The politics of democracy in the Middle East

Daniel Brumberg

Daniel Brumberg is a Senior Associate in the Carnegie Endowment's Democracy and Rule of Law Project and also an associate professor at Georgetown University. He previously was a Randolph Peace Fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace, where he pursued a study of power sharing in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In 1997, he was a Mellon Junior Fellow at Georgetown University and a visiting fellow at the International Forum on Democratic Studies. Brumberg is the author of many articles on political and social change in the Middle East and wider Islamic world. Among his recent publications is "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East" with coeditors Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner.

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.

In its desire to topple Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration failed to consider and prepare for the ramifications of a U.S. military occupation in postwar Iraq, said Daniel Brumberg in his address to the Global Executive Forum.

"Our efforts are blowing up in our faces, and nothing we try works because the realities on the ground are something that we just never planned for or felt were important to take into account."

The administration expected that the Shiites would hail U.S. troops as "liberators," and that understanding Islam, religion and culture was not a necessary component of the war strategy. The reality has been fierce guerrilla warfare and resistance from the Shiites, the group that benefitted most from Saddam's defeat.

Brumberg cited the fact that American soldiers are driving around Baghdad in Humvees without armored plating because the assumption was that the protection wasn't necessary. "The military is now trying to produce the armored plating, which will take another few months."

We were unprepared for the refusal of the Shiites' Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani to work with the interim council appointed by the U.S. When he demanded immediate elections for the purpose of creating an interim government which would then draft a constitution for Iraq, "we simply ignored Sistani at that point," said Brumberg.

"Finally, we were not prepared for the fact that Saddam was prepared, and it's pretty clear that this was something of a trap that was laid for us. Saddam had some plan to basically withdraw his best troops and come back and fight another day."

This lack of preparation and a strategy based more on wishful thinking than on knowledge "may explain why bringing democracy to Iraq, or encouraging democratization there, will be extremely difficult," said Brumberg.
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Obstacles to democracy

• Oil, it turns out, is a curse and one of the obstacles to the democratization of the region.

"Regimes use oil to purchase political support and, therefore, the taxation and representation nexus, which is so critical to American democracy, has not been so necessary in the Middle East.

"People are not demanding representation because the regime is a patriot state providing all the goodies. It completely alters the nature of the state-society relationship as we know it in the West. It is simply naive to think that we could find a simple solution to resolve that problem, given the fact that Iraq's economy depends on oil so much, and not only on the presence of oil, but on the use of oil to subsidize other parts of the economy.

• Ethnic-religious divisions of Iraqi society pit the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds against one another. The Shiites have a clear majority, with 60-65 percent of the population.

"Democracies by nature tend to have winners and losers, and elections tend to produce winners and losers. If elections can be used by one group to exclude the other, democracy becomes a problem not a solution.

"Elections and full democracy by themselves aren't necessarily going to be a solution because those who are the minority, and particularly the Sunni community, have a lot to lose in an election that rewards power to the majority."

The infrastructure and the power centers of the military under Saddam were dominated by the Sunnis, said Brumberg. When the U.S. disbanded the military, nearly 500,000 Sunnis lost their jobs. "So we tended to create fear in the Sunni community that a free election would result in a Shiite dominated state and the undermining of their political rights.

Given the fact that the Shiites have long been persecuted, "I suppose the Sunnis have a legitimate fear about the issue of political or even physical retribution."

• Islam is another obstacle to democracy, but the problem is not Islam itself, said Brumberg. "It's the political manipulation and use of Islam by political leaders who claim to represent Islamic identity. Sistani's demand that somehow the state has to represent Islamic identity brings up the basic question of who does the representing and how. Democracy is not an easy vehicle for that."

Democracy or despotism

Brumberg referred to a speech President Bush made in November in which he said, "The problem with the Middle East is we have despotism and no freedom. We have despotic regimes. And the choice is democracy or despotism."

This idea is "completely inappropriate for the Middle East," Brumberg said. "It assumes that liberty produces democracy, which is not the way it works in a region where political liberalization has been used, not as a vehicle for democratization but as an instrument to maintain authoritarian regimes."

Brumberg has coined the phrase "liberalized autocracy" to describe a system that allows its people a degree of political freedom in order to keep the lid on potentially explosive situations. The "freedom" acts
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as a safety valve, giving the opposition sufficient opportunity for expression so that it has a sense of participation, but not sufficient participation that it can threaten the regime.

"This practice is obviously useful for regimes. If you can control the opposition, then you have the best of all worlds: some semblance of political openness, and yet the persistence of autocracy."

Oppositions, too, find this practice useful as democracy is an unknown quotient that can't guarantee them the seat of power.

"Most mainstream oppositions, including Islamist parties, prefer to play in this nebulous world of liberalized autocracy by which they enter parliaments through limited elections, they participate up to a point, they express themselves, but they never have political power. It's a solution that in many respects works for them because full democratization is a black hole and may be either a prelude to political conflict, as it probably will be in Iraq, or the reimposition of authoritarianism of the worst kind.

"Liberal Islamists love liberalized autocracies because they're not interested in political power. They are interested in cultural power, ideological power and that's what these regimes give them. They want bottom-up change and they're very good at it.

While espousing democracy in the Middle East, the United States' foreign aid programs over the last eight to ten years are geared to sustaining the liberalized autocracies of our friends, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. "None of the programs ever get at the root of the problem: the nature of the state and how it operates."

All the aspirations of the Bush administration now hinge on how democracy shakes out in Iraq. "If we can just get that right, the administration believes, somehow it will have a demonstration effect on the rest of the region, and people who have been complacent about liberal autocracies, or who are fed up with them but not willing to act, will be so inspired by what is happening in Baghdad that the name of the political game in the Arab world will change."

But if our hopes of democratizing Iraq turn out to be misplaced, the result will be a negative demonstration affect not a positive one, de-liberalization rather than liberalization.

"Because when you try to fix something that wasn't broken in the first place, it's going to inspire all those Arab hard-liners to say 'I told you so,' and the United States gets blamed."

A guest suggested that it's easier to pursue our self-interests through liberalized autocracies than through uncertain democracies.

"Yes," said Brumberg, "but liberalized autocracy is also a trap because you never develop real democratic institutions," he said. "So there's this cycle of liberalization and de-liberalization which goes on and on and saps these regimes of their legitimacy."

A guest asked: "Is it possible that Islamic totalitarian regimes' cultural beliefs don't support the democratic process and never will?"

Said Brumberg: "It's not a matter of cultural beliefs, which are complex and contradictory, but the way they're politically organized. The largest Islamic party in the world is in Indonesia, which is on its way to being the largest Islamic democracy."
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"The Kurds and the Shiites, with the exception of the Shiite extremists, overwhelmingly want us to succeed. Of course, there are differences within these groups about what success means. The Shiites are democratic. Recent polls show that most of the Arab world is democratic; they want democracy. The problem is not what most people want, it's what a few people want. It's the capacity of the bad guys to organize that is the problem.

"So this is a huge gamble we're undertaking because this notion of hanging everything on Iraq is an easy way out of dealing with the real question: Should we really promote democracy in the Arab world? And if so, where?"

Consensus building must precede constitution

The U.S. charged the interim Iraqi governing council with the task of writing a constitution in a six-month time frame. "This effort fell apart because you have to have a basic agreement about the role of a constitution and its meaning in the society. It's a long process of negotiating and consensus building before you can get there," said Brumberg.

"It's not just a matter of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds; the whole question of a constitution raises profound differences and intentions within the Shiite community where there has been a violent struggle for political supremacy. Thus far the fundamentalists have been winning this struggle. They have taken power, and if there is a direct election, they are going to win.

Ayatollah Ali Sistani opposed the idea of a constitution written by the U.S. appointed council. So the Bush administration has adopted a new plan to hold a series of caucuses to gain input for what the constitution should look like. "The idea of caucuses is a complex process designed essentially to allow the appointed council control over the choices made by the caucuses."

Sistani nixed this idea too, calling for delegates to the caucuses to be elected by the Iraqi people. "So now we're caught between the council we appointed and Sistani."

Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani

Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani is the spiritual leader of the Shiite community, with a tremendous amount of influence over Iraq's future. He espouses the "quietist" tradition, which holds that clerics should be authority figures independent from politics and the day-to-day affairs of government.

Initially supportive of the U.S.-led effort to depose Hussein, the 73-year-old leader has condemned the U.S. plan to develop a constitution through a system of regional caucuses organized by the coalition and its appointed council.

Sistani wants Islam to be recognized in law as the religion of the majority of Iraqis, which happens to be Shiites. However, he has always rejected the Iranian model of the Islamic government.