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From a Symposium

Exporting Democracy: What Have We Learned from Iraq?

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FOUR years after the war for democracy in Iraq began, it is evident that the project has failed dismally. Many analysts attribute this to flawed implementation. Although there is no denying that there were gross mistakes, the failure had much more to do with conceptual flaws and total lack of comprehension of, or worse still, disregard for Iraq's history and its problems. Had the project's architects taken these into account, they would not have opted to make Iraq the model democracy for the Arab world, even if only for lip service.

The most severe conceptual flaw was the belief that democracy can be imposed by force by an outside power. The successful German and Japanese cases after the Second World War were completely irrelevant models for Iraq, where a combination of historical, political, social, and cultural factors doomed the American project from the start. It was Great Britain that attempted first to establish Western-style democracy in Iraq, beginning in the 1920s. This experiment, which was identified with Christian imperialism, failed and left severe scars in the Iraqi collective memory. Iraqis remained suspicious of any similar projects emanating from the West. Even with all the best intentions, the new American project could only have aroused, at least among some significant parts of the population, deep-seated fears of a new imperialism disguised by slogans of democracy.

Another conceptual flaw was the idea that one of the worst totalitarian regimes in the world could be transformed overnight into a democracy. This vision of radical change did not take into account the fact that in Iraq civil society was nonexistent. There were no competing parties to the Baath Party; no nongovernmental organizations to speak of; and, worst of all, the fragile middle class, which should have carried out democratic transformation, was dwindling due to ongoing wars, long years of sanctions, and the regime's socioeconomic policies. Other difficulties included the lack of a strong industrialized economy and a long history of political violence.

Complicating the picture further was the fact that the change was not the result of long-term internal evolution (as was the case in the Soviet Union, for example), but an abrupt act by an

outside force. Consequently, when the Baath Party was ousted from power in April 2003, there were no organized domestic forces (except for the Kurds) capable of filling the vacuum and stabilizing the chaotic situation, a sine qua non for the functioning of any normal polity, let alone democracy.

Islamic extremism received a significant boost after the fall of the Baath, and this made matters even worse. Islamist forces, both Shias and Sunnis, were held in check by Saddam Hussein, and now they came out forcefully. The problem is not that Islam is in itself incompatible with democracy, but that its traditional lack of a separation between religion and state works against it. Indeed, where there has been such separation in a Muslim country, democracy does have a chance, and the best example is Turkey. But the processes of westernization and secularization in the Ottoman Empire started a hundred years before Atatürk, and they came out of Ottoman decisions. In Iraq, by contrast, the fall of the Baathist regime gave new room to Islamist forces who exploited newfound freedom to reassert themselves rather than reinforce democracy. In the elections of December 2005, the majority of the votes went to religious parties, while the secular ones were pushed to the sidelines.

Now, factor in the heterogeneity of Iraqi society. By itself, this should not have been an obstacle to democratic development. But Iraq's historical, political, and ideological complexities produced in post-Saddam Iraq three competing visions or models of democracy that could not coexist with each other: (1) Shia religious groups wanted democracy for the majority, without separation of religion and state; (2) the Kurds sought federative democracy and the separation of religion and state; and (3) Sunnis came out vehemently against "dictatorship of the majority" and the "Shia agenda" for democracy because the two deprived the Sunnis of their past monopoly of power. These three visions clashed with each other and with a messianic American vision of democracy. As a result, democracy in Iraq came to be identified with anarchy, rather than triggering a democratic domino effect throughout the region.

It is true that the new constitution of October 2005 is one of the most progressive in the region, and the general elections of December two months later were one of the freest. But the accompanying euphoria blinded many people to the fact that the Constitution remained controversial and that the elections were held under the watchful eyes and tight control of 130,000 soldiers. Indeed, the true test of these democratic mechanisms will be when the Americans and their allies leave the region and when the government is changed in another round of elections. (The earlier British experiment does not provide an encouraging example.)

IS THE IRAQI situation completely hopeless? Not necessarily. When the dust of Sunni/Shia strife settles, a more representative government might be possible than the Sunni-dominated one that existed over the previous eighty-five years, simply because the Shias will never again accept disenfranchisement. Another ray of hope lies in the burgeoning democracy in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds' relative success is due to the fact that they managed to overcome their own semi-civil war in the 1990s and that they have now had a decade of experimentation in democratic processes. They

have authentic parties and insist on the separation of religion and state. If this democracy of sorts flourishes (although there are some less encouraging signs of late), it could become a model for the entire country.

The United States did not create a Pandora's Box in Iraq, but it did open one. And despite all the chaos, it is too soon to tell if it was worth the risk.

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