

**IRAQIS’  
BLEAK VIEWS  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES**



*Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Abdul Hadi al-Khalili*

**F**IRST, I (al-Khalili) was carjacked right in front of my home. That was terrifying enough. But then, on April 28, 2004, I was kidnapped. I was riding in a car owned by a friend. Suddenly, a late-model BMW swerved in front of us, blocking our way. Three armed men jumped out, called me by name, and demanded that I come with them. I was handcuffed and blindfolded. They moved me from one car to another and then I was imprisoned in a small house occupied, strangely enough, by a woman and her three children. The kidnapers demanded that my family pay them \$500,000. My family desperately negotiated the ransom down to \$30,000. They paid and I lived.

Such was life in Iraq a year after the Americans overthrew Saddam Hussein. Kidnappings, killings, and carjackings were carried out in broad daylight. These acts were perpetrated by well-equipped, professional Iraqi criminals organized into gangs. The Iraqi police were, to put it most generously, not committed to stopping this organized crime. After my ordeal, for example, not a single Iraqi official wished to enquire about the details of my kidnapping in order to catch the criminals or to gather information that might help them prevent future attacks. Many middle-class

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and professional Iraqis responded to this nearly unfettered criminality by fleeing the country or by greatly curtailing their activities.

Here is the tragic irony. Crimes like carjacking, murder, and kidnapping were nearly unheard of during the years of Saddam's repressive police state. The United States successfully dismantled Saddam's government but completely failed to bring a sense of law and order to the nation of Iraq. This failure was disastrous. Worse, the Americans' failure to insure domestic security for Iraqis was and is not the only problem keeping Iraqis from embracing or even accepting the United States as a true friend. Iraq and the United States (as well as Great Britain and Iraq) have an uncomfortable history that few Americans know but that few Iraqis have forgotten. To understand Americans' difficulties in convincing Iraqis that the United States can and should be their ally, some of that history has to be communicated. This historically conditioned perspective combines with the contemporary predicament to explain a great deal about what must be done if Iraqis are to perceive the United States in a more favorable light.

We aim to highlight four key phases during which Iraqis, generally but not totally, came to share strongly negative or cynical views of the United States. The first phase came right after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which was punctuated in Iraq with the Ba'ath Party takeover in 1968. Then, in 1980, Iraqis became focused on the Iran-Iraq War. As a result, the Saddam regime, which had total control of the mass media, toned down its anti-U.S. rhetoric as a means to garner American support for its war against Iran. This stage in Iraqis' perceptions of the United States ended in August 1990 when Saddam, in an attempt to stop the United States from ending the takeover of Kuwait, used his control of the mass media to focus the nation's hatred toward the United States. This era of unrelenting anti-Americanism lasted throughout the 1991 Gulf War and the twelve years of UN-imposed sanctions. The fourth phase began after the American occupation, which resulted in the emergence of an independent Iraqi media and numerous civil society organizations that tended to blast the United States for its mishandling of the occupation or for simply being an aggressive imperialist nation.

These four phases have produced, to put the matter schematically, some common Iraqi perceptions of the United States. Many Iraqis argue, sometime in only inchoate forms, that American policy in Iraq is re-

peating the same disastrous mistakes British imperialists made in their administration of Iraq after 1920. And a great many people have continued to believe the view of the United States spread so effectively and sometimes quite accurately by the Saddam regime that the United States is a neocolonialist, pro-“Zionist” power that wants to steal Iraq’s oil resources.

### *The Rise of the Ba’ath and Anti-Americanism in Iraq*

First, a bit of deep historical context: the modern nation of Iraq since the sixteenth century had comprised three provinces of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. British forces overran these provinces toward the end of World War I, beginning a military occupation that was met with widespread resistance among Iraq’s tribes, as well as other segments of the Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish communities. The events culminated in 1920 in what is referred to by the Iraqis as the “Great Revolt.” Iraq gained independence in 1932. However, the ruling monarchy had signed an Anglo-Iraqi treaty that allowed Great Britain to intervene in Iraq’s domestic affairs. The British interference in Iraqi affairs fiercely alienated many segments of its population. In 1958, Iraqi military officer Abdul Karim Qassim overthrew the monarchy in a military coup and ended its pro-Western stance. Qassim’s government was overthrown on February 8, 1963, by elements of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party and the military. However, the Ba’ath Party held power for only nine months, until they were purged from the government by factions loyal to General Abdul Salam Arif.<sup>1</sup> Much of the public discourse in Iraqi circles from the 1920s to 1958 expressed hostility toward British control over Iraq’s affairs.

This hostility was slowly redirected toward the Americans after the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors.<sup>2</sup> After Israel’s lightning victory, the United States began to side far more openly with Israel, in part in an effort to confront Arab states supported by the USSR. As a result of this heavy tilt toward Israel, Iraq broke off diplomatic ties with the United States in 1967.<sup>3</sup> Just a year after this war, on July 30, 1968, a second Ba’ath coup brought General Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr to power. He presided as president of Iraq, and his cousin, Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti served as vice president.<sup>4</sup> The basic principles of the Ba’ath

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Party were socialism and pan-Arab unity, and the party officially declared, with justification, that the United States opposed both of these goals.

Ba'athist hostility towards the United States became more pronounced after the 1973 October War, in which Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel in an attempt to regain lands they lost in the 1967 war. Many Arabs, including the Iraqis, blamed the United States, which supplied Israel with emergency military supplies, for the Arab defeat in this war. Thereafter, Iraqis perceived Israeli actions throughout the region as part and parcel of American "imperialism."<sup>5</sup>

The official Iraqi discourse in the 1970s emphasized Iraq's policy of nonalignment while condemning U.S. imperialism and U.S. support for the "racist-Zionist entity" (i.e. Israel) or what was euphemistically referred to as the "Washington–Tel Aviv Axis."<sup>6</sup> During this period, Iraqi writers regularly condemned the alleged "Zionist conspiracy" to control American foreign and domestic policy: "Since Presidential candidates in the United States know it is unthinkable to win anything without Zionist support, they have come to the natural conclusion that the more weapons they promise [Israel], the more likely they are to win elections."<sup>7</sup>

In the aftermath of the 1973 October War, Arab oil-producing nations imposed an oil embargo to punish the United States and the West for supporting Israel. The Iraqis believed that the United States, in response, wanted a military base in the Middle East to attack Arab oil countries and gain a ready supply of oil.<sup>8</sup> In the mid-1970s Iraqi government sources stated over and over again that American support for Kurdish rebels was aimed at gaining a military base in northern Iraq. From 1974 to 1975, the government-controlled press and government spokesmen claimed that the United States, Iran, and Israel were colluding to create the Kurdish "separatist insurrection" in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> When President Carter attempted to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict in the late 1970s, Iraqis claimed that the United States was merely covering up its real intentions, to "further plunder Arab oil."<sup>10</sup> When Egyptian president Anwar Sadat sought a peace treaty with Israel with American help, Iraqi officials labeled him an Arab "defeatist," unlike the Iraqis who were at the forefront of the "Arab patriotic movement."<sup>11</sup>

This anti-Americanism continued after Saddam Hussein officially took power as president in July 1979.<sup>12</sup> Hussein blasted Carter, claiming

that he was scheming to control Arab oil. Saddam also invoked an analogy that would be used repeatedly during the 1990–91 Gulf crisis: the Vietnam War. He argued that the United States had suffered a devastating setback after the Vietnam War and that the Americans had failed to heed the lesson of this conflict: “These were too well known lessons to be forgotten by the imperialists. However, the contemporary incumbents of the White House, State Department and the Pentagon needed a breather to absorb the shock of the Vietnam debacle. They therefore, decided to lie low for some time.”<sup>13</sup> The Vietnam analogy gave the Iraqis the impression that the Americans could not stomach another conflict with high casualties, a theme that would prove significant during the 1991 Gulf crisis.

### *An Iraqi-U.S. Rapprochement?*

After the Iranian government of Shah Riza Pahlavi collapsed and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini made his triumphant return to Tehran on February 1, 1979, Iraq was overjoyed. The Saddam regime perceived the shah as an American puppet in the region and, at first, welcomed the new Iranian government’s anti-U.S. position. However, this relationship quickly changed, as Saddam Hussein feared that Iran’s Islamic revolution could spread to Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

On September 22, 1980, Iraqi aircraft attacked bases near the Iranian capital of Tehran, marking the first day of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>15</sup> In a November 1980 interview, Iraqi foreign minister Sadun Hammadi justified the attack by claiming that the United States was trying to establish a long-term friendship with Khomeini’s government: “Obviously, the United States does not want the war to come to an end in such a way as to involve the settlement of the dispute in favor of Iraq.”<sup>16</sup> Ironically, events seven years later proved the exact opposite, as the United States intervened to end the war on terms favorable to Iraq.

As Iraq found itself on the defensive following the Iranian offensives of June 1982, the government declared that it was willing to negotiate a settlement. At this juncture, official Iraqi rhetoric against the United States was toned down, as the leadership hoped that the American superpower would intervene and end the conflict. In November 1984, the

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Iraqis successfully restored diplomatic relations with the United States.<sup>17</sup> The United States enforced an arms embargo on Iran, but not on Iraq. The new relationship even survived the grave difficulties produced by the Reagan administration's secret supplying of arms to the Iranian government (the Iran-Contra affair) and then the Iraqis' accidental missile attack on the USS *Stark* that killed 37 American sailors.<sup>18</sup> President Reagan chose to blame Iran for the attack, stating that it had escalated tensions in the Gulf and thus had created the context in which the tragedy occurred.<sup>19</sup>

Despite occasionally condemning Iraqi military atrocities, throughout the 1982–88 period the United States shared satellite photos of Iranian troop movements with the Iraqi government.<sup>20</sup> The United States, fearing that an Iranian victory would result in the spread of Khomeini's revolution through the oil-rich Gulf states, chose to treat the enemy of their primary regional enemy as its friend. The U.S.-supplied photos led to Iraqi victories on the battlefield, bringing the war to an end on terms favorable to Iraq. This U.S. covert support was known to segments of Iraqi society during the war, and it was widely reported after the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq as an example of American duplicity. Several influential Iraqis have told us in recent conversations that U.S. aid during the Iran-Iraq War convinced them at the time that the United States government supported Saddam's regime and wanted to keep Hussein in power.

### *Saddam's Hostility toward the United States*

Official Iraqi perceptions of the United States quickly deteriorated after the Iran-Iraq War. On February 15, 1990, a U.S. Voice of America commentary broadcast in Iraq, made after Romanian dictator Ceaușescu was overthrown, stated that Saddam Hussein's dictatorship would likely collapse in a similar fashion.<sup>21</sup> This commentary, not surprisingly, made Saddam furious, and he and his inner circle feared that the United States was out to get them. These fears had begun to grow in the immediate aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War. Not without reason, Saddam was convinced that the United States, in collaboration with Israel, wanted to undermine Iraq's emergence as a regional power. He held such conceptions

despite the fact that the United States had provided substantial economic and intelligence aid to Iraq during the war itself.

We have unusually detailed insight into Saddam's views of the United States during the key years of 1989–91 because numerous Iraqi documents were left in Kuwait after the retreat of its forces during the Gulf War.<sup>22</sup> These documents reveal that Saddam and high Ba'ath Party officials believed that the Americans intended to assume the role that the British played in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The British were perceived as acting against the Arab world, splitting it up by imposing arbitrary borders and exploiting its natural resources. In this vein, the United States was maintaining the colonial legacy of Great Britain. Given that the Soviet Union was collapsing, the Iraqis perceived that no power existed to check American designs on the Middle East.<sup>23</sup>

Saddam's concerns over unchecked American power during this period compounded his profound belief in an American-led conspiracy, supported by Israel and Kuwait, to overthrow his rule. Saddam viewed the Kuwait invasion not as an offensive operation but rather as a preemptive maneuver aimed at stopping the American effort to overthrow him and gain control of Iraqi oil. A document from Saddam, issued to Iraqi military commanders in 1990, reveals his deep suspicions of U.S. aims; it asserts his belief that the United States was conspiring with Israel against Iraq. It states, "The American-Zionist union against our country means to steal the natural resources of the Arab world, under an international umbrella and the approval of the Security Council."<sup>24</sup>

In the face of American belligerency in 1990 and 1991, Saddam and at least some of his loyalists laid their hopes on the "Vietnam syndrome." Saddam seemed to truly believe that the United States would quit the war if his army could inflict enough casualties on the Americans. Saddam was well aware that in 1983 the Reagan administration had withdrawn from Lebanon after incurring relatively few casualties. The following directives were sent by Saddam to the Iraqi military on the eve of Operation Desert Storm: "Try to cause many casualties and have a long war. Wait underground for the end of the air attack."<sup>25</sup> While things did not go quite as Saddam had hoped during Operation Desert Storm, his perception of American resolve in the face of mass casualties was not changed, since Americans chose not to carry the war to Baghdad in order,

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he believed, to avoid American battlefield deaths. Essentially, Saddam continued to hold on to the Vietnam analogy from the 1970s until his last war in 2003.

In the immediate aftermath of the first United States–Iraq war anti-Saddam Iraqis found their own reasons for not trusting the United States. In 1991, President Bush Sr. publicly asked Iraqis to revolt against Saddam Hussein. When the Shias revolted in the south and the Kurds in the north, Bush withdrew his offer of support, and Saddam’s army slaughtered the insurgents. Not only did the United States not support the insurgents, many Iraqis believe that specific American actions led directly to Saddam’s maintenance of his power. First, the United States had declared a cease-fire before Iraq’s Republican Guards were destroyed. Those very soldiers suppressed the twin uprisings that shook the country in the aftermath of the 1991 war. Numerous Iraqis point out that the United States allowed the Republican Guards to move across territory held by the Americans and that U.S. troops kept the poorly equipped insurgents from acquiring arms at Iraqi arms depots. Many Kurds and Shias also state that the United States allowed Iraqi helicopters to fly after the cease-fire; these gunships helped to slaughter the rebels. Some Iraqis believed that the United States failed to intervene on behalf of the Kurdish and Shia rebels out of fears that their success would lead to collapse of the Iraqi government and the dismemberment of Iraq, creating chaos in the region or a Shia Islamic republic closely allied to Iran. In sum, Iraqis were convinced that the United States, despite rhetoric by the first President Bush, wanted to keep Saddam in power. And anti-Saddam elements in Iraq, including Kurds, learned to be wary in the extreme of American promises.

### *Post–Gulf War Perceptions*

When U.S. forces concluded Operation Desert Storm on April 11, 1991, the war against Iraq did not completely end. Instead, a low-intensity conflict began from that day, with sanctions, UN weapons inspections, covert CIA support for the Iraqi opposition, failed coup attempts, and numerous air raids against Iraqi radar stations, intelligence headquarters, and missile sites.



The United States justified stationing a large military presence in Saudi Arabia to counter the “Iraqi threat” to Kuwait. At the same time, U.S. arms sales to the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, increased dramatically after the 1991 Gulf War. These military acts deepened Iraqis’ suspicions of the United States. First, many Iraqis believed that the U.S. troop presence had nothing to do with the “Iraq threat” but rather was aimed at controlling the world’s oil supply. Second, Iraqis were convinced that the United States greatly exaggerated Saddam’s threat to other Gulf countries in order to keep the American arms industry alive after the end of the Cold War.

In the immediate aftermath of Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. administration mistakenly predicted that Hussein would be overthrown by his own military. Both American and British intelligence services repeatedly tried to foment a coup within the Ba’ath regime.<sup>26</sup> Their goal was to overthrow Saddam but leave his Sunni-dominated totalitarian state intact. As these attempts failed, many Iraqis were convinced that the coup attempts were not genuine and that the United States wanted Hussein to stay in power. Other well-informed Iraqis argued that the U.S. desire to keep the Ba’athist regime in power sans Saddam Hussein proved America had no desire for democracy to take root in Iraq. These views of U.S. policy contributed to sophisticated Iraqis’ suspicion of U.S. motives and goals during and after Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Anti-U.S. feelings in Iraq intensified in the dozen years that followed the first United States–Iraq war. The sanctions regime imposed on Iraq, aimed at pressuring the Saddam government to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction program, grievously hurt the Iraqi people. Saddam blamed the United States for the sanctions and their terrible societal impact. While the sanctions were, of course, placed under a United Nations resolution, most Iraqis blamed the United States for continuing the embargo. And here is an unexpected twist to the story. Even educated Iraqis during this period believed that the sanctions were actually an American ploy aimed at helping Saddam stay in power. As they saw it, the sanctions enabled Saddam to strengthen his grip over the nation because his regime was able to control rations distribution. This control over food, fuel, and the necessities of life gave the regime immense power over individual Iraqis, and it also enabled Saddam and his cronies to gain great wealth, as they took kickbacks by awarding contracts to foreign companies via

the UN Oil-for-Food program. This hidden support was inflated, in the minds of Iraqis, to the point where many, even in the most educated strata of society, believed that Saddam had to be a CIA agent.

### *Post–September 11 Perceptions*

While Saddam was ecstatic that he outlived the political career of his rival George Bush Sr., Iraqis opposed to the Hussein regime hoped that Bush's son would complete the job his father failed to finish. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks seemed to make that possibility more likely. On September 12, the Iraqi government, via official Baghdad-based Republic of Iraq Television, praised the attacks, the only country in the Middle East to do so. The Iraqi declaration stated, "The American cowboy is reaping the fruits of his crimes against humanity."<sup>27</sup> The term "cowboy" was a common rhetorical tool in the Iraqi media to convey U.S. foreign policy recklessness and to suggest that this "gun-toting" country was determined to dominate the Middle East. The declaration further stated, "It is a black day in the history of America, which is tasting the bitter defeat of its crimes and disregard for peoples' will to lead a free and decent life." The September 12 statement continued: "The collapse of U.S. centers of power is a collapse of U.S. policy, which deviates from human values and stands by world Zionism at all international forums to continue to slaughter of the Palestinian Arab people and implement U.S. plans to dominate the world under the cover of what is called the new world order. These are the fruits of the new US order."<sup>28</sup>

This statement, while obviously propagandistic, hit most of the key points that alienated Iraqis from the United States. First, it connected the United States to Israel, referring to the "American-Zionist alliance." Second, it called on Iraq's overwhelming support for the Palestinian people. Finally, it referred to the first Bush's call for a "new world order," which Iraqis saw as nothing more than U.S. global domination. The September 11 attacks served the Iraqi leadership as vicarious revenge for a war launched against its nation more than a decade earlier.

By 2003, most Iraqis had lived under the Saddam dictatorship for most or all of their lives. That dictatorship controlled the media and education. Through these controls, as well as through simple terror and

brutal repression, the Saddam regime had indoctrinated its people to withstand three wars and a decade of sanctions by deflecting Iraq's problems onto an external foe: the United States of America. By the time Saddam's state collapsed, many Iraqis had internalized the anti-American discourse of the Ba'athist regime. Not surprisingly, many anti-Ba'athist Iraqis today who are critical of the United States continue to use the same basic words and themes to attack it. While Saddam may have not been popular with all segments of Iraqi society, the themes extrapolated in his speeches obviously struck a chord among many Iraqis. The language and tactics used during the current insurgency demonstrate that many discursive remnants from the former regime continue to resonate in Iraq today.

### *Iraqis Perceptions of the United States in a Post-Saddam Iraq*

It is not easy to determine how Iraqis feel about the United States in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War. Only a select group of Iraqi political factions command any respect and authority. And since Saddam systematically destroyed Iraqi civil society, the kinds of forums in which free speech, public debate, and serious inquiry occur are few and far between. Combined with the generally upbeat views from U.S. politicians or optimistic predictions from photogenic Iraqi political figures, a true Iraqi voice is absent in the debate on this nation's future, and it is that voice which needs to be examined in order to fully appreciate Iraqi perceptions of the United States.

It is not easy to understand what the "Iraqi street" is saying. Public opinion polls in Iraq are conducted by local partisan institutions, and few international polling organizations have conducted recent studies. On-the-street interviews and call-ins on Iraqi talk shows express views of the general public, but they are usually edited or screened to suit the channel's agenda. Because of these limitations, we have set out to examine how the emerging political and intellectual elites in Iraq perceive America, combined with our own personal experiences of talking with groups of Iraqis to get a sense for the contemporary Iraqi response to the U.S. presence in Iraq. Examining their statements can help gauge sentiments among common Iraqis. While the role of the United States in Iraq

and the nature of Iraq's developing state are matters hotly contested, these opinions are rarely examined in an analytical fashion.

One of the questions we tried to answer is the common American one: why didn't Iraqis welcome U.S. troops with open arms after they "liberated" Iraq. When the now deceased Ayatollah al-Hakim, leader of one of Iraq's Shia parties, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), was asked why the Iraqi Shia, long oppressed by the Saddam government, failed to revolt and support the U.S. advances during the 2003 Iraq war, he said, "There are a number of reasons why there has not been an uprising, most important of which is that Iraqis perceive the United States as an occupying rather than a liberating force. The second reason has to do with people's strong sense of nationalism, the painful memories of the war of 1991 and the fear that anyone who rises up against the regime will be crushed."<sup>29</sup> As we underlined earlier, because of past American policy, many Iraqis believed that Saddam was a creation of the United States. Therefore, many Iraqis saw no reason to thank the United States for removing him.<sup>30</sup> While many Iraqis were happy to see Saddam Hussein leave, they did not necessarily believe they had to thank the United States for removing him, and they feared that the American occupation might just well be a new form of subjugation.

Furthermore, many Iraqis were deeply suspicious of how U.S. troops acted in the immediate aftermath of the war. They quickly realized that in the post-Saddam Iraq the United States had clear priorities that were not those of the Iraqi people. While looting of hospitals and museums and general lawlessness terrified and saddened the people, U.S. troops guarded oil facilities and the Oil Ministry, giving the impression Americans cared little about the Iraqi people but a great deal about safeguarding Iraq's oil.<sup>31</sup> Following the looting, the United States chose not to stop the waves of revenge killings and humanitarian crises or to reconstruct devastated infrastructure. The American authorities failed to deal effectively with the power grabs of warlords, independent militias, and tribal leaders, or to stop land grabs or the dangerous meddling of Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Nor did the U.S. authorities handle wisely the touchy issue of the "de-Ba'athification" of Iraq.

While the Iraqis were critical of the United States for the aforementioned failings, they were most critical of the Americans' inability to re-

store security in Iraq. Many Iraqi believe that the Americans encouraged chaos to give them a pretext for maintaining an extended force deployment in Iraq.

Ironically, some Iraqis have called for a ruthless dictator to bring security back to Iraq, rejecting the Americans' stated goal of installing a liberal elected leader. Many, many Iraqis wondered: After the eight-year Iran-Iraq War and after the 1991 Gulf War, with no help from anyone, the Iraqi people successfully reconstructed their own country and maintained domestic security. How is it that the most advanced and most wealthy country in the world, the United States, has failed to bring about basic security and economic reconstruction? Iraqis note that despite UN-imposed sanctions, Saddam Hussein rebuilt his country after 1991 more effectively and quicker than has the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority. Hence, some Iraqis desire the return of a firm and authoritative leader.

### *The Beginnings of an Insurgency*

Several specific blunders on the part of the American occupiers greatly contributed to the rise of armed resistance in Iraq. On April 29, 2003, as many as thirteen Iraqis, protesting the American military presence in Falluja, a town west of Baghdad, were gunned down by American soldiers. On the following day the U.S. army fired on another crowd of one thousand protesters demonstrating over the thirteen civilian deaths.<sup>32</sup> The Iraqis of Falluja were most upset over the fact that American soldiers made no attempts to apologize for the deaths of innocents in the crowds. If the U.S. authorities had made an immediate formal and serious apology for the tragic deaths it had caused, a great deal of trouble may well have been avoided. Instead, the Americans did nothing, which produced a deep-rooted desire for revenge among the Fallujans that continues to this day and has made this small town a focal point of Iraqi discontent with the United States. Similarly, the way the U.S. military conducted searches and military operations in Falluja, and other towns and cities throughout Iraq, indicated disrespect for Iraqi culture, creating an unhealthy atmosphere between civilians and the Coalition military.

Such “offending” actions included indiscriminate killings of civilian bystanders, oftentimes members of tribes whose fellow tribesmen then felt a mandatory duty according to their code of honor to exact revenge against Coalition forces. Other humiliating offenses included arrests of tribal chiefs, the frisking of Iraqi females by U.S. male soldiers at checkpoints, and using dogs, an animal considered unclean in Islam, to conduct searches. All of these events contributed to what would be later termed the “Iraqi insurgency,” centered around Falluja. On May 1, President Bush landed aboard a U.S. aircraft carrier and announced the end of major battle operations in Iraq.<sup>33</sup> Little did he know that the hardest battle had begun: winning the “hearts and minds” of the Iraqis.

The second mistake made by the United States in the mind of the Iraqis was when the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), led by Paul Bremer, disbanded the Iraqi army. Not only did Bremer not have enough U.S. troops to keep the peace, but he dissolved the last symbol of Iraqi sovereignty. This action and similar actions—dissolving the intelligence services and all police forces—are widely perceived by Iraqis as a colonial humiliation reminiscent of the British rule. Many Iraqis agree that some of these forces were corrupt and had to be removed. However, Iraqis also argue that many elements of the former military could have been won over to the Coalition side if their salaries were paid. Disbanding the Iraqi army, one of nation’s largest employers, sent many disgruntled men with combat training into the ranks of the Iraqi insurgency. Even Saddam Hussein realized he could not disband the Iraqi military after the Iran-Iraq War, for doing so would send bands of restless warriors into the streets and possibly in the direction of the Presidential Palace. In this case, Bremer could have learned a few lessons from the detested dictator. After losing their jobs, many former military and intelligence employees simply had to find ways to get paid; at least some chose, with deadly consequences, to take money offered by terrorist sources.

The United States has blamed the violence in Iraq on “the insurgency,” suggesting that one group foments all the internal disturbances. Really, multiple “insurgencies” rage throughout Iraq. Some insurgents are former Saddam Hussein loyalists, while others are Iraqis who loathed Saddam but loathe the Americans even more. Other insurgents are sym-

pathetic to Osama bin Ladin, a man who personally despised Saddam Hussein.<sup>34</sup> However, the label “the insurgency” is a convenient tool, as it simplifies the nature of the threat from this multifaceted guerrilla war. Many Iraqis cite how the U.S. pins the violence in Iraq conveniently on either the fedayeen, Saddam’s former militia, or Al Qaeda. However, Iraqis point out that inadequate American forces allowed the terrorists to infiltrate Iraq’s borders in the first place. Some Iraqi do not use the label “insurgency” but the more sympathetic term *al-muqawama*, or “the resistance,” linking the Iraqi case with the Algerian resistance to the French in the 1960s or the Palestinian intifada against the Israelis. Some Iraqis criticize the U.S. media and government statements that typically claim that violent actions are only occurring in a small swath of territory referred to as the “Sunni Arab Triangle,” a geographic area that includes the restive towns of Falluja, Ramadi, and Tikrit, Saddam Hussein’s birthplace. Iraqis argue that this label is misleading as it confines the violence to a small area, whereas in fact violence has struck almost every part of the country.

### *The Sadr Uprising*

After major hostilities ended in April 2003, the U.S. administration in Iraq expected to rely on the relative stability of the Arab Shia south, as opposed to the Arab Sunni heartland, where guerrilla attacks occurred on a nearly daily basis. While many Iraqi Shias held critical perspectives on U.S. policy in Iraq, these criticisms had never turned into violence. The conflict between Muqtada al-Sadr and U.S. forces signaled the spread of bitter anti-American perceptions that fueled a violent uprising in the south of Iraq. Sadr is a young cleric who inherited his father’s credentials as a prominent critic of the Saddam Hussein government. After years of hiding, Sadr reappeared in Najaf when the American military captured the city. On October 10, 2003, al-Sadr called for the establishment of a rival government to challenge the U.S. Coalition-sponsored Iraqi Governing Council.<sup>35</sup> His declaration was the first organized Shia response from a community that had for the most part acquiesced to the American presence.

The Americans responded angrily to this new challenge. In April 2004, the American authorities hurt their credibility by ordering the closure of the al-Sadr-linked weekly newspaper *Al-Hawza*, stating that it carried articles that “stirred up hatred.” Ironically, by shutting the paper down, the Americans incited the violence they had tried to avoid. Afterwards, Coalition soldiers were ambushed by Sadr’s militia, the Mahdi Army in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala and in the neighborhood of Baghdad known as Sadr City, a stronghold of al-Sadr. The pro-Sadr preachers in the mosques of this area proclaimed that this area was an “American-free zone.”

Sadr had not always been violently opposed to the United States. The CPA had, for several months, turned a “blind eye” to his militia, and, at first, al-Sadr had stressed that his followers only conduct civil disobedience to challenge the CPA. Still, he was always vehemently opposed to the American presence in Iraq, and he had opposed religious leaders such as the revered Ayatollah al-Sistani, who had begrudgingly acquiesced to the CPA’s attempt to establish a post-Saddam leadership.<sup>36</sup> Sadr’s uncompromising hatred of the American presence in Iraq was given far greater credibility by another one of the Americans’ blunders.

The U.S. military decision to imprison Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib prison was a terrible error in judgment. It greatly angered the Iraqi populace even before the scandalous nature of that imprisonment was well known. The facility was synonymous with the tortures and executions that typified life under Saddam. The United States had promised that such living nightmares were over. Not only did the United States continue to use Abu Ghraib, but Iraqis learned they had continued to torture people within its bloody walls. The pictures released in April 2004 of U.S. military interrogators torturing and humiliating naked Iraqi prisoners will symbolize the failings of the American “liberators” in Iraq for years to come.

Anti-American factions in Iraq were quick to use the infamous photos to their advantage. A spokesman for Muqtada al-Sadr claimed that Iraqis detained in Saddam’s prisons were treated better than in the American-run prisons. He concluded: “This is a very good opportunity for the whole world to know that the alleged democracy is a lie and falsehood.”<sup>37</sup> American errors of judgment are often seen in Iraq as the true face of American power.



### *Kurdish Perceptions*

The Kurds, generally, are an exception to the general rule of Iraqi discontent with their American occupiers. Though the Kurds were abandoned by the United States during their revolt in the mid-1970s, most have stood by the United States since the overthrow of Saddam. For example, in the Iraqi town of Dohuk, forty-five minutes from the Turkish border, one is greeted by a sign, "God Bless the Coalition." Dohuk is the only town in Iraq where American soldiers can walk around unarmed. In fact, they come to Dohuk for short vacations while on duty in various other parts of Iraq. Another sign in Dohuk reads, "Thank God for Our New Constitution." The Kurds have generally been content with the nature of political change in Iraq, as they have won several major concessions, including the establishment of the Kurdish Regional Government, an autonomous entity in the north that enjoys substantial powers within Iraq.

However, even the Kurds have their concerns. The Kurds worry about perceived American favoritism toward the Shia. The next flash point between the United States and the Kurds will likely emerge over the city of Kirkuk. This city is divided among ethnic Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmens, and Sunnis, Shias, and Christians. Some call it the Iraqi Jerusalem, and like that contested city, Kirkuk has witnessed almost daily armed skirmishes over control of neighborhoods and its long-term demographic fate. The Turkmen minority of Iraq, closely allied with Turkey, accuse the United States of turning a blind eye to what they term a Kurdish-led "ethnic cleansing" of the city.

Kirkuk is more than a symbol; it sits atop one of the largest oil fields in the Middle East. The American government has made it clear that it intends to secure the Kirkuk oil fields, and it has established a military base and airfield literally just outside of the oil fields to protect this asset. In return, Iraqi insurgents angry over American control of this valuable resource have lobbed mortar shells at the base on an almost daily basis. Then, too, the Kurdish political parties want complete control of the oil-rich Kirkuk region and fear that the United States will not give it to them, since doing so could prompt Turkey to intervene to prevent a powerful Kurdish entity from forming in the north of Iraq. So even as the Americans have gained an ally among the Kurdish people of Iraq, the long-term fate of this special relationship remains unclear.

### *Perceptions of U.S.-Sponsored Democracy*

Throughout Iraq, people animatedly discuss the course of their political evolution, the desirability of democracy, and whether or not the Americans truly wish to foster democracy in Iraq. Many are dubious about Americans' commitment to a democratic Iraq, pointing out that since the Arab Shias are a majority in Iraq, an elected post-Saddam leader would most likely be a Shia. These Iraqis believe that the United States would not accept such a leader because he might form an alliance with Shia Iran and then the Shias would come to dominate the Gulf. Instead, they believed the Americans will try to do what the British did: impose a leader on the people from above.

Above all, Iraqis believe that the United States is far less interested in a democratic Iraq than in using permanent American military bases to control the region's oil. Just as the British forced the first Iraqi government to accept British military bases in Iraq, so they believe the United States will coerce the new Iraqi government to accept American bases. Iraqis argue that the instability in Iraq at the moment has actually served that U.S. policy. An unstable Iraq justifies a continued American military presence. Along these lines, some Iraqis argue that the U.S. claim that it invaded Iraq to remove weapons of mass destruction was just smokescreen that allowed the creation of a pro-American state in the heart of the world's oil reserves.

Americans' claim that they only want to help the Iraqi people to establish democracy touches another nerve. Iraqis perceive Americans as suggesting that because they are Arabs and Muslims, they are not capable of establishing their own democracy. The Association of Muslim Scholars seeks to represent the views of the Iraqi Sunni Arabs in political and social affairs. One of its clerics, in an interview with the Arabic satellite channel Al-Jazeera, questioned America's audacity in helping Iraq with drafting its 2005 constitution: "Iraq does not need the help of a state whose age is no more than two and a half centuries. We are an ancient nation in history. We are the first to write the alphabet and enact constitutions."<sup>38</sup> Iraqis believe that too often, indeed almost exclusively, the literature on the prospects of democracy in Iraq is written by academics or think tanks in Washington. Few American authorities have bothered to look at what the Iraqis themselves say about democracy.

Ironically, it is from Shia clerics, whom Americans feared would try to engineer an Iranian-style theocracy in Iraq, that the most strident calls for democracy have emerged. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the country's most influential Shia leader, rejected a U.S. formula to transfer power to the Iraqis via a provisional legislature selected by eighteen regional caucuses. When the Coalition Provisional Authority suggested that Iraq's first referendum be based on this system, Sistani criticized it, since candidates would be handpicked by the Americans. It was Sistani who insisted that a truly democratic system is based on an one-person, one-vote system.

Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarassi, a Shia cleric once on the State Department list of terrorists, has also been an active advocate of democracy in Iraq. He questioned the actions of the United States in an interview: "On one hand, they have decided to transfer sovereignty to the people, and on the other hand, they are beginning to talk about sharing it with them? Or does it mean that they have changed their policy of openness toward the political forces and now believe in the policy of the iron fist, as Saddam did?"<sup>39</sup> Ironically, he adopted the language of the Bush administration to challenge the U.S. occupation authorities: "We advise all those who love peace and security to support the march for genuine democracy in Iraq. It would be the best solution to prevent the spread of terrorism and support what they call political reform in the greater Middle East." He also said, "In our opinion, the question of people's vote and respecting the principle of democracy is an important issue, and the Islamic government is a secondary issue." Two decades ago the same man had argued for an Islamic revolution in Iraq. His statements indicate that he has abandoned the first goal and is ready to work for a democratic Iraq: "The Iraqi people are on the verge of frustration because of the increasing feeling that the Coalition forces have failed in achieving security and democracy."<sup>40</sup>

Even the Iraqi Kurds, whom the United States counted as its staunchest allies in Iraq, have criticized American failures to deliver democracy. The Kurdish paper *Howalati* said that the United States will only depart from Iraq when it can leave a "repressive singular authority, which is dependent on the United States." The editorial concluded: "In the end the United States wants a democracy in Iraq that is more pro-American than pro-people's choice and the outcome of the ballot boxes."<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, the Iraqi Turkmens in their newspaper *Turkomaneli* were very critical of U.S. actions in Falluja and Najaf in April 2004. The paper has repeatedly argued that such actions jeopardized democracy in Iraq: “Under the auspices of supposed democracy in the new Iraq, the blood of many thousands of innocent children, women and old has been spilled, be it in Falluja, Baghdad, Najaf, or any governorate of our beloved country.”<sup>42</sup> Questioning American motives for trying to arrest al-Sadr, this editorialist asked, “What equation is being applied today by the Coalition forces? Is this democracy?” He answers, “By God, if the democracy you understand is this, then we do not want it and we will reject it in every possible way.” Intriguingly, this Turkmenian newspaper, representing a religiously mixed Turkic, non-Arab, non-Kurdish ethnicity in Iraq, was displaying sympathy for both Arab Shias and Sunnis attacked in Najaf and Falluja. Nationalistically, they are referred to as the “sons of Iraq.” Out of such anger with the United States had come a new kind of Iraqi unity.<sup>43</sup>

Discontent with the United States is prevalent along the Iraqi political spectrum. An editorial in *Al-Dustur*, an independent political daily, stated: “Iraq may become an example of a progressive country with a good infrastructure, a model for democracy in the entire region, but it will nevertheless become one of the best new U.S. colonies governed indirectly by the U.S. administration.” The editorialist argued that all political and economic decisions made by the future Iraqi governments will be bound to U.S. political and economic interest: “The new model of Iraq is a U.S. national park. The six U.S. military bases that will be established in Iraq are proof of this.”<sup>44</sup> In *Al-Furat*, another independent, a writer stated that a democracy cannot be implemented in Iraq under an American occupation: “We were surprised by the many resounding names that had a lot to tell us the day they entered Iraq and talked about democracy, human rights, and the individual freedoms that abound in the paragraphs of the American constitution drafted for the transitional postoccupation period.” He argued that while Iraqis were looking forward to a democratic Iraq, promises of democracy have amounted to nothing for the average Iraqi.<sup>45</sup>

While external observers debated the likelihood of democracy taking root in Iraq, Iraqis, while worried about the efficiency of democratic decision-making, seem to be excited about the possibility of creating a liberal democracy. But many worried that such a democracy will only be

a shell for American interests. We believe that the twinned desire for an autonomous democracy and suspicion about American interests in Iraq at least temporarily unified Iraq's disparate ethnic and sectarian communities.

### *Perceptions of the United States in a "Sovereign Iraq"*

As the American presence in Iraq evolves, Iraqis are looking at several key issues. They want to be sure that Iraq, not the United States, determines the role of the American military alliance in Iraq and the duration of its stay. Intellectuals in Iraq, at least, remember the widely unpopular Anglo-Iraq treaties in the 1930s, forced on the Iraqi monarchy by the United Kingdom, that allowed British forces to stay in Iraq indefinitely. Iraqis also want to make sure that their oil stays in their hands. While various agreements seem to offer this guarantee, time alone will test such assurances.

Internationally much was made over the January 2005 elections for a transitional assembly. During the run-up to Iraq's elections, most of the emerging Arab Sunni political factions failed to engage in the process after losing control of a state they had dominated for decades. The Shia factions demonstrated a will to take part in the elections, since an elected government would be in a better position to end the U.S. occupation. Even Ayatollah Sistani stressed that successful elections would be the only way to "expel the occupation."<sup>46</sup>

An article in the Shia SCIRI party paper *Al-Adala* stated that while Iraqis looked forward to transparent elections, it feared that "the United States is not ready to lose control over Iraq. Such [losing control] would be the case if a group of people who would never fulfill U.S. interests, or would oppose them, were to win the elections."<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the United States did allow SCIRI to dominate the transitional government, the constitution-writing process, the Interior Ministry, and the permanent assembly elected after December 15, 2005. None of this is admitted in the SCIRI media, but the critical remarks against the United States were eventually toned down.

During the run-up to the 2004 American presidential election, Iraqis overwhelmingly came to believe that the American occupation of their

nation had more to do with President Bush's political needs and domestic agenda than it did with Iraqis' own desires and needs. This view grew in strength even after the election. In early 2005, an Iraqi wrote of Bush's appearing on American television with "a striking Hollywood smile" to denounce his political detractors and announce the success of his policy in Iraq—even as violence wracked the Iraqi people.<sup>48</sup>

This issue became ever so much more important in the summer of 2005 when the Iraqis began writing their constitution, amid fears of American interference in drafting the charter. Mahmud Othman, a Kurdish politician who sat on the committee drafting the constitution, stated that U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad played an impartial role during the process.<sup>49</sup> Tariq Al-Hashimi of the Iraqi Islamic Party, which had been critical of American policy in Iraq, described the United States in a positive manner in an interview, saying, "In this mess over the constitution, for once they have conducted themselves well." Prior to the January elections, his party condemned the United States as heavy-handed "occupiers," but during this interview he said, "Instead, in this impossible birth, the Americans have conducted themselves like impartial midwives." He acknowledged that the United States, for once, intervened on behalf of the Arab Sunnis, who pushed for their inclusion on the drafting committee.<sup>50</sup>

Concerns about America's role are shaped, in part, by Iraqi worries about sectarian conflict. The February 22, 2006, bombing of the Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra had sparked an unprecedented level of sectarian violence in Iraq, raising the specter of civil war. Killings between Kurds and Turkmen, and Arab Sunnis and Shias, were occurring at an alarming level prior to the attack, but failed to make headlines in the United States; there the news highlighted attacks against American forces in Iraq. The fact that the chant "Death for America for bringing terrorism to Iraq" was shouted from the Samarra mosque's speakers indicate that some blamed the United States for the attack, since it was in charge of Iraq's security forces. Other critics argue that a civil war would ultimately benefit American covert plans to divide Iraq into three separate states, undoing what was once one of the most powerful nations in the Arab world.

In 2003 and 2004, Iraqis were skeptical that they would be allowed to control their nation in a democratic fashion. Anger and distrust toward

the United States is now being shifted inwards against other Iraqi communities. While differences have always existed between Iraq's Arab Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds, such divisions were never discussed openly and were glaringly absent in the Iraq media that emerged after the fall of the Ba'ath government in 2003. While the United States has proven that it is willing to give control to the Iraqis, the current fear is what type of nation they will inherit if the country collapses into sectarian conflict.

Iraqis are still waiting to see what will come next. And so long as American troops remain in Iraq, numerous factions will fight them. And so long as the Iraqi government depends on American troops for its security, most Iraqis will remain unconvinced of their government's autonomy or its ability to protect them. And as long as everyday Iraqis see American troops patrolling their streets, wait in long lines for gasoline, suffer from a lack of electricity, fail to find work, and witness a deluge of car bombs, with the prospect of civil war on the horizon, they will not trust their government nor lose their anger toward Americans.

### *Conclusion*

Iraqi perceptions of the United States, while historically conditioned and forcefully shaped by the recent war and its deadly and dispiriting aftermath, are by no means fixed. And different factions, groups, and individuals have different perspectives. Iraq's political scene is convoluted and cannot be easily explained just by looking at simple sectarian or ethnic divisions. Still, many Iraqis do share some common perceptions of the role of the United States in shaping their national destiny.

During World War I, the victorious British general Maude entered Baghdad and told its inhabitants that they were "liberated" from years of "Ottoman tyranny." While the Kurds, Turkomans, Sunni Arabs, and Shia Arabs of that time had little in common with each other, they quickly became unified by their common hatred of the British. These communities all saw the British "liberation" as their "occupation." They united to expel the British. The British responded by creating a very pro-British monarchy. By 1958, the Iraqi people again united and overthrew what they perceived as a government too subservient to the British. In the chaos that followed the 1958 revolution, tyranny gained the upper hand in Iraq.

Saddam Hussein did his utmost to implant in the Iraqi psyche an ugly image of the United States: colonizer, Zionist, bully, and greedy oil thief. The United States was the new British imperialist. These images remain alive in Iraqi society today. Just as the British greedily exploited Iraqi oil so, too, Iraqis believe, will the United States. The image of the United States as a brutal, even murderous neocolonial power has already led many Iraqis to become ardent anti-Americanists.

Americans who wish to change these Iraqi perceptions of the United States do not face an easy task. Americans' failure to understand Iraq's history and politics led to terrible miscalculations during Operation Iraqi Freedom. More such miscalculations will likely produce disastrous results. Iraq has had an agonizing history: it was created out of the ravages of the First World War, went through a nationwide revolt in the 1920s, suffered through the Second World War, underwent revolutions in 1958, 1963, and 1968, endured almost continuous Kurdish rebellion, faced a mass uprising in March 1991, and has now recently gone through three disastrous wars with foreign powers. Chaos, colonization, dictatorship, brutal repression, and foreign occupation have not left the Iraqis a sentimental people. But Iraqis are a capable people, and if the U.S. government wishes to maintain a viable relationship with Iraq, its representatives must learn to understand Iraq and listen to its people. Otherwise we will all reap the whirlwind.

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