Obstacles to democracy in the Middle East

Daniel Brumberg

Daniel Brumberg is a visiting scholar in the Carnegie Endowment’s Democracy and Rule of Law Project, on leave from his position as associate professor at Georgetown University. With a grant from the MacArthur Foundation, he is currently working on a comparative study of power sharing experiments in Algeria, Kuwait, and Indonesia. He previously was a Randolph Peace Fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace, and in 1997 was a Mellon Junior Fellow at Georgetown University and a visiting fellow at the International Forum on Democratic Studies. He is the author of many articles on political and social change in the Middle East and wider Islamic world. He is a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Democracy and the advisory board of the International Forum on Democratic Studies. He has a B.A. from Indiana University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

The war is over, but for Iraq's reformists and Shiite radicals, the battle has just begun, according to Daniel Brumberg, who framed the issues for Forum members and guests. Factor into this potentially volatile mix the influence of Iran's very mobile radical elements, and it's anybody's guess which side will prevail.

"There is a civil conflict going on between the Shiite clerics and the population. Who wins that conflict will have a huge impact, not only on the shape of a modern Iraq, but also on the fate of politics in Iran," said Brumberg.

"If the radicals prevail in Iraq, this will greatly reinforce the radical position in Iran. If the more pluralistic elements in Iraq prevail, this will reinforce the reformists." In either case, Iran is not on the verge of collapse as the neoconservatives in Washington believe. "As far as I'm concerned, this is a ridiculous notion."

"There are two scenarios for Iran. Either the hard liners remain in power and become more entrenched in their positions, or there's a very long process of political power struggle and liberalization that slowly but surely opens the place up a little bit more. "But a democratic Iran in the sense that is talked about in the neoconservative arena in Washington is not on the horizon," said Brumberg. "The Islamic Republic of Iran is not going away."

Power plays

After Saddam Hussein fell and the voices of the Shiites could be heard for the first time in more than thirty years, "the radical clerics of Iran assumed that the reemergence of Iraq's Shiite majority would provide an opening for them to assert their power."

Brumberg pointed out that the murder of liberal cleric Abdul Majid al-Khoei on April 7 was the beginning of the radicals' power play. Khoei had been in exile in London and had returned to Iraq on an American transport plane. He was murdered in the Shiite holy city of Najaf by a crowd linked to radical clerics who share the late Ayatollah Khoumeni's vision of Shiism.

"The radical clerical vision is probably the minority position, but minorities have a way of organizing that majorities don't have," said Brumberg. "The more moderate opposition has gone into hiding because they've been so threatened."

Does this mean that Iraq is in danger of becoming the Islamic Republic of Iraq, based on the theocratic model of Iran?

"The murder of Khoei was kind of a wake-up call to such a possibility," said Brumberg, adding that he doesn't think it will happen. "Any effort to create an Islamic republic would be a catalyst for civil war, not to
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the establishment of that republic. I think even the Iraqi Shiite clerics know this and will try to find some way to avoid it."

Brumberg referred to statements made by the Ayatollah al-Hakim who has returned to Iraq after twenty-three years of exile in Iran. "Hakim talks about the importance of religion in government. But he's not talking about establishing an Islamic republic along the lines of Iran. In part that's because the Iraqi Shiites are Arab; they don't want to be seen as emulating the Iranians."

But Hakim and other returning Iraqi leaders are viewed with suspicion by the population and not simply because they escaped Saddam Hussein's rule. "There are severe divisions within the Sunnis, Kurds and Shiites based on whether you're an insider or an outsider." While the outsiders have experience, they lack credibility within their own groups."

Bringing the outsiders and insiders together under one tent and finding some way of producing trust between them are huge challenges for the U.S. "We lack that international umbrella that would facilitate all these political pacts and accommodations between insiders and outsiders."

Will democracy work?

Politics in the Arab world is generally local in nature, determined by local conditions, said Brumberg. However, two issues have crossed borders to become regional in scope. One of these is the fate of Iraq.

"If Iraq is able to move toward some reasonably pluralistic competitive democracy, it will encourage political liberalization in the Arab world, a process that is already underway in Bahrain and Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco, and to some extent in Egypt."

However, Brumberg points out, "state-controlled political liberalization and democracy are not the same thing."

What are the differences?

"For a democracy you have to have a series of elections which gives the winners the capacity to establish a new government and, in effect, to change the nature of the political establishment.

"In the Arab world, we have things that look like political parties and political pluralism. In many states - Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, Lebanon, for example - there's a fairly open press and a lot of debate. But this pluralism and even elections doesn't lead to a change in the ruling establishment.

"If things go reasonably well in Iraq, I think that will be an impetus for more political liberalization, more openness in the region. But I don't think it's going to lead to democratization because the staying power of the Arab regimes is remarkable. They have extraordinary capacities to use and manipulate the opposition and things like elections to sustain their own rule.

"However, if things go badly in Iraq, if Iraq falls apart into feuds and even civil war, I think we're going to see retreats big time from political liberalization which right now provides these regimes with a safety valve to keep the opposition in line. So where Iraq goes is important for the Arab world, not in terms of great revolutions, but in terms of negative or positive evolutions."
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In divided societies, democracy isn't necessarily the panacea it appears to be. "The great dilemma for Iraq is: How do you move toward democracy without democracy becoming a vehicle of exclusion by which, let's say, the Shiites emerge as a majority and use the mandate of a democratic election to disenfranchise the Kurds, or particularly the Sunnis who persecuted the Shiites? In a country of profound divisions, like Iraq, democracy can make problems worse, not better."

What's needed is "a coherent definition of Iraqi identity that includes Shiites, Kurds and Sunnies, because the notion of identity was so distorted by Saddam Hussein and resulted in such violence.

"The challenge for Iraq is to produce a process of political change and democratization that creates a formula by which everybody knows in advance that they will have a place at the table after an election. Otherwise, the groups that stand to lose in an election have no rational reason to actually back a democracy."

Palestinian/Israeli conflict

The second regional issue that's causing the Arabs concern is the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. "This is the issue that matters most to young Arabs.

"I do believe that even if we are successful in establishing a Jeffersonian democracy in the heart of Baghdad -- which is not very likely -- unless the administration is able to resolve the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, it will make no difference and we will continue not to have any credibility in the region.

"I am very pleased that on a rhetorical level, Bush has given this issue so much attention. But I don't see the administration having the political will, particularly before the next election, to follow through and to put pressure on both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and to twist arms.

"Ultimately, if I'm pessimistic about the fate of Iraq, it has less to do with the internal dynamics of Iraq and more to do with the regional effects of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. It's going to make it very hard for the United States to have any credibility for the bigger agenda, which is the political liberalization/democratization of the region. We have zero integrity right now to promote that agenda.

"If the United States is seen as unwilling to invest its political capital to bring about a permanent solution to the conflict, any government in Baghdad will find itself hard pressed to deal with us."

According to the road map that's been developed, 2005 is the target date for a solution. To achieve this, "we need to have the political will to stand up to terrorists and say that we'll do everything we can to dismantle your operations and make the peace process occur at the same time."

Why did Saddam Hussein allow the war to go forward, knowing he would lose?

Giandomenico Picco: I wondered that, too. Why didn't Hussein just open the door, clean everything up and get the sanctions lifted? Then, three years later, when everybody seems at peace, he could start rebuilding what he wanted rebuilt. An Iraqi gentleman I asked, said: 'Saddam Hussein cannot afford to let his population believe that he does not have these kinds of weapons, because if his population knows that, six months later, he won't be there anymore.' Maybe that is one explanation."
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Dan Brumberg: "Hussein has obviously miscalculated for the last time. Wherever Saddam is right now, he's maybe thinking, 'If things get insecure enough and people blame the United States, maybe somehow I'll find a context by which I can re-assert my authority.' It sounds bizarre, but we don't have the handcuffs on him yet; although I think a comeback is highly unlikely.

Oil, a curse

Dan Brumberg: "Iraq is an oil rich country, but we know from experience with almost all oil rich countries that oil is a curse not a blessing. Because when you have that much economic power that's directly or indirectly controlled by the government, the government has the capacity to buy political support or punish its enemies. Moreover, the distortions of an oil-based economy make it very difficult for the emergence of independent little business sectors that are not dependent on the state. One of the big issues that is debated among U.S. government leaders is "How are we going to redefine the role of oil in Iraq and put some distance between the state, the government and the oil sector?"