



## Counterinsurgency and Democracy: Strategic Implications of the Iraqi Elections

By Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk

*As this goes to press, Iraqis are preparing to vote on January 30 in what will be their country's first democratic elections in nearly fifty years. In the face of the ongoing insurgency in the Sunni Triangle and efforts by guerrillas to disrupt voting, however, a chorus of voices—from former U.S. national security advisers to prominent Sunni politicians—is warning that the elections are likely to do more harm than good, strengthening the very forces responsible for the violence. But while some of these critics raise compelling objections, they fail to grasp why it is precisely U.S. counterinsurgency strategy—as much as any abstract, moral commitment to democracy—that makes holding elections more, rather than less, necessary.*

It is impossible to be sanguine about the security environment in which Iraq's January 30 elections are to be held. Despite the U.S.-led assault on Fallujah in November and the elimination of the terrorist safe haven there, the Sunni-dominated insurgency shows scant sign of breaking. Violence continues to wrack the center of the country, as guerrillas ruthlessly target anyone and everyone associated with the post-Saddam order. Election workers and candidates have been murdered, forcing logistical preparations and politicking underground—part of a broader, shadow campaign of intimidation that seeks to keep the 14.2 million eligible Iraqi voters away from the polls. “Our apologies for not mentioning the names of all the candidates,” a recent flier for one political party explained. “But the security situation is bad, and we have to keep them alive.”<sup>1</sup>

Given these conditions, a range of critics has attacked the Bush administration for its

determination to hold fast to a January 30 deadline, arguing that the date is less the function of any coherent, justifiable strategy than of a mulish and inflexible White House. Far from paving the way for democracy, skeptics warn that the vote will instead mark another milestone in the brutal unraveling of Iraq. Brent Scowcroft, former national security adviser to President George H. W. Bush, has commented that “the elections are turning out to be less about a promising transformation, and it has great potential for deepening the conflict. Indeed, we may be seeing an incipient civil war at this time.”<sup>2</sup> Reflecting the realist-leftist alliance so skeptical of the Bush administration's commitment to democratization, the editorialists of the *New York Times* echoed Scowcroft in more histrionic tones, warning that “the coming elections—long touted as the beginnings of a new, democratic Iraq—are looking more and more like the beginning of . . . [a] worst-case scenario,” that is, “a civil war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims that would create instability throughout the Middle East and give terrorists a new, ungoverned region that they could use as a base of operations.” Thus, the *Times* averred grimly, “it's time to talk about postponing the elections.”<sup>3</sup>

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Proponents of a delay point out that, because terrorist attacks are concentrated in the Sunni Triangle, Sunni Arab turnout on January 30 is certain to be disproportionately low—perhaps as little as 6 percent of the seats in the new Iraqi parliament, far less than the Sunnis' estimated 20 percent of the overall population. The consequences of this are worsened by the fact that the Transitional National Assembly, created by the election, is charged with the task of establishing the constitution—that is, the very foundation—of the new Iraqi state. The insurgency will thus ensure that one of Iraq's three main ethnic groups is effectively absent at the creation of the post-Saddam political order, potentially sowing doubts about its legitimacy for years to come. As a result, Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a former adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), has predicted that "elections will only increase political polarization and violence by entrenching the perceptions of Sunni Arab marginalization that are helping to drive the violence in the first place."<sup>4</sup> Noah Feldman, an associate professor of law at New York University who likewise served as a consultant to the CPA, has similarly argued that "the only way to end the terror is to dry up the well of Sunni resentment. . . . If the Sunnis cannot or will not vote, protracted civil war lies ahead."<sup>5</sup>

Postponing the January 30 elections, then, is a necessary maneuver in the delicate ethnic politics that will determine the future of Iraq, its advocates claim. Before Iraqis go to the polls, Sunni resentment must be appeased, which can be accomplished if "moderate" Sunni politicians "engage groups that are now outside the political process while addressing the security situation."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Sunni guerrilla fighters need to be co-opted or destroyed before Iraq is safe for democracy.

This, in short, is the respectable case for postponing Iraq's elections. It is a serious argument made by serious people—but it is also seriously flawed. This is not to say that its identification of Sunni disenfranchisement at the epicenter of the insurgency is inaccurate, nor to dismiss its concerns about the perceived legitimacy of new Iraqi institutions. Rather, it is to cast a critical eye on its assumption that a delay will do anything to ameliorate these challenges and on its disregard for the new problems any postponement will inevitably create.

It is also to recognize that the intellectual pedigree for delaying elections has a less seemly side than described above. While many advocates of delay are genuinely concerned about the future of Iraqi

democracy, for others in the foreign policy cognoscenti, the argument for postponement reflects less any specific concern with the particulars of Iraq than a deeper, knee-jerk ambivalence about the possibility—and desirability—of democracy in the Middle East and the forces it will unleash there. Senator John Kerry attempted to capture this mood during last year's presidential campaign by repeatedly casting the stabilization of Iraq and the democratization of Iraq as less-than-complementary objectives, with no doubt as to which he would prioritize. Foot-dragging over the January 30 election also reflects a deep-rooted paranoia about Iraq's Shia majority, who are suspected of pushing a slate of Manchurian candidates with marching orders from the clergy in Najaf, at best, or theocrats in Iran, at worst.

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Although the Bush administration has, to its credit, held firm on Iraqi elections, the debate over January 30—and the relationship between elections and security—has larger implications for the U.S. commitment to supporting democracy across the greater Middle East. Rather than understand elections as a perfect panacea for the region's myriad problems or a fundamental moral good unto themselves, they should instead be recognized as a powerful instrument for beginning to make progress in the broader strategic environment there. Rather than insist on the defeat of the Iraqi insurgency—or, indeed, of al Qaeda's global insurgency—as a precondition for Iraqi or Middle Eastern democracy, it is a central hypothesis of President Bush's foreign policy that democracy may itself help defeat the threat of radical Islam. In this regard, political reform—as much as military, intelligence, or law enforcement action—is not only the end, but also the means, of the global war on terror.

## Rewarding Friends, Punishing Enemies

Insurgency lives and dies by public opinion, counting on the support or at least passive acceptance of its surrounding population. In Mao Tse-Tung's infamous aphorism, civilians are the sea in which guerrillas must swim. In the case of Iraq, then, it should come as little surprise that Iraq's predominantly Sunni Arab insurgents are largely constrained to where Sunni Arabs themselves live. Although there can be little doubt that these fighters would prefer to slaughter Shia in Najaf or Kurds in Dohuk, they have thus far failed to establish significant footholds beyond their own communities, for the simple reason that public support for their cause evaporates outside the Sunni Triangle. (Notably, the most significant violence that has taken place outside the Sunni Triangle has been largely the work of indigenous elements, whether Muqtada al-Sadr's militia in the Shia areas or Ansar al-Islam in the Kurdish north.)

This localization is both the tactical strength and strategic weakness of Iraq's insurgency. It is interesting to speculate how the battle for the country might be altered if geography and demography intersected in a different way—if, for instance, the Sunni Arab population were concentrated at the periphery of the country, like the Kurds, rather than at its center. (It has arguably been a key weakness of the post-Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan that its base of support among the Pashtuns constrains it to the southeastern edge of the country—and, to its advantage, that it has a safe haven across the border in Pakistan.)

To break the Sunni-dominated insurgency in Iraq, then, is less a matter of "search-and-destroy" missions geared at eliminating enemy fighters than at cracking its base of support among the broader population. To accomplish this, U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine has emphasized winning hearts and minds, no doubt in part a reflection of American faith in our soft power and inherent likeability. But as argued by Steven Metz, director of research at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute and among America's foremost experts on low-level warfare, there is reason to doubt whether this traditional emphasis on "positive" information operations is misplaced.<sup>7</sup> Thus, although it is important to woo the Sunni population into the new Shia-led order, a more immediate—and attainable—goal should be to make them distrust and despise the insurgents.

Although accurate opinion polls are naturally unavailable for the parts of Iraq most affected by the insurgency,

anecdotal and informal observation suggest a range of intertwining factors is responsible for Sunni tolerance of the guerrillas in their midst. Undoubtedly crucial is the belief—whether tinged with hope or fear—that the insurgents might prevail in their struggle. Although the correlation of forces would seem to be against a minority of a minority asserting control over an entire country, it is nonetheless an accurate description of much of the political order across the Middle East today, not to mention Iraq before March 2003. The very fact that a small coterie of Sunni strongmen successfully kept a thumb on the numerically superior Shia and Kurds for so long in the past lends credence to the attempt, through a combination of violence and intimidation, to do so again. In the Middle East, ruthlessness usually pays off.

Even if they fail to recapture the country, many Sunnis likely wonder whether the insurgency might at least prove an instrument for their relative empowerment in the new, post-Saddam Iraq, to recoup by means of political violence a larger share of control than their relative number would otherwise allow. As one U.S. official in the region recently remarked of the Iraqi Sunnis: "Personally I'm not sure they get it, that they can't run this country the way they did in the past. . . . They have been raised as a ruling class of high officials and warriors, and they are reluctant to give that up."<sup>8</sup>

In this regard, the insurgency is rooted in a broader fear among Sunnis of how they will be treated in a new Shia-led political order that also enjoys strong Kurdish support, and the desire for a hedge against it. Given the brutality that Saddam visited upon Iraq's now-ascendant demographic, slaughtering civilians en masse following their 1991 revolt, many Sunnis are no doubt nervous about whether they might face a similarly grim fate once the new government consolidates power.

To defeat the insurgency, U.S. and Iraqi strategists must adopt tactics to address and weaken these factors—and elections provide the means to do precisely that. Advocates of delaying the January 30 vote argue that doing so will demonstrate to the Sunni community a concern for their well-being and a desire for their involvement in the politics of a new Iraq, thus ultimately attracting more people to the polls. But the fact remains, a massive effort has already been undertaken—from a comprehensive public-relations campaign to massive security preparations—to facilitate Sunni participation on January 30. A postponement would send the unmistakable message that guerrilla violence can indeed affect the political course of post-Saddam Iraq, confirming among the

Sunnis that the guerrillas can provide a useful check on Shia, not to mention American, power.

To the contrary, going forward on January 30 will send a different message to the Sunni population: that the insurgency, far from orchestrating their return to power, threatens to exacerbate their disenfranchisement. The result is likely to put increased pressure on Sunni rejectionists to justify themselves and begin to pit moderate Sunni politicians and the broader population against the insurgents. While the ensuing struggle for the soul of the Sunni community is certain to be long, difficult, and bloody, Sunni moderates will be able to argue convincingly that the hard-liners have only made things worse. To win the counterinsurgency, Sunni solidarity must be shattered.

Simply put, January 30 will turn Iraq's new Shia-led political order into a tangible reality—one that Sunni Arabs must simply learn to live with, the sooner the better. In particular, it is critical to quash any hope among Sunni Arabs that their cause will receive support from the other Sunni powers of the region. The establishment and broad diplomatic acceptance of a Shia-led government will go a long way toward making this clear, as the pragmatists in Amman, Riyadh, Damascus, and elsewhere have little choice but to embrace the new leaders in Baghdad. Already, rather than endorsing boycotts, neighboring Arab governments have been pleading with Iraqi Sunnis to participate in the election.

Syria's support to the guerrillas remains a notable and highly problematic exception, but even here, the cause of the insurgency is recognized as sufficiently tawdry—and the threat of U.S. retribution sufficiently great—that the interference has been illicit and limited. Over time, it should also become more difficult for Damascus to continue to straddle this fence, as a new Iraqi government—rather than the U.S. Central Command—makes the case that its incipient democracy is being threatened by subversion next door.

In all of this, a great deal will depend on the competence and guile of Iraq's new government, including the extent to which it is able to puncture the fears and bigotry about the Shia on which the insurgents derive support. Thankfully, Shia candidates have displayed keen appreciation of the need to embrace Sunni Arabs as partners in this new political enterprise, eschewing anything resembling a go-it-alone attitude. Prominent Sunni politicians have been included on the Shia-dominated candidate list of the Iraqi National Alliance, which is supported by Grand Ayatollah

Ali al-Sistani, and Sunni leaders like Mudhar Shawkat and Sheikh Fawz al-Gerba have been warmly received at rallies in the Shia heartland. The Shia leadership—political and religious alike—has also been outspoken in calling for restraint against sectarian attacks, despite the best attempts at provocation by Sunni terrorists.

## Consequences of Delay

Advocates of delaying Iraq's elections would, in effect, punish the Shia for this cooperation while rewarding Sunni intransigence—a course of action that would have disastrous consequences. The nightmare scenario since the fall of Baghdad has been a Shia-majority insurgency—a situation in which a critical mass of Iraq's largest group abandons cooperation with the U.S.-approved postwar transition and instead pursues power through extralegal means against competing factions of Sunnis and Kurds, not to mention among themselves. Nor is there anything hypothetical about this scenario. In late 2003, Grand Ayatollah Sistani sent hundreds of thousands of Shia into the streets to protest what he felt was an insufficiently democratic proposal for the creation of an interim government, effectively forcing the CPA to abandon it. It is also worth remembering that it was the intervention of Sistani, more than U.S. military force, that drove Muqtada al-Sadr out of the business of insurgency and into the political process. The Shia clergy has made clear that it expects voting to take place on January 30, and given their hypersensitivity to any appearance of double-crossing by Washington (remember 1991!), postponing elections would alienate the one demographic group in post-Saddam Iraq that the United States cannot afford to lose.

Elections are simultaneously a carrot and a stick: they reward participation and punish opposition. Of course, the insurgency is also a product of visceral forces—an irrational hatred of the Shia and a sense of righteous anger and wounded honor at foreign occupation—taints that are likely to be transferred onto any successor government not directly installed by the guerrillas. But in the same vein, it is difficult to understand how a postponement would do anything to win over, rather than embolden, hard-liners on both these points.

More importantly, it is unclear what U.S. forces can accomplish in the next six months by way of defeating the insurgency and improving the security environment that they have nonetheless failed to do in the past year and a half. Given the strain on U.S. land forces around

the world, the Pentagon's ability to surge forces for a point event—such as January 30—and thereby temporarily improve the security environment in Iraq, is actually much better than its ability to sustain these improvements over the long haul. That is unfortunate—but it is also reality, at least until the Bush administration commits to a bigger Army and Marine Corps.

Given the forces we have—rather than the forces we need—the best course of action following the election is for the Pentagon to finally get serious about training Iraqi security forces. This effort has never been given the support that it has needed. Rather than focusing on churning out sheer numbers of Iraqi soldiers, the U.S. military needs to commit the American manpower and the material support necessary to stand up capable Iraqi units. In particular, U.S. advisers should be embedded with Iraqi units on a far larger scale than currently undertaken.

Luckily, this appears to be the exact direction for future U.S. strategy. In an extensive interview with Eric Schmitt of the *New York Times*, Lieutenant General John Vines, commander of the U.S. Army's XVIII Airborne Corps and the man about to assume control of day-to-day military operations in Iraq after the elections, stressed that training Iraqi forces was his “number one job.” Crucially, Vines intends to employ as many as 10,000 U.S. advisers to work directly with Iraqi units—a commitment that contrasts starkly with past U.S. efforts, which have been undermanned, on the cheap, with few resources.<sup>9</sup>

## Strategy for the Greater Middle East

The debate over elections in Iraq and the security situation there illustrates a critical point about American strategy in the global war on terror. The United States does not seek democracy in the Middle East strictly for humanitarian or moral reasons, but rather, because the first rule of counterinsurgency is to try to address underlying conditions that are responsible for the enemy's support. The September 11 attacks represented the natural consequence of a radical Islamist insurgency against the political order in the greater Middle East and the broader, global system that helped to create and sustain it. Whereas in the past Islamist insurgents were largely localized in their grievances and targets, the forces of globalization allowed them to network, leverage, and project power in ways never before possible. Al Qaeda represents insurgency gone global.

It has been the argument of the Bush Doctrine that the rise of radical Islam is best met by freedom and political liberalism across the greater Middle East. In Iraq and the surrounding region, then, it is not that peace and security must precede democracy—but rather, that democracy itself will help pave the way for peace and security. There is more than wishful thinking in this strategy. Consider Afghanistan, where widespread turnout despite threats of violence in the presidential election marked a turning point in the counterinsurgency campaign, with growing numbers of Taliban surrendering in its wake and pursuing President Hamid Karzai's offer of reconciliation and demobilization.

The counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq still has a long way to go before the security situation there resembles the relative calm that has been achieved in Afghanistan, which itself still requires significant support and careful management by the U.S. military and its allies. But by holding firm on a January 30 election, the Bush administration is pursuing precisely what the strategic logic of its “forward strategy of freedom” demands—and, arguably, the last, best hope for Iraq.

## Notes

1. Dexter Filkins, “Rising Violence and Fear Drive Iraq Campaigners Underground,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2005.

2. Brent Scowcroft, “Charting a U.S. Foreign Policy Road Map for 2005 and Beyond,” roundtable discussion hosted by the New America Foundation, January 6, 2005, transcript available through [www.newamerica.net/index.cfm?pg=event&EveID=444](http://www.newamerica.net/index.cfm?pg=event&EveID=444).

3. “Facing Facts about Iraq's Election,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2005.

4. Larry Diamond, “How a Vote Could Derail Democracy,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2005.

5. Noah Feldman, “Iraq Can Wait for Democracy,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2004.

6. Adnan Pachachi, “Delay the Elections,” *Washington Post*, January 2, 2005.

7. Steven Metz, “Relearning Counterinsurgency,” AEI panel discussion, January 10, 2005, available through [www.aei.org/event982](http://www.aei.org/event982).

8. Doyle McManus, “U.S. Coaxing Sunnis to the Polls,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 2004.

9. Eric Schmitt, “New U.S. Commander Sees Shift in Military Role in Iraq,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2005.