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Iraq's Hard-Won Lessons for Future Transitions in the Middle East

by Peter J. Munson

Eight years after the American-led invasion of Iraq, the Middle East sits at a crossroads. The pressure, building well before 2003, has finally begun to burst the dam. The oppression and inhumanity were so intolerable that Mohamed Bouazizi, a roadside fruit seller unable to cough up a bribe to keep his roadside turf, immolated himself after Tunisian authorities beat him. This tipping point led to weeks of rage, felling the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators, setting Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria on razor's edge, and forcing at least token reforms in Oman, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The depths of the frustration felt across the region, however, indicate not the promise of rapid transitions to democratic rule, but rather the extent of the damage to society, economy, and politics that will have to be overcome. While it is a unique case, the Iraqi experience holds hard-won lessons for what lies ahead.

No matter how reviled the regime, it will always leave behind opportunists that profited from the status quo. While the regime's inner circle will be discredited, business people and powerbrokers not directly connected will seek to maintain their profitable positions or create new niches. In contrast to these powerful and well-organized elites, other actors in society are poorly organized and lack resources. As a result, the voice of the masses will be lost in a cacophony of independent politicians and small parties, while the powerful will organize quickly and back those groups most capable of safeguarding their interests. In this environment, democracy is less than ideally representative and positive change is slow to come by. On the economic side, extricating corrupt businessmen and politicians from the mix will cause necessary but significant disruptions.

Repressive rulers leave behind broken economies and societies. The economy is an inefficient trough from which elites seek opportunities to skim profits and power. Early privatization is an opportunity for elites to corner markets while inflation undercuts the average standard of living. Corruption and shades of lawlessness drive businesses into the shadows where government officials' hands are less likely to pry. Lawlessness and the shadow economy heighten the prevalence of concepts of "face," tribal and ethnic solidarity, and vengeance, just as they do in neighborhoods and business sectors like those found in Tony Soprano's New Jersey or other gang havens. In such an unpredictable world, people are less likely to put their faith and their future in each other's hands. Trust is low and xenophobia runs high. Divisions are many. Urban/rural, economic class, tribal, sectarian, ethnic, and many other markers of identity and interest balkanize the population. In all, these are significant barriers to the rapid establishment of democratic politics and a rational, liberal economy.

Iraq is in many ways a unique case that is all too often oversimplified. The Iraqi narrative is often reduced to terms of the Sunni and the Shi'a; the Awakening and the

Surge. The reality is far more complex, with all of the above factors and more yielding the chaos that gripped the state for years. The drawdown in violence owed as much to realignment of these divisions into acceptable power arrangements and the exhaustion of the hope that violence would profit as it did to the Surge or any high political resolution. Granted, the transition there was externally imposed, meaning perhaps that conditions were not as ripe for change as they may be in many Arab states today. Likewise, there is little or no foreign presence today to precipitate insurgency as there was in Iraq. For all the negatives of foreign involvement, Iraq also had significant foreign help. International experts were at hand to help with the matters of reconstruction, elections, and economic reform. Foreign governments applied significant diplomatic pressure to keep the political process on track and on timeline while making it clear that a relapse into authoritarianism would not be acceptable. In Iraq, a semblance of normalcy has returned. Lights are on and per capita gross domestic product is three times that in 2002. Even so, Iraq's latest government, nine months in forming, has yet to address some of the country's thorniest issues. Reforms demanded by Sunnis and Kurds are still outstanding. Crude oil production has returned to prewar levels only in the past few months. Violence, while far below the hellish levels of 2004 and 2005, continues. Iraq has come a long way, but is still haunted by the specters of dictatorship and war.

The Iraqi experience should remind us that transition is never as simple as toppling a regime, whether from within or without, and holding a vote. The scars of illiberal rule take years to overcome. Foreign assistance during the challenging times ahead for the Middle East should come at arm's length. It must eschew simplistic pronouncements on democracy and abstract references to the rule of law, focusing instead on shepherding the long process of finding a balance in society and economy that benefits most. Only with a reasonable amount of trust and equality will open politics flourish. The lessons of Iraq should not be that "we" could have done it more easily, more quickly, or better, although in some ways these observations may be true. The lessons should be that transition is an unpredictable and protracted process that cannot be predictably managed and must find legitimacy as a solution that stems from the host society. If open politics are to endure, they must come in a form "of the people, by the people, and for the people": not the American people, but the people of the Middle East. The results may be objectionable to doomsayers, but artificial, external solutions will not last and in our meddling we sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.

Peter J. Munson is a Marine officer, aviator, and Middle East Foreign Area Officer. His first book, Iraq in Transition: The Legacy of Dictatorship and the Prospects for Democracy (Potomac, 2009), details the social, political, and economic legacies of the Saddam era and their intersection with the American-led invasion and its aftermath. He is currently working on a new project, tentatively titled War, Welfare, and Democracy: Rethinking America's Quest for the End of Democracy. The views expressed here are his own and do not reflect the position of the United States Marine Corps or the Department of Defense.

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