

Middle Eastern Upheavals

Iraq Weathers the Political Storm

by Sterling Jensen

The Middle East political storm of early 2011 has had an interesting impact on Iraq. Though the government was confronted with almost daily demonstrations, which led to a number of high profile resignations and the use of force to suppress political dissent, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki felt sufficiently confident to boast that “Iraq has become the most stable country in the region.”¹ While this may seem a bold claim given the recent past, Maliki is not alone in showing confidence in Iraq’s prospects. The Sadrists, Kurds, and leaders of the primarily Sunni Iraqiya bloc have been equally upbeat about the country’s prospects while many Iraqi insiders believe that their battle-torn country will not only weather the instability but will also serve as a model for democracy.

Indeed, the democratic system established in Iraq through its second elected government in six years is becoming more representative and responsive to the people. While the country still has many sectarian and political differences to resolve in order to ensure its long-term stability, this system is likely to last due to four main elements: a representative government, an independent and transparent media, a professional security force, and a close relationship with the United States.

AN ELECTED GOVERNMENT

Iraqis were euphoric after the successful national elections of March 2010. Most local media stations, regardless of political slant, aired sound bites and discussions hailing the elec-

tions as blazing a democratic path for other Arab countries to follow. That euphoria quickly wore off as controversy over the election results and eight months of party negotiations followed. By December, media reports about the political process had become more depressing and fears of a new Maliki dictatorship grew. Yet once the government was formed, most Iraqis gave it a month-long honeymoon. During that period in mid-January, public demonstrations in Tunisia successfully removed Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, their 23-

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¹ *Iraq Daily Times* (Baghdad), Mar. 23, 2011.

year dictator, from power. Then in February, Husni Mubarak resigned in Egypt following protests. With an Arab League summit planned to take place in Baghdad at the end of March, Iraqi politicians, who had urged their own government to reform, also preached to their Arab counterparts on the need to learn from the Iraqi democracy.

The Iraqi Security Forces need to be more disciplined and politically neutral, especially during demonstrations.

The key for Washington will be to reinforce the importance of free and fair elections. In response to Arab instability, many government officials, including Maliki, called for the delayed local elections to take place.² This is not

the way ahead; Washington should help Iraqis prepare for local elections, then direct attention toward national elections in 2014. Following Mubarak's departure, Maliki announced he would not seek a third term.³ His statement of intent may help Iraq with a peaceful transfer of power in 2014, and Washington should press the prime minister to keep his word.

INDEPENDENT AND TRANSPARENT MEDIA

Iraq experienced its first nationwide demonstrations on February 25, 2011, in part in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. Prime Minister Maliki, who had previously encouraged citizens to exercise their constitutional rights to demonstrate peacefully—even against him—made an abrupt turnaround, and two days before what Iraqi organizers called the “Day of Rage,” patterned after the Egyptian “Revolution of Rage,” which started on January 25, decried the forthcoming event as a provocation by terrorists and Baathists. This ploy failed, and while there were scattered incidents of violence, such as the

2 See, for example, *The Boston Globe*, Mar. 1, 2011.

3 *Middle East Online* (London), Feb. 6, 2011.

deadly clashes in Mosul⁴ and the desecration of public property in Kut,⁵ the demonstrations have been relatively peaceful. Whenever the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) used excessive force, the domestic media gave extensive coverage to public outrage and dissatisfaction, driving the alarmed government to denounce any violations and to promise fact-finding investigations. Governors, mayors, and city councils resigned due to pressure from demonstrators,⁶ and the government significantly altered the 2011 budget to spend more on investment and immediate financial assistance in order to appease public demands.

This responsiveness would not have been forthcoming had there not been an independent and transparent media. The gap between the government and the people would have been much more difficult to bridge had the people been fed only state propaganda as in Libya, Egypt, and Syria.

Iraq's continued path to democracy and improved human rights will require U.S. and international pressure to keep the Iraqi media open and free. And while Washington has been reluctant to criticize the government, as it ends one of its most controversial and costly wars, it must not lose sight of the free media's role as democracy's watchdog.

A MORE PROFESSIONAL SECURITY FORCE

While the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have come a long way from the days of sectarian death squads in 2004-08,⁷ they have yet to establish the trust required to be considered a neutral and purely national force. Rather than being seen as sectarian, the ISF are now accused of politicization. As witnessed during the Day of

4 *The Guardian* (London), Feb. 25, 2011.

5 *Dawn* (Karachi), Feb. 26, 2011.

6 *Middle East Online*, Feb. 27, 2011; *The Washington Post*, Feb. 27, 2011.

7 *The Times* (London) Feb. 16, 2006; *BBC News*, Feb. 16, 2006.

Rage, and despite the government's attempt to portray them as neutral protectors of the people, the ISF proved more loyal to the incumbent political parties than to the people they were supposed to protect.⁸ On a positive note, when violations occurred, such as firing on demonstrators or closing down political offices, the media and public pressure have provided checks on the parties' use of the ISF for political purposes.

As long as the media remains free and the government representative, the ISF will become more apolitical. The respect the Egyptian army was shown by demonstrators was not overlooked

in Iraq. During Iraq's wave of demonstrations beginning with the Day of Rage, the majority of Iraqi television stations aired both demonstrators and members of the ISF voicing their hope to act as the Egyptian army and not suppress or prevent peaceful protests.⁹

Notwithstanding Maliki's invocation of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to discredit the demonstration, AQI and other violent groups have not used the protest to carry out high profile attacks. Mullah Nathem Jabouri, a former AQI religious leader, argued that while the organization would love to blow up a Tahrir Square packed with thousands of Shiites, it would not do so because the demonstrations were also undermining public trust in the ISF and the government.¹⁰

In order to gain, rather than lose, trust from

8 *The Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), Feb. 25, 2011.

9 Baghdadiya TV (Baghdad), Feb. 25, 2011; Sharqiya TV (Baghdad), Feb. 25, 2011.

10 Author telephone interview with Mullah Nathem Jabouri, Mar. 2, 2011.

Photo will not display.

Though the initial euphoria attending the successful national elections of March 2010 wore off as controversy over the election results and eight months of party negotiations followed, the democratic system established in Iraq through its second elected government in six years is becoming more representative and responsive to the people.

the demonstrations, the government will need to implement reforms and resist the impulse to use the ISF to quell public protest. Moreover, for Iraq to continue on the path of democracy, the ISF will need to be more disciplined and politically neutral, especially during public demonstrations. For their part, the United States and NATO should maintain their close relationship with the ISF so as to allow it to become more professional, which leads to the fourth element in guaranteeing Iraq's future as a stable democracy.

CLOSER TO WASHINGTON, FURTHER FROM TEHRAN

There is a growing fear among some experts, especially in the Persian Gulf states, that the Iranian regime's attempts to exploit the Arab instability will pull Baghdad closer to Tehran. In fact, the revolutions have taken Baghdad one step closer to Washington. Thus, for example, Jassib Moussawi, a prominent professor at Baghdad University, argued on state-run Iraqiya television in late February, just after Mubarak's res-

ignation, that “the U.S. neo-con plan to democratize the Middle East and help Arab human development has succeeded, and Iraq should strengthen its ties with the U.S. in order to become more of a model of democracy for the countries in the region.” He even urged the Iraqi parliament to extend the security agreement with the United States beyond 2011, all on the state-run TV station.¹¹ Statements such as these have become increasingly common in the Iraqi media.¹²

The Iraqi government wants greater regional respect and reassertion of its position in the Arab world. The nascent trend toward democracy and open society will place Baghdad more in the Western camp than in Tehran’s. Though at odds with Washington’s Persian Gulf allies, notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, due to their reluctance to accept a Shiite-led government, Baghdad will continue

to side with Washington rather than with Tehran as it develops its democratic potential still further. Iraq’s state television and Shiite politicians both condemned Tehran’s use of force against the Iranian opposition in February 2011,¹³ and they have been much more vocal about

Bahrain’s use of force against the emirate’s Shiite majority.¹⁴ While Sunnis and anti-Iranians might see this strong stance against Bahrain as an indication of Baghdad’s propensity to support Iranian interests in the region, it is important to distinguish between Iraqi and Iranian solidarity

on Shiite issues and their distinct individual national interests. Baghdad will show its solidarity with Tehran on Shiite-related issues in the region, but it will not do so at the expense of weakening its own political development. As Iraq achieves greater domestic stability, the government can be expected to display more confidence in its Shiite-led democracy that weakens, rather than strengthens, Tehran.

CONCLUSION

The Arab revolutions have given the Iraqi government added confidence that it will emerge from the last eight years of conflict stronger and more capable of playing a leading role in the Middle East in the next decade or two. Baghdad sees itself as an emerging economy and democracy that will need assistance from Washington and other Western states to accomplish these aspirations; and while Iraqi energy officials may be overly optimistic in predicting the daily export of ten million barrels of oil by 2021, exporting even half that quantity would greatly boost Iraq’s geopolitical weight.

The Persian Gulf states would be wise to stop viewing Iraq through a sectarian lens. If Baghdad is able to resolve its internal disputes peacefully and improve government efficiency through modest reforms, its future will be bright. An open media will help the people keep the government honest, and free and fair elections will make it more representative. U.S. administrations will need to stay close at hand although the U.S. relationship will no longer be based on security. Proximity to Washington will help check the government’s impulse to use the ISF for political purposes, silence the media, or not fully implement needed government reforms. Although the withdrawal of U.S. troops makes it easier for Baghdad to defy Washington, it is likely to rely on U.S. assistance in its attempt to become the model of Arab democracy it is beginning to approach.

Baghdad sees Iraq as an emerging economy and democracy that will need assistance from Washington.

11 Jassib Moussawi interview, Iraqiya TV (Baghdad), Feb. 18, 2011.

12 Hassan Snayd, Abdul Hadi Hamani, and Mahmood Othman, Sharqiya TV, Apr. 7, 2011; Borhan Mizher, Hurra Iraq TV (Baghdad), Mar. 29, 2011.

13 Iraqiya TV, Feb. 15, 16, 2011.

14 TVNZ (Auckland, New Zeal.), Mar. 17, 2011; *Kuwait Times* (Kuwait City), Mar. 21, 2011.

