

Ignoring History: U.S. Democratization in the Muslim World

by James Kurth

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The most important undertaking of the first George W. Bush administration was its war in Iraq. Now, at the beginning of the second Bush administration, there is a growing consensus across the political spectrum that this war may be the president's most disastrous undertaking as well. What sort of rationales got him, the vice president, and the Pentagon—and the rest of us—into this mess?

The initial justification the administration gave for the war, the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's WMD, was of course discredited when no such weapons could be found. The second justification, the purported connection between Saddam's regime and Al Qaeda, had been discredited by most American experts on terrorism even before the war began, and indeed no evidence of any such connection has ever emerged.

By summer 2003, only one justification for the war remained to the administration, and that was its claim that the United States could bring democracy to Iraq and that Iraq would then become a model, and perhaps even a base, for the spread of democracy to other countries in the Middle East, particularly Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.¹ Now, two years after the beginning of the Iraq War, the promise of democratization remains the only justification for the war. It is not surprising that the Bush administration keeps telling the American people about the value, indeed the necessity, of the U.S. democratization project for Iraq and for other Muslim lands as well. The administration is always pointing to some impending political event, such as this or that election, to demonstrate that democracy in Iraq is just around the corner. Of course, whenever U.S. military forces turn a corner in Iraq, they keep getting hit by the improvised explosive devices planted by the Iraqi insurgents.

¹ Peter J. Boyer, "The Believer: Paul Wolfowitz Defends His War," *New Yorker*, Nov. 1, 2004; Robert S. Snyder, "The Myth of Preemption: More Than A War Against Iraq," *Orbis*, Fall 2003.

The U.S. democratization project in Iraq and in the Muslim world fits into a long chain of U.S. democratization efforts that reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Some of these efforts were successful, and some were not. Together they form a pattern that can tell us something about the prospects for the democratization efforts now underway in Iraq.

Democratization, the American Way²

The twentieth century witnessed numerous attempts to bring democracy to countries that hitherto had been ruled by authoritarian regimes. The great majority of these efforts were promoted by the United States, and many of them were backed by U.S. military intervention and occupation. The twentieth century was the American century; therefore, it was also the century of democratization. Indeed, the century began with the United States engaged in three separate military occupations to bring democracy (albeit in a somewhat distant future) to former colonies of the Spanish empire: the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. The Philippine occupation and successful repression of the insurgents there was especially bloody and costly. Four thousand U.S. soldiers lost their lives in the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1902), along with 16,000 Filipino guerrillas and as many as 200,000 civilians.³ A decade later, President Woodrow Wilson defined the essence of the new century—which might be seen also as the Wilsonian century—when he first sent the U.S. Marines into several Latin American countries, declaring that he was going to “teach the South Americans to elect good men,” and then sent the entire U.S. military into Europe, declaring that the United States was going “to make the world safe for democracy.”

The U.S. attempt at the beginning of the twenty-first century to use military conquest and occupation to bring democracy to Iraq and, by a vaguely defined process, perhaps to its neighbors as well, is thus the latest chapter in a grand American narrative that has been under way for more than a hundred years. By now, many countries know what it means to be, in the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “forced to be free.”⁴

The United States has undertaken its epic drama of political democratization through military occupation—ballots through bullets—in four great theaters over the decades: (1) the Caribbean Basin and Central America (Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua) during the 1900s–1930s and

²The following two sections are based upon my “Iraq: Losing the American Way,” *American Conservative*, Mar. 15, 2004.

³Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books), p. 125.

⁴Rousseau developed this concept in his *The Social Contract*. A pioneering study of the phenomenon was John D. Montgomery, *Forced To Be Free: The Artificial Revolution in Germany and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

again during the 1960s–1990s (the Dominican Republic and Haiti again and also Grenada and Panama); (2) Central Europe (West Germany, Austria, and Italy) during the 1940s–1950s; (3) Northeast Asia (Japan and South Korea) during the 1940s–1950s; and (4) Southeast Asia (particularly South Vietnam) during the 1960s–1970s. Together, these add up to more than a dozen cases where the United States has used military occupation in an effort to bring about political democratization. They provide useful precedents and lessons for the current efforts in Iraq.⁵

The United States also made numerous attempts in the 1990s to bring democracy to the countries of the former Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe. With the exception of Bosnia and Kosovo, these democratization projects did not involve military occupation with U.S. forces. However, these ex-communist countries—almost two dozen in number—also provide plenty of evidence and lessons relevant to the prospects for democratization in Iraq.

In promoting the Iraq War and its accompanying regime change as the first phase in a grand project that would bring democracy to Iraq's neighbors and to the Muslim world more generally, the Bush administration and neoconservative writers pointed to the U.S. successes in West Germany and Japan as historical precedents. They were notably silent, however, about the large numbers of U.S. failures or disappointments elsewhere, particularly in the Caribbean Basin and Central America, to say nothing of Vietnam.⁶ Nor did they mention the most recent, wide-ranging, and numerous democratization efforts, in the former Soviet bloc. If any honest discussion about the prospects for democratization in the Middle East had included an analysis of even a few of these cases, the discussion would have concluded that the prospects were bleak. But for whatever reason the Bush administration and the neoconservative promoters of the war chose not to consider these cases.

The German and Japanese Exceptions

The cases of West Germany and Japan after World War II certainly demonstrate that military conquest and occupation can bring about successful democratization. The U.S. achievement in these countries was all the more impressive considering that, in the 1940s, the leading American area specialists and experts frequently argued that the peculiar features of German and Japanese history and culture made democracy an unlikely system for these nations. Over the past few years, when leading American area specialists and experts have made similar arguments about Arab or Muslim history and culture, one can understand why the democratization promoters might dismiss these arguments. However, looking at the circumstances of the German and

⁵ Omar G. Encarnación, "Beyond Civil Society: Promoting Democracy after September 11," *Orbis*, Fall 2003.

⁶ The one exception was Max Boot, in *The Savage Wars of Peace*.

Japanese cases in more detail, there were at least three crucial ways in which these circumstances differed from those of today's Iraq.

A prior liberal democratic experience. First, Germany and Japan (as well as Austria and Italy) had actually had considerable experience with some version of liberal democracy only a couple of decades before, between the First World War and the Great Depression. The Weimar Republic, with its blighted hopes and dark tragedy, is especially well known, but Japan also experienced liberalization and even democratization in the 1920s, Austria had a political system similar to the Weimar Republic, and Italy had had a functioning liberal democracy for more than two decades before Mussolini put an end to it in 1922. Each of these countries had developed liberal, democratic, and even social democratic parties. Although these parties were repressed by the later totalitarian or authoritarian regime, in the late 1940s the experience was still there in the memories of substantial portions of the population. Indeed, some of the prominent leaders of the liberal democratic period were still there, and the U.S. occupation authorities soon drew upon them to assume leadership in the renewed liberal democratic systems—Konrad Adenauer in Germany, Karl Renner in Austria, Alcide de Gasperi in Italy, and Shigeru Yoshida in Japan.

The contrast here between West Germany and Japan in the late 1940s and Iraq (as well as Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia) today could not be greater. These latter countries have never been liberal democracies. Further, the most liberal (but hardly democratic) regime in Iraqi history was the monarchy of King Faisal II, but that was violently overthrown in 1958, almost half a century ago. In Iraq, there is no solid historical base for the American democratization project.

To get some sense of how successful externally imposed democratization would be in the absence of internally developed historical experience, one would have to look instead at the U.S. efforts to impose democracy upon such countries as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Panama. Here, the only cases that can be said to have been successful were the slow establishment of a liberal democratic system in the Dominican Republic during the decade or so after the U.S. military intervention and occupation in 1965–66 and the quick establishment of such a system in Panama after the U.S. intervention and occupation of 1989–90. In contrast, each of the U.S. democratization projects of the 1900s–30s ended in failure, with the liberal democratic system overthrown and replaced by some kind of dictatorial regime, such as that of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic or Somoza in Nicaragua.

A greater foreign threat. Second, and probably more important, West Germany and Japan in the late 1940s each perceived a foreign threat that was even greater than the one posed by the U.S. occupation. As oppressive as the West Germans and Japanese found the U.S. military forces, they feared something even worse: the military forces of the Soviet Union. The threat from the Soviet military was especially obvious to the West Germans, who had ample evidence of the reign of pillage, rape, and murder that the Red Army had

inflicted upon Germans in the East and could be expected to inflict upon Germans in the West, if they got the chance. But even the Japanese feared a possible conquest by the Soviet military and revolution by the Japanese communists, particularly after they saw what the Soviets did to the Japanese colonists and soldiers they captured in Manchuria. As bad as the reality of the American occupation was for both nations, the specter of a Soviet occupation was worse. It soon became clear to many West Germans and Japanese that only the American military stood in the way of that specter's being realized.

Here again the contrast is great between West Germany and Japan then and Iraq now. Of course, given the memory of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and the close relations between the Shiite regime in Iran and the Shiite majority in Iraq, Iran would appear to pose a potential threat. And given the long-standing hostility of the Turks to the Kurds, Turkey might also appear to pose a potential threat to Iraq. But Iraqis only perceive these potential threats in the context of the ethnic hostilities within Iraq itself. For now, the Iraqi Shiites fear and loathe the Iraqi Sunnis more than they do the Iranian Shiites, and for now it seems that the Iraqi Kurds fear and loathe the Iraqi Sunnis more than they do the Turks—and both the Sunnis and the Shiites loathe the U.S. military occupation as much or more.

To get some sense of how acceptable a U.S. military occupation would be in the absence of a still-greater foreign military threat, one would have to look at the U.S. occupations in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Panama. In the cases where the occupation was prolonged beyond a couple of years, substantial local resentment and even resistance developed. In the two most successful cases (the Dominican Republic in 1965–66 and Panama in 1989–90), the United States withdrew its military forces and ended its occupation in less than a year.

An ethnically homogenous population. Third, and probably most important, West Germany and Japan (and also Austria and Italy) were among the most ethnically homogenous nations in the world. There were no significant ethnic minorities or secessionist movements. Democratization did bring all sorts of political conflicts and cleavages, particularly around issues of economic class, but no ethnic group or territory voted to separate itself from the rest of the nation.

Here, the contrast between Germany and Japan then and Iraq now could not be greater. As is well known, Iraq has never been ethnically homogeneous; from its creation in 1920, it has always been divided into three ethnic parts: the Sunni Arabs, the Shiite Arabs, and the Kurds (who are Sunni, but non-Arab), with the Sunni minority imposing an authoritarian and usually brutal regime upon the Shiite majority and the Kurdish minority. Moreover, the three ethnic parts have roughly corresponded to three territorial parts, with the Sunni Arabs in the center, the Shiite Arabs in the South, and the Kurds in the North (with mixed populations in major cities such as Baghdad and Mosul). Iraq was always a partition waiting to happen, artificially held together by the

iron bonds of an authoritarian regime. During the monarchy, that regime was relatively mild, but after 1958 Iraq's regimes became progressively more brutal. In such circumstances, "regime change" would inevitably result in state change or even country change; in particular, democratization would mean that one or more of the three ethnic and territorial parts of Iraq would vote to separate itself from the others. One can have an Iraq without democracy or democracy without an Iraq, but not both.

To get some sense of how successful democratization could be where there is such pronounced ethnic heterogeneity, one would have to look at the extensive recent experience of democratization in the former communist countries. One would have to look especially at the Balkans, once called the Near East, which is not that far geographically and sociologically from the contemporary Middle East.

In virtually every country in the communist world that had ethnic heterogeneity, democratization (which included free elections) was followed immediately by secession and partition. This was largely peaceful in the case of the Slavic and the Baltic republics of the Soviet Union and in the case of the "velvet divorce" between the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. It was violent and even genocidal in the case of the Caucasian republics of the Soviet Union and in the case of several of the republics of Yugoslavia. Given these results—especially the violent results in the Caucasus and the Balkans—it strains credulity that anyone would argue that the most relevant comparisons to Iraq were the homogeneous nations of West Germany and Japan in the 1940s.⁷

The Democratization Project in Iraq

The Drive Toward War

Who were the people who made such arguments and drove the United States into the Iraq War? The Bush administration's democratization policy is the product of a grand coalition of two of contemporary America's major ideological groupings: the neoliberals and the neoconservatives. The central interest of the neoliberals is America's role in the global economy and society. They want the United States, with its unparalleled power and influence, to establish a global order characterized by liberal democracies, free markets, open societies, and the "democratic peace."⁸ The neoliberals are

⁷ Other factors that made Germany and Japan exceptional cases were the thoroughness of their wartime destruction and the extensiveness of the American occupation. John F. Peters, "A Potential Vulnerability of Precision-Strike Warfare?" *Orbis*, Summer 2004.

⁸ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002); Ray Takeyh and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Democratic Impulses versus Imperial Interests: America's New Mid-East Conundrum," *Orbis*, Summer 2003; and P.H. Liotta and James F. Miskel, "Dangerous Democracy? American Internationalism and the Greater Near East," *Orbis*, Summer 2004.

self-consciously and self-confidently carrying on the Wilsonian tradition of “making the world safe for democracy” that has been so persistent in U.S. foreign policy. Neoliberals may not seem to be prominent in the Bush administration, as they clearly were in the Clinton administration (e.g., Madeleine Albright and Richard Holbrooke), but their basic ideas seem to be expressed by President Bush himself.

Conversely, the neoconservatives’ central interest is America’s role in global security. They want the United States, with its unparalleled power and influence, to eliminate threats to the security of America and its allies, including Israel, which is in one of the least secure environments on the globe. In their own way, the neoconservatives are also carrying on the Wilsonian tradition of making the world safe for democracy, with the emphasis on “safe.” The neoconservatives are especially prominent among the top civilian officials (definitely not the top military officers, who are more likely to be traditional conservatives) in the Bush administration’s Defense Department.⁹

The neoliberals and neoconservatives each had a special interest in the Middle East in general and in Iraq in particular. The neoliberals saw the Middle East, lying between democratic Europe and democratizing East Asia, as the next great arena for democratization. (They also knew that stable oil exports from the Persian Gulf were crucial for the smooth functioning of the global economy.) The neoconservatives saw rogue states in the Middle East, if they became armed with WMD and allied with Islamic terrorists, as the greatest threat to U.S. (and Israeli) security. Both therefore saw the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime—which ruled an Iraq that might acquire WMD, which was rich in oil reserves, and whose relatively well-educated population seemed ready for democratisation—to be a fulfillment of their own central interests in the region. Historically, pro-Israeli groups and groups that emphasize the importance of oil exports have often opposed each other in regard to U.S. policies toward the region. The fact that these two groups came together in the Bush administration around a policy of regime change in Iraq gave the project a new and extraordinary energy, a sort of fusion power. And so the war came, and a splendid little war it was at first.¹⁰ But then came the occupation.

America’s Occupation of Iraq

Upon invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam’s regime, the Bush administration used its rhetoric of democratization to justify its immediate abolition of the Iraqi Army and other security forces that had functioned under

⁹ Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Claes G. Ryn, “The Ideology of American Empire,” *Orbis*, Summer 2003; and Andrew J. Bacevich and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, “God Is Not Neutral: Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy After 9/11,” *Orbis*, Winter 2004.

¹⁰ Max Boot, “The New American Way of War,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 2003; Peter J. Boyer, “The New American War Machine,” *New Yorker*, June 30, 2003.

the regime. The abolition of these forces and the anarchy that resulted were important contributors to the ensuing insurgency.¹¹ However, just because the United States destroyed the old authority did not mean that it really sought to establish a new democracy, as that term is normally defined. A real democracy in Iraq would have contradicted the neoliberals' and the neoconservatives' primary interests. In order to understand what a real democracy would have meant in Iraq, one must consider each of its three major ethnic communities.

The Shiite Majority

By the normal definition of democracy, one would have expected the Bush administration to propose an electoral system based upon one person/one vote and majority rule. However, the Shiites comprise about 65 of the Iraqi population, and in such a system they could easily achieve a great preponderance of power and control of the Iraqi state. The Shiites took very seriously their version of Islam and Islamic law; this made them repugnant to the neoliberals, with their fixation on such secular values as the free market, the open society, and Western conceptions of human rights. The Shiites of Iraq also had many close connections with the Shiites of Iran and its Islamist regime, which made them repugnant to the neoconservatives, with their central interests in the security of Israel and the stability of U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf.

The Bush administration was therefore determined that, whatever kind of democracy might be established in Iraq, it could not issue in Shiite rule, or at least rule by Islamist Shiites. Consequently, the administration would not allow a system of majority rule. Rather, the system would have to be a truncated version of democracy, be it liberal, federal, elite, or some combination thereof. This explains why, in its first several months, the U.S. occupation (the Coalition Provisional Authority, headed by L. Paul Bremer III), persistently tried to marginalize Shiite religious leaders (e.g., the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani) and religious parties (e.g., the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq). It also explains why the administration persistently tried to inflate political groupings of secularized Shiites (e.g., Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress) that had no following at all among the vast Shiite population. This strategy had manifestly failed by December 2003.

In June 2004, the CPA was succeeded by the collaborating Interim Iraqi Government, headed by Ayad Allawi, a secularized Shiite, which also had little following among the Iraqi population. Allawi understood that he would have to work with Sistani and the Islamic Shiites, and the new U.S. authorities in Iraq now understood this, as well. However, Sistani and the Shiite Islamist parties, which were much better organized than the Shiite secular groups, wanted an

¹¹ Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2004.

Iraqi constitution that would institute majority rule, and they wanted national elections to be held as soon as possible. These demands put them on a collision course with the Sunnis and the Kurds. These two minorities, each in their own way, naturally opposed Shiite rule and therefore majority rule and early elections.

The Sunni Authority

Whatever the public pronouncement of their leaders might be, the Sunnis really wanted minority rule of Iraq by themselves. They wanted an authoritarian system like that which had served their interests under every regime since Iraq was created by the British in 1920, and indeed even before that under the Ottoman empire.¹² Since the Sunni minority was in fact a rather small one (only 15–20 percent of the Iraqi population), any regime composed by the Sunnis had been especially authoritarian; the Sunni regime compensated for its unusually small base by employing unusually brutal methods against the Shiites and the Kurds. As Iraqi society modernized over the course of the twentieth century, the Shiites and the Kurds steadily acquired more and more of the economic and educational resources that enabled their political mobilization and organization. This largely explains why successive Sunni regimes had to steadily become more severe, leading to the brutal rule of the Baath party and culminating in the ferocious regime of Saddam Hussein. Only a regime such as his could suppress the growing pressure from the increasingly mobilized Shiites and Kurds. By the late 1990s, the Sunnis not only were the sole beneficiaries of their authoritarian regime; they could not even imagine an acceptable political alternative, let alone a democracy. They also knew that if their regime were to be overthrown and its elaborate security apparatus dismantled, total anarchy would ensue, and that the long-suppressed Shiites and Kurds very likely would take their revenge.

While it was no cause for joy for the Sunnis when the United States destroyed Saddam's regime in April 2003, they at least had a measure of protection left in what remained of the Iraqi army and the Baath party. But in May 2003, Paul Bremer decreed the abolition of both the army and the party and authorized a purge of Baath party members from all Iraqi institutions, including the health services and the public utilities. Several hundred thousand Sunnis were immediately thrown out of work.¹³

The Sunnis were thus suddenly plunged into an economic condition equivalent to the Great Depression. Much worse, however, they saw themselves as being suddenly plunged into a condition of insecurity equivalent to

¹²Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

¹³Jon Lee Anderson, "Out on the Street: The Policy that is Fuelling the Insurgency," *New Yorker*, Nov. 15, 2004.

the Hobbesian state of war, with the prospect of a massacre similar to others that have occurred in the Middle East (e.g., the Armenian genocide of 1915–18, the Lebanese civil war of 1975–90, and, of course, the all-too-relevant Kurdish genocide implemented by Saddam Hussein in 1987–89). Of course they would become desperate, even desperadoes, and join any organized resistance to the occupation they could find. This was soon provided by the underground elements that remained from the Baath security apparatus and by the insurgent units that quickly grew out of Sunni Islamic organizations. It was not long before there was a fully developed insurgency in the notorious “Sunni triangle.”

The available evidence indicates that Bremer’s orders, which guaranteed a much larger, more desperate and ferocious Sunni insurgency, originated among the civilian leadership in the Defense Department. They certainly did not derive from lessons learned in previous U.S. occupations. As we have seen, the Bush administration always cited the cases of Germany and Japan, but in those countries the occupation authorities, while removing the top military and political levels, initially worked with and relied upon local military and security units to maintain order. They also left the civil institutions largely intact, so that they could continue to perform their essential functions. The administration ignored these German and Japanese (as well as Austrian and Italian) precedents. It also ignored the advice of many U.S. civilian officials and military officers who had had recent experience with occupation tasks, particularly in Bosnia and Kosovo.¹⁴

There has been considerable criticism of Bremer’s orders, but the Bush administration has not publicly explained why Bremer did what he did. One likely explanation is that both the Shiite and Kurd leaders insisted upon these measures, making it clear that they would not support the U.S. occupation if it simply meant a new Baath regime. But as the four U.S. occupations after World War II demonstrate, one can abolish a regime—an organized and integrated entity—while still running a country with the aid of former adherents of the regime, who are now merely disaggregated individuals or units. This path was not taken, probably because Chalabi and the secular Shiites wanted not just to rule over Iraq, but also to control and fill all of the attractive institutional positions the Baath party members had held, i.e., a classic case of patronage politics. Since Chalabi and the secular Shiites were the only Iraqis with whom the neoconservatives in and around the Defense Department felt comfortable in spring 2003, what they wanted, they got. What the United States got in return was a much larger Sunni insurgency.

Of course, by spring 2004, Chalabi betrayed the United States by establishing contacts with the Iranian intelligence services and then even with

¹⁴James Dobbins, et al., *America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2003); James Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Jan./Feb. 2004.

Moktada al-Sadr and other radical Islamists among the Shiites. In other words, he allied himself with the most pronounced U.S. adversaries to be found in the Shiite world. This might seem ironic from an American perspective, but from a Middle Eastern perspective, no less would have been expected.

Kurdish Autonomy

In contrast to both the Shiites and the Sunnis, the Kurds really wanted an independent state, or perhaps a very loose Iraqi federal system. For them, Iraq was at best a geographical expression and more commonly a genocidal repression.

The United States had excellent relations with the Kurds, having protected their territory with a no-fly zone since the Gulf War and having provided them with substantial economic aid. In return, the Kurds had constructed in their protected mini-state a prosperous economy and a vibrant democracy that seemed to provide an excellent model for the rest of Iraq.¹⁵

There was a problem, however. Just as the Kurds despised the rest of Iraq and did not think of themselves as Iraqis, the rest of Iraq despised and resented the Kurds and did not think of them as Iraqis either. Thus the Kurds consistently opposed any Iraqi constitution that would institute either a centralized political system or majority rule. They also insisted upon retaining their own well-organized and effective Kurdish militia (really army). These demands put the Kurds on a collision course with the Shiites and the Sunnis.

In summary, the Shiites wanted majority rule of Iraq by themselves; the Sunnis wanted minority rule of Iraq by themselves; the Kurds wanted majority rule of Kurdistan by themselves. In a sense, the Shiites and the Kurds each wanted a democracy, but their conceptions of democracy were contradictory. Conversely, the Shiites and the Sunnis both wanted an Iraq, but their conceptions of Iraq were antithetical. Neither the Sunnis nor the Kurds wanted a democratic Iraq, while the Shiites wanted an Iraq that was (from the U.S. perspective) too democratic—i.e., too representative of the majority. For this three-body political problem, there is no stable democratic solution, and that is why the United States has not been able to find one.

The Iraqi Individuals

In its public pronouncements, the Bush administration rarely acknowledged the existence of the three ethnic communities and their strong identities. The public opinion polls it sponsored in Iraq carefully avoided asking questions about ethnic identities. The administration persisted in describing Iraqis as if they were simply individuals defined by their interests in a free

¹⁵ Susanne Martikke, "Regime Change Revisited," *Orbis*, Summer 2003.

market, in an open society, and in a liberal democracy: in short, as if they were Americans.

Even if one were to stipulate that the principal identity of each individual Iraqi was defined by his economic, social, and political interests, there were some odd features about the U.S. occupation's economic and social measures. As it happened, the neoliberal and neoconservative elements of the Bush administration each had their own particular agenda for Iraq, even an Iraq populated by American-like individuals.

The neoliberals insisted upon a radical transformation of Iraq's economy and society. Bremer promulgated a series of decrees and measures designed to dismantle the state-controlled Iraqi economy and to bring about privatization and openness to American investment. Bremer also promoted programs to greatly increase women's power in Iraqi society. The neoconservatives supported these neoliberal-based measures for their own purpose of insuring that Iraq could not again become a strong state that controlled an organized society based upon an Arab or Muslim identity. The measures, as it turned out, were largely abortive, their institutionalization made impossible by the growing insurgency. Indeed, because they were so offensive to the traditional Iraqi way of life, the measures helped to generate support for that insurgency.¹⁶

The neoconservative civilians in the Defense Department often demonstrated little true interest in real democratization in Iraq. Defense officials allowed a series of acts of omission and commission that assaulted Iraqi public opinion and which therefore undermined the legitimacy of any U.S. promises about democratization. These included the initial period of anarchy (dismissed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as "freedom is messy" and "stuff happens"); the perverted and illegal interrogation methods at Abu Ghraib prison, which would inevitably become common knowledge among the Iraqi public; and the failure to spend already-appropriated funds to provide such basic physical necessities as sewers and electricity. For some Defense Department neoconservatives, it was not really necessary that Iraq be democratic, merely that it be weak.

In short, because of the primary interests and insistent demands of both the neoliberals and the neoconservatives, the Bush administration's proclamations soon lost whatever credibility they might have had in the first weeks of the U.S. occupation. Iraqis saw the U.S. objective of liberal democracy to be transparent, its objective of free markets to be self-serving, its objective of an open society to be offensive, and all three objectives to be illegitimate. The universalist conceits and arrogance of the two neo-groups

¹⁶ William Langewiesche, "Welcome to the Green Zone: The American Bubble in Iraq," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2004. The economic measures were also illegal under international law, since established international conventions forbid an occupying power from changing the economic structure of an occupied country.

utterly ignored the local, intractable realities within Iraq and thereby ensure that the American democratization project will ultimately fail. Furthermore, because the United States probably will not be able to produce a political solution for Iraq which has legitimacy, it will have difficulty establishing the sound political basis that is necessary for a military solution to the Iraqi insurgency.

The Future Prospects for Iraq: Three Possible Paths

What are the future prospects for the American democratization project in Iraq? The Bush administration is pursuing a path aimed at achieving a democratic, unitary Iraq. There are, however, two other alternatives.

A democratic, confederal Iraq. This is the path Peter Galbraith has envisioned in several recent articles.¹⁷ Galbraith has served with distinction in a number of high positions in the U.S. government (e.g., he was U.S. ambassador to Croatia during the Clinton administration, at the most crucial time in that country's achievement of independence and territorial integrity). In the late 1980s, he was a senior aide for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he thoroughly investigated Saddam Hussein's genocide of the Kurds. He has continued to have close relations with the Kurds up to the present time.

Galbraith's analysis of the Shiite and the Kurdish positions is congruent with that presented above. He is convinced that the Kurds will accept no greater connection with Iraq than a confederal one. The confederation would be composed of three states—Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish, with the government in Baghdad having authority over currency, finance, customs, and allocation of oil revenues but very little else. Galbraith believes that the Kurdish state will certainly be democratic and that the Shiite state will probably be so; as for the political character of the Sunni state, he is rather vague.

An Iraqi war between the states. Since the three states of an Iraqi confederation would each have its own military, it is likely that each would have its own foreign policy. The Kurds would be friendly to the United States but would face hostility, and perhaps intervention, from Turkey; this would put the United States in a very difficult position. Conversely, the Shiites would probably be friendly to Iran, which might influence them to be unfriendly to the United States; this, too, would put the United States in a difficult position. As for the Sunnis, they would probably remain fiercely hostile to the United States, as well as to the Kurdish and the Shiite states, and they would probably seek aid and support from Saudi Arabia, or at least from wealthy Sunni Islamists within Saudi Arabia; this, too, might put the United States in a difficult position.

¹⁷ Peter W. Galbraith, "Operation Save Face," *American Prospect*, Dec. 2004; "How to Get Out of Iraq," *New York Review of Books*, May 13, 2004; "Iraq: The Bungled Transition," *New York Review of Books*, Sept. 23, 2004.

Whatever might be the difficulties for the United States, the difficulties faced by any confederal government are likely to be insurmountable. With each state having its own foreign ally or adversary, the centrifugal tendencies of the confederation would probably cause it to fly apart, and perhaps to fall into a war between the states, aggravated by military intervention from neighboring powers.¹⁸

It might seem obvious that an Iraqi civil war or war between the states would also put the United States in a very difficult position. However, if American military forces were no longer in Iraq, the major enemies of each Iraqi ethnic community would be each other. The United States would remain an enemy in the memory of certainly the Sunnis, probably the Shiites, and potentially the Kurds (because it might have abandoned them once again), but for each ethnic community, the operational enemy would be the other community.

The current insurgency against U.S. military forces in Iraq is doing much to increase the appeal and strength of militant Islam and indeed of transnational Islamist terrorism. In contrast, a war between the states in Iraq might do much to render militant Islam irrelevant, at least in Iraq if not in other countries of the Middle East. What meaning will militant Islam have if Sunni Arab Muslims are killing Shiite Arab Muslims and Sunni Kurdish Muslims, and vice versa?

Such a war could well drive the Sunni Arabs of Iraq into embracing the most extreme versions of Sunni Islam—Wahhabism and Salafism. But it could also drive the Shiites and the Kurds into invading the Sunni triangle and the Sunni districts of Baghdad and Mosul. If a war between the states should occur in Iraq, the Sunnis will be in grave danger of being ground between the two millstones of the Shiites and the Kurds.

In their current desperate state, the Sunnis seem to be heedless of this potential danger to their community or to their very survival. Sometimes described in the past as the Prussians of the Arab world because of their high degree of organization, their ruthless methods, and their effective rule over other peoples within the state, the Sunnis are still too close to their recent ascendancy and invulnerability to imagine the catastrophe that could befall them. When the Soviet Army invaded the Prussian territories of Germany in 1945, 3 million Prussians died, 8 million were forced to flee their homeland forever, and the remaining 9 million were subjected by the Soviets to forty years of communist rule in East Germany. Indeed, as a distinct people, the Prussians were never heard of again.¹⁹

¹⁸George Packer, "The Next Iraqi War? Where Ethnic Tensions in Kirkuk May Lead," *New Yorker*, Oct. 4, 2004.

¹⁹James Charles Roy, *The Vanished Kingdom: Travels Through the History of Prussia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999); Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944–1950* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

The Coming Failure in Iraq

Ample historical experience with a wide variety of democratization projects predicts that the U.S. effort to bring democracy to Iraq will fail. It may fail because the Iraqi people do not have the cultural values, social conditions, or historical experience with which to construct a democracy; because the Iraqi people associate democracy with the U.S. occupation and all the attendant disruptions and humiliations; or because there is no “Iraqi people” after all, only three peoples who will use democracy to break away from each other, optimally to form three democracies but potentially to form three warring states. Or it may fail because of all of the above. With all these paths leading straight to failure, it will take a miracle for the U.S. democratization project in Iraq to succeed.

The failure of democratization in Iraq will discredit U.S. efforts at democratization elsewhere, since other countries will dismiss any U.S. proclamation or promotion of democratization as just another preposterous, feckless, and tiresome American conceit. The damage will be greatest in the Middle East and in the broader Muslim world, where the discrediting of democratization may leave Islamism as the only valid ideology and Islamization as the only vital political and social project.

Universal Religion vs. Multi-ethnic Societies in the Muslim World

The multi-ethnic divisions and tensions we have been discussing are especially pronounced in Iraq, but they are seen throughout the Muslim world.²⁰ This has important implications for U.S. foreign policy and democratization projects. In appearance and by definition, a common faith in Islam unites Muslim countries; the ideal of Islam is that the Muslim world forms one great Islamic community or nation (the *umma*). In reality, however, this appearance of Islamic unity lies atop a myriad of ethnic or tribal divisions that existed even before Islam, especially in Mohammed’s own Arabia. Indeed, one might interpret the Islamic world’s intense proclamation of unity as rhetorical compensation for persistent conflict among a multitude of ethnic communities or tribes.

Almost all Muslim countries are really multi-ethnic or multi-tribal societies, usually composed of one large ethnic community plus several smaller ones. Often, each ethnic community is concentrated in a particular region of the country. These ethnic or tribal communities are the actual basis for most political behavior in Muslim countries. Most people act to preserve or

²⁰ Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, eds., *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999).

promote the interests of their own ethnic community or tribe against the interests of other ones, despite their rhetorical expressions of unity. Very little sense of the public interest (*res publica*) or the common good exists in Muslim countries; left alone, these communities or tribes would war with each other despite the purported unity of Islam.

In most cases, one ethnic community or tribe imposes a peace of sorts on the others and then becomes strong enough to form a state. Given the condition of persistent and pervasive ethnic and tribal conflict, this state will be authoritarian—a Hobbesian Leviathan. As we have seen, this pattern of a uniethnic state ruling over a multi-ethnic or multi-tribal society clearly characterized Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Similarly, before being ousted by the United States in 2001, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan represented the domination of the Pashtuns over several other ethnic groups. This pattern also exists in contemporary Iran, Syria, and Sudan, and some version of it can be found in Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Algeria, and many other Muslim countries as well. Sometimes the largest ethnic community controls the state and uses it to dominate the others (e.g., Iran, Indonesia, Sudan, Algeria, and Taliban Afghanistan). Conversely, a smaller community may control the state and use it to dominate the others, including the largest community (e.g., Pakistan and Yemen). In cases where this ruling community is especially small, it compensates for weakness in its numbers by extreme brutality in its repressive measures (e.g., Baathist Iraq and Syria). In any case, the multi-ethnic society is held together and held down by a uniethnic state, particularly by its security apparatus.

These Muslim political systems are small multinational empires, really. Indeed, they are governed in ways similar to those used by the Ottomans to govern their empire, with the contemporary state security apparatus playing a role similar to that of “the Ottoman ruling institution.” The “millet system” of organizing and ruling a Muslim country (each ethnic community was a “millet”) reached its fullest expression by the Ottoman Turks, who provided the “ruling institution” that kept a wide variety of millets, some Muslim and some non-Muslim, operating within one imperial system. A millet often served a distinct economic or social function; the function of the Ottoman Turks was to rule the rest.²¹ The Ottoman Empire ended more than eighty years ago, but its basic pattern lives on in many contemporary Muslim countries. The members of the different ethnic communities under the ruling state see themselves as distinct tribes or ethnic groups, at most a collection of nations within a nation but not of it, or a nation within an empire. This is hardly a promising basis for a viable democracy.

²¹ Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functions of a Plural Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982); Dennis P. Hupchick, *Nation or Millet? Contrasting Western European and Islamic Political Cultures in the Balkans* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.: Wilkes University Press, 1994).

Such multi-ethnic society/uniethnic state contraptions can be seen as unstable equilibria. They are accidents, secessions, and partitions waiting to happen. Whenever the state is suddenly and sharply weakened (as with Iran during the Revolution of 1979, Iraq during the Gulf War of 1991, Afghanistan during the Afghan War of 2001, and Iraq again during the current war), the subordinate ethnic communities try to break away from what they see as a brutal, now-failed empire. Since these communities are concentrated in particular regions, their efforts amount to secession. Historically, the multi-ethnic empire has survived when a new or renewed state security apparatus was constructed, which then put down the secession.

U.S. Policy vs. Uniethnic Regimes

This multi-ethnic reality of many Muslim countries provides both dangers and opportunities for U.S. foreign policy. On the one hand, any one of these unstable contraptions might collapse into a failed state, and a lawless secessionist tribe and region might provide a territorial base for a transnational network of Islamic terrorists. Even without the collapse of the state, something like this already is the case with the Tribal Areas and North-west Frontier Province of Pakistan, where the Pashtuns continue to provide refuge and support for Al Qaeda.²² Indeed, even in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns of the southeastern provinces continue to give shelter to Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

On the other hand, the uniethnic regime ruling one of these unstable contraptions does have something to keep and defend, and it knows that it has to maintain its extensive security apparatus in order to do so. This means that it will probably be sensitive to a U.S. capability and willingness to attack and destroy that apparatus, and therefore that the United States can deploy many of the normal methods of deterrence against that regime. In a few cases, U.S. air power alone, or in conjunction with local ground forces, might be capable of destroying or weakening a regime's security forces to the point that subordinate and secessionist ethnic groups might rise up and attack the regime. Something like this happened in Afghanistan in 2001; another variation occurred in Kosovo in 1999.²³ Another regime that might be vulnerable to such a strategy is that in Sudan.

Ironically, the uniethnic regime that was probably the most vulnerable to being deterred by this strategy was Saddam Hussein's. He was sitting on top of the most unstable multi-ethnic contraption of all. We shall never know what

²² James Risen and David Rohde, "A Hostile Border Land Foils the Search for bin Laden," *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2004.

²³ Michael E. O'Hanlon, "A Flawed Masterpiece" *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2002 (on the Afghan War); Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen, eds., *War over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

might have happened if, instead of invading and occupying Iraq with 140,000 ground troops in 2003, the United States had threatened Saddam with the destruction by air power of the material bases for his military and security forces, drawing his attention to the recent examples of Afghanistan and Kosovo. This was one of the many paths not taken in Iraq, for reasons including all three of the Bush administration's original justifications for the war. The most pervasive and persistent of these justifications, however, was the administration's democratization project, its insistence upon getting inside Iraq, to remake the country from the ground up.

In all events, two years later, now that the U.S. military is bogged down and stretched thin in Iraq, the United States has no ground forces left with which to threaten the developing nuclear capability of Iran. It still has air forces, but air strikes alone may no longer be sufficiently effective to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities; by now, these are widely dispersed and some are hidden within cities, where air strikes would kill large numbers of civilians.²⁴ Overall, the United States' deterrent credibility *vis-à-vis* Iran is probably much less because of the Iraq War than it was before it. Moreover, given the disagreements and suspicions the war has sparked between the United States and its former European allies, the U.S. and Europe have not been able to unite around a common and effective diplomatic and economic strategy toward Iran's nuclear program. All of this means that Iran will move relentlessly forward until it does indeed produce and possess nuclear weapons, and that it will not halt in its quest unless the United States actually—but probably ineffectively—uses air power to try to stop it. It will be an irony of history—or as Hegel put it, the cunning of history—if the U.S. effort to abort Iraq's purported nuclear weapons program made it easier for Iran to pursue its own, actual nuclear weapons program.

In 1917, Woodrow Wilson, the original author of the democratization project, described six U.S. senators who were trying to prevent America's entry into World War I "to make the world safe for democracy" as "a little group of willful men." By 1920, with the debacle of the Versailles Treaty and the shambles of democratization in war-torn and revolutionary Europe, many Americans had come to think of Wilson as rather willful, too. Almost ninety years later, George W. Bush, the most recent in a long parade of Wilsonian presidents, along with a little group of willful men in his administration, propelled America's entry into the Iraq War "to make the Muslim world safe for democracy." By ignoring history or trying to sidestep it, we will make the Muslim world neither safe nor democratic.



²⁴James Fallows, "Will Iran Be Next?" *Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 2004; Steven Ekevich, "Iran and New Threats in the Persian Gulf and Middle East," *Orbis*, Winter 2004.