

Will Elections Make a Difference in Iraq?

By Mark LeVine | January 5, 2005

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 it has become a commonplace that religious extremism, particularly of the Muslim kind, lies at the heart of the problems that seemingly condemn the Muslim majority world to political and social backwardness, economic stagnation, and cultural oppressiveness. For the planners and supporters of Bush administration policy in Iraq, the actions of the country's Sunni minority, and the thousands of foreign "jihadis" who have come to fight the Great Satan "between the two rivers" (as Musab al-Zarqawi has allegedly renamed his Iraqi branch of al-Qaida), have become a poster child for all that is wrong with Islam.

Most scholars of the Middle East and Islam would take issue, strongly, with such simplistic (mis)characterizations of contemporary Islam and Muslims. But there is more than a grain of truth to the accusation that religious beliefs and motivations are among the biggest contributors to the violence plaguing Iraq. Indeed, the attitudes of religious leaders in the country, especially Sunnis, have played a powerful and negative role in the continuing violence that threatens to derail, or at best seriously delimit the positive impact, of the January 30 elections.

Of course, the attitudes of senior American religious-*cum*-political leaders (and can there be any doubt George W. Bush functions as both for millions of Americans?) aren't helping much either. Much attention has been devoted to the numerous Bush administration errors—disbanding the Iraqi army, not putting enough U.S. forces on the ground—that encouraged the current chaos and violence in Iraq. Yet as important has been the clearly religious—jihadist, actually—foundations of the U.S. invasion and occupation of the country. Guiding American policy in Iraq and the larger Middle East are several troubling dynamics, the combination of which have led to 100,000 dead Iraqis, well over 1,000 dead U.S. soldiers, and counting; not to mention hundreds of billions of dollars literally wasted on useless violence (go ask the victims of last week's tsunami what better ways there are to spend that kind of money).

Crusader Mentality

First there is the "imperial" and "crusader" mentality that has come to dominate American foreign policy (the words are Condeleeza Rice's and President Bush's respectively, not mine). Next there is the belief among some of the most important political figures in the country, not to mention tens of millions of God-fearing Christian Americans, that the war in Iraq heralds the coming of the Apocalypse and is therefore part of God's plan and beyond criticism (no matter what the human and economic costs). Most important, fin-de-millennium America has witnessed the re-branding of Christianity as a religion of large-scale, divinely sanctioned violence *that is specifically wed* to a hyper-consumerist, market fundamentalism, which, as Thomas Frank demonstrates in his best-selling *What's the Matter with Kansas*, has the perverse ability to brainwash tens of millions of Americans to support economic policies that are manifestly against their class interests and violate the most cherished tenets of the Gospels (humility, serving the poor, struggling for social justice). Making the synergy work is the ability of what could be termed "market-fundamentalist Christianity" to redirect Americans' anger at the life-conditions it produces toward a mythological bogeyman called the "liberal elite."

While the above discussion explains why President Bush has been re-elected despite an invasion gone terribly awry—legally, politically, and economically—it shouldn't blind us to the fact that an equally disturbing rebranding of Islam in Iraq and across the

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



Muslim world has enabled an equally disastrous decision by the highest levels of the country's Sunni establishment to use mass violence rather than mass civil protest to confront the American-sponsored occupation. As one of the country's most senior religious figures blithely explained to me during my travels through Arab Iraq last spring, the Sunnis would "kill the infidels" without question or remorse in order to defeat the occupation. The blood of the occupation would be answered by the blood of the insurgency, with little consideration of the implications of unleashing such a wave of violence across a country that had already lived through "thirty-five years of death," as a young Shi'a religious leader explained to me exasperatedly in describing his despair at the turn to violence by his Sunni colleagues and compatriots.

Of course, Iraqi Shi'a have their own militants. Not just Moqtada al-Sadr, but numerous higher-level Shi'a religious figures, including Ayatollahs like Ahmed al-Baghdadi (whose message to America when I interviewed him in Najaf was even more extreme than that of his Sunni counterparts in Baghdad) also are prepared for "jihad" to rid Iraq of the occupation. But such views are clearly outweighed by the more pragmatic and largely non-violent strategy of Grand Ayatollah Sistani and his disciples, young and old, who realize that their majority status, coupled with their belief that the U.S. cannot sustain an occupation for very long at the current costs in dollars and soldiers, has led them to bide their time and strip the U.S. of power and authority one election, and one redrafted law, at a time.

But the Sunni establishment by and large does not have this view. Part of the reason is, of course, that their minority status leaves them naturally frightened of any new political system that might marginalize or

even oppress them, as the country's Shi'a have been oppressed for centuries. As important, according to several Iraqi students of the country's religious establishment, is that the last decade plus of sanctions succeeded in isolating the country's Sunni establishment from the outside world, and especially more modern and even progressive currents within Islam, whereas their Shi'a counterparts spent these years either in exile (and thus more open to outside influences) or at least in close touch with the outside world via Iran.

Golems of Violence

Viewed broadly, then, it would seem that a combination of ignorance about the other side and arrogance about its own power and righteousness of its goals has led conservative, even extremist American and Sunni Iraqi leaders alike to create what we could refer to as twin golems of violence to protect and advance their opposing interests. But like the monster in the old Jewish folk tale, while originally created to protect and serve its community, the Sunni and American golems quickly became uncontrollable, instigating more violence than either side could have done on its own.

In Jewish folklore, the golem is either forced to flee the town by its inhabitants or is destroyed by its creator. Sadly, in real life, it seems that neither the Bush administration nor the Sunni leadership of Iraq is capable of or interested in taking on its golem. This reality—a combination of pride and moral cowardliness on both sides—has left elections as perhaps Iraq's only hope for an end to the violence. But this will only happen if the Iraqi people surprise the world and use the elections to run both golems—and with them, the insurgents and the occupation forces alike—out of town.

Fin-de-millennium America has witnessed the re-branding of Christianity as a religion of large-scale, divinely sanctioned violence that is specifically wed to a hyper-consumerist market fundamentalism, which has the perverse ability to brainwash tens of millions of Americans to support economic policies that are manifestly against their class interests and violate the most cherished tenets of the Gospels.

The ability of the vast majority of Iraqis of all ethnicities and sectarian allegiances who are desperate for an end to both the occupation and the insurgency to achieve such a miracle will depend on who votes on election day and what parties and candidates they vote for. Specifically, women, secular, and non-sectarian or ethnic (that is, “Iraqi” as opposed to “Sunni,” “Shi’a,” or “Kurdish”) voters will have to come out in large numbers to make the healing of Iraq possible; yet this is a very tall order considering that all three groups have been largely shut out of the public sphere that during the past year.

Women have been largely imprisoned in their homes because of the violence and chaos of the insurgency, even though beforehand Iraq had among the most socially advanced female populations in the developing world. And so while the electoral law stipulates that one out of every three candidates for the Assembly be a women, if women are too scared to vote or are otherwise prevented from doing so, their elected representatives will have little power or incentive to push to protect the interests of half the population.

Iraq also was once one of the most secular countries in the Muslim world. However, the decade plus of sanctions, Hussein’s patronage of the Sunni religious establishment and the political repression of the Shi’a have all made it very difficult for secular politics to thrive in post-occupation Iraq. Similarly, while for most of the past 80 years Kurds and Sunni and Shi’a Arabs have managed to sustain a surprisingly resilient and deep “Iraqi” national identity, perhaps one of the signal accomplishments of the occupation has been the successful transformation by the U.S. of what had threatened to become a country-wide Arab into a more manageable Sunni revolt.

While such a splitting of Iraqi allegiances to more narrow sectarian and/or ethnic interests has a long imperial pedigree, the blowback from it is that even as most Iraqis prefer to remain united under one sovereign government than break apart into what would surely be three unsustainable states, the violence of the occupation and insurgency are making it hard to build a common, cross-ethnic, and sectarian political movement. The violence, closed public sphere, and power of ethnic and sectarian parties, are major

impediments to Iraqis voting their “Iraqi” rather more narrowly defined conscience.

The Lebanon Scenario

Because of these dynamics there is every reason to believe that the January elections will at best produce a deeply divided Assembly that will have to overcome extreme odds to build a common future for Iraq’s diverse population. What we’ll likely see are several major blocs divided between Shi’as, Kurds, and Sunnis, with women effectively marginalized from or co-opted into the emerging male and religiously defined power structure—in short, the “Lebanon scenario” more than one Bush administration official has declared would be an acceptable and even preferred outcome of the January elections.

The problem with such an outcome is that in Lebanon the post-colonial power structure failed to chase away or disarm the golems of ethnic and religious hostility so carefully nurtured under French rule. It took a 14-year civil war to do that, and even today Lebanon survives despite a barely functioning state and a lack of substantial political development or intercommunal reconciliation since the war ended. And that’s in a country with only 3.5 million people and no oil.

Of course, with literally hundreds of parties and thousands of candidates registered Iraqis might surprise the world and elect a legislature with enough independent and non-sectarian members to forge the national consensus that will be the sine qua non for writing the country’s new constitution in the coming year. Let’s hope such an outcome comes to pass; if it doesn’t, the blame will be shared equally by the golems and their creators, in Washington and Falluja alike.

In his recent surprise visit to Baghdad, British Prime Minister Tony Blair exclaimed that the battle in Iraq is “between democracy and terror.” He and his friend President Bush keep leaving out one third of the true equation—empire. Iraq has become a battleground between democracy, terror, and empire. And empire has always been sustained by religious chauvinism, exclusivism, and the violence they breed. Unless and until imperialism and religious extremism

are removed from the equation, democracy will continue to lose out to terror, in Iraq, the United States, and across the globe.

Mark LeVine

*(<http://www.meaning.org/levinebio.html>) is an associate professor of history at UC Irvine and the author of *Why They Don't Hate Us: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil* (Oneworld Publications, 2005). He is a contributor to *Foreign Policy In Focus* and writes a blog hosted by *History News Network* (<http://hnn.us/blogs/37.html>).*

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpiif.org.

Recommended citation:

Mark LeVine, "Will Elections Make a Difference in Iraq?," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, January 5, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2005/0501iraqelect.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Mark LeVine

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

p. 4

www.fpiif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

