupiers? Or are they not occupiers? That is my question. When Abdel Karim Qasim came and took over Iraq, he organized ministries in 15 days, and he is an Iraqi. These guys are American, and we are living in a new, modern age. Why are things going this way? (Shi'a Men, Najaf)

We are just like them in this situation, with occupation, and we hope that we won't suffer like they suffer. (Sunni Women, Mosul)

Disarray and confusion is the perfect plan. Several Iraqis in the focus groups express a belief that the situation since the war has been part of the plan. What analysts in the West see as lack of organization and planning is interpreted by many in the Iraqi public as completely perfect organization and planning – several Iraqis believe that the United States planned this chaos. A country as obviously powerful as America should be able to do what it wants.

Few participants believe that the United States is acting in Iraq's best interests, and most think that the United States is here for their own interests – it came here to improve the American economy and to steal Iraq's resources.

All of the ministries are burned, except for the Ministry of Oil – all for their own benefit. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

All they care about is the oil right now. They didn't care about us. They took from us, and robbed us. (Shi'a Women, Najaf)

They are protecting their own interests, under the name of doing all of these things for the benefit of Iraq. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

The exception to this is in the northern areas of Iraq, particularly among Kurds, who are generally more supportive of the Americans. But overall, the bulk of the comments from the focus group participants focus on a presumed conspiracy to sow chaos in Iraq:

It is part of their plan – if it is not part of their plan then it means they didn't know what they were doing. (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

We think that they absolutely know and understand the total situation. They know about everything. They enjoy watching this for no reason. We don't know why they do this. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

They want disorder, and they want their companies to come and use our resources. (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

Few participants have a sense of the CPA's vision for Iraq, with several participants saying that the CPA works secretly, and that it seems like a puzzle to them. In stark contrast,

media outlets like *Al-Jazeera* seem to do their utmost to get Saddam Hussein's message across to the public. During the second week of the focus groups, a recorded message allegedly from Saddam Hussein appeared on *Al-Jazeera*, which put a sign language interpreter in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen to make sure that deaf viewers were able to get Saddam's message in its entirety.

XI. Conclusion

Iraqis are ready to move beyond their past and build a new country based on the rule of law and some form of democratic rule. Although Iraqis' feelings about democracy are a mixture of excitement, fear, and concern for defending their culture, there is a consensus for the basic elements of a democratic system: a society governed by fair rules, and not the arbitrary authoritarianism Iraqis suffered under Saddam; a government that listens and is responsive to all citizens, rather than Saddam's closed system of government which responded only to the interests of a select few; and a government that creates opportunities for all to share in the country's wealth, rather than a corrupt government that stole the country's wealth and built palaces while average Iraqis got by with the bare minimum.

Three months after the fall of Saddam's regime, the challenges of building a new Iraq are daunting. The first challenge is establishing the basic foundation of law and order. Without this foundation, chaos and instability will continue to undermine efforts to build a new Iraq. Iraqis are pleading for basic governance – a police force to keep order, an official to process their legal documents, and a representative who listens to concerns.

The second building block is writing a new constitution, setting the legal framework, and establishing new government structures. Having suffered under Saddam's rule, Iraqis are very clear about what they do not want, but they may need some time to figure out what they want. Iraqis may need time to sort out many thorny questions, including how to balance the competing interests of different ethnic groups and what is the right way, if at all, to include values from the many different religious faiths in shaping their new government.

The third building block is creating new ways to organize political debate and channel the will of all Iraqis, both men and women. Iraq has witnessed an explosion of new political parties since the fall of Saddam, but most of these parties lack credibility at the popular level. New media outlets and newspapers appear every week, but few have captured the attention of Iraqis. Iraqis remain ill-informed about the current situation. If an election were held tomorrow, it is not clear what Iraqis would debate or who would emerge as the new leaders.

There is much work to be done in these three areas – reestablishing law and order, setting up the constitutional framework for the future government, and fostering new ways to organize political debate in Iraq. The focus groups show that the Iraqi public understands that these efforts may take some time and they are anxious to get started.