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# The Iraqi Elections—A Test for Democracy

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As reported by Dexter Filkins in The New York Times, the leaflets also warn Iraqis to stay at least 500 yards from voting booths and to avoid windows in case of attack.

The most chilling language came as the leaflets offered a final threat. “To those of you who think you can vote and then run away, we will shadow you and catch you, and we will cut off your heads and the heads of your children.”

Those leaflets are a threat hurled at the very heart of democracy. The vitriolic opposition and inestimable hatred reflected in these threats indicates that those who oppose democracy know exactly what they are up against—the very real possibility that the Iraqi elections will bring the first real opening for participatory democracy in the Middle East.

No one knows how many Iraqis will turn up to vote on January 30. Iraqi officials and American advisors have been eagerly encouraging Iraqi citizens to participate in the elections, while radical Islamists and the enemies of democracy have been doing everything within their power to intimidate citizens from voting. The turnout will be the first test of Iraq’s fragile democracy, but it will not be the last.

The real battle in the Iraqi elections is not a contest between different candidates, but a warfare between democracy and nihilism. On one side of this battle, those hoping and dreaming for a democratic future are pushing for their own brand of democracy and their own vision of government. On the other side, various radicals, reactionaries, and tribalists—most resembling little more than street criminals banded together by tribal identity and religion—oppose the very idea of democracy and hope for the nation’s decline into sheer anarchy.

For its part, the world press has been complicit in granting the opponents of democracy more dignity than they are due. Many media outlets and newspapers refer to these terrorists as “insurgents,” suggesting a moral purpose to their cause and a noble strategy behind their tactics. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Fouad Ajami, one of the most insightful observers of the Middle East, set the Iraqi elections in a historical context. “On the morning after Iraq’s elections, we now know, the insurgents will still be with us. And there will remain that denial among broad segments of the Arab intellectual and political elites, their stubborn belief that these elections are but an American veneer over Iraq’s mayhem. We shall not be able to convince people with no democratic experience that Iraq is on the cusp of a new history. We shall have to look past those who call up the specter of the Shiite bogeyman and dismiss these elections as the first step towards a Shia theocracy. But set this election for a National Assembly against the background of Iraq’s historical torment—and against the background of an Arab world thrashing about for a new political way—and one is forgiven the sense that January 30 is a signal day in Iraqi history.”

For President George W. Bush, the Iraqi elections represent a test of his global ambition to spread democracy. Speaking to a press conference on January 26, President Bush said: “And just four days from now, the people of Iraq will vote in free national elections. Terrorists in that country have declared war against democracy itself, and thereby declared

war against the Iraqi people themselves. Yet the elections will go forward. Millions of Iraqi voters will show their bravery, their love of country, and their desire to live in freedom.”

The president acknowledged that democracy will not come without a cost. “Across the world, freedom has deadly enemies; yet, across the world, freedom has great and growing momentum. There have been enormous sacrifices made by some of our citizens in the spread of freedom. Families suffer as the result of the loss of a loved one. We continue to offer our condolences and prayers for those who do suffer. We’ll honor the memories of their loved ones by completing our missions.”

When asked about the efforts to intimidate Iraqi voters, the president declared himself impressed by the bravery shown by Iraqi citizens. “I anticipate a—a grand moment in Iraqi history,” the president declared. “If we’d been having this discussion a couple of years ago and I’d have stood up in front of you and said the Iraqi people would be voting, you would look at me . . . with a kind of blank expression. People are voting. And this is part of a process, to write a constitution and then elect a permanent assembly. And it’s exciting times for the Iraqi people.”

The stakes in the Iraqi elections are incredibly high. Few know this as well as Steven Vincent, an investigative journalist who spent a considerable amount of time—at a considerable risk to his own personal safety—traveling around Iraq, meeting with ordinary people. In *The Red Zone: A Journey into the Soul of Iraq*, Vincent acknowledges the obstacles faced by those who hope for the Iraqi elections as a harbinger of democracy in the Middle East.

In the first place, the Iraqis are not yet unified in understanding what democracy is. As Vincent explains, “Iraq’s notorious refractory tribal leaders pay lip service to a system of governments that, if successful, would replace the customs and privileges their patriarchal ilk have enjoyed for centuries within personal laws drawn up by bureaucrats in Baghdad.” Furthermore, the religious parties insist that a new Iraqi government must be based upon the legal foundation of shari’a law—antithetical to democracy.

Iraq did hold elections in 1995 and 2002, and Saddam Hussein won 100 percent of the vote. Election “results” like that have not served to inspire Iraqis to understand the ongoing process of democratic government. As one American advisor commented, “We have to teach these people that just because you win 51 percent of the vote doesn’t mean you get to go out and shoot the other 49 percent.”

Democracy does not emerge from a vacuum. Whether in the United States of America or anywhere else in the world, democracy requires a stable foundation of respect, community, and trust. These qualities must coalesce around the rule of law, respect for individual citizens, and confidence in the democratic process.

As one Iraqi told Steven Vincent, “Democracy is like an egg, you can’t simply ‘make’ it. You need a whole culture and environment.”

Added to all this is the fact that democracy does not exist elsewhere in the Middle East. With the exceptions of Israel and newly-democratized Afghanistan, democracy is nonexistent in the Middle East and among Arab states.

Furthermore, most Arab leaders are intractably opposed to democracy. As Saudi Arabian king Fahd bin Abdul Aziz once remarked, “The democratic system that is predominant in the world is not a suitable system for the peoples of our region. Our peoples’ makeup and unique qualities are different from those of the rest of the world . . . . In my view, Western democracies may be suitable in their own countries but they do not suit other countries.”

Some American liberals, joined by European elites, argue that cultural differences may mean that the peoples of the Middle East, among others, are not capable of democracy. For decades, approaches to foreign policy in the United States have been divided into “idealist” and “realist” camps, but both sides appear to be changing hats. President George W. Bush, a Republican, is not following in the realist tradition represented by his father, President George H. W. Bush. While the realists argue that America’s foreign policy should be directed at containing problems around the world and accepting the necessity of autocratic governments in some nations, the idealists argue that America should not settle for anything less than the spread of democracy around the world.

A bit of historical context will help put this question in perspective. As Joshua Muravchik notes in *The Wall Street Journal*, “In 1775 there were no democracies. Then came the American Revolution and raised the number to one. Some

230 years later there are 117, accounting for 61 percent of the world's governments.”

Muravchik, author of *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny*, acknowledges that the spread of democracy around the world “has not occurred at a steady pace.” Nevertheless, he argues that the proportion of democracies in the world is now roughly twice what it was just three decades ago. Furthermore, Muravchik argues that momentum is key to the spread of freedom. “As the proportion of democracies rises, it will become harder for the remaining authoritarians to hold out. The skeptics ridicule President Bush for declaring his ultimate goal to be the end of tyranny. But today probably no more than 20 percent of the world's governments could rightly be called by that name, whereas once the proportion was vastly higher. Why shouldn't that 20 percent go the way of the others?”

Fouad Ajami knows that Iraq's elections will be opposed by deadly forces. Nevertheless, “an endeavor is often clarified by its enemies,” he consoles.

Ajami also understands that many peoples around the world will be watching the Iraqi elections—and the most nervous observers will be the Arab autocrats of neighboring countries. “Let Iraq's Arab neighbors draw their own conclusions about the legitimacy of political liberty,” Ajami argues. “Let them see Iraqi women both vote and contend for seats in the assembly. Iraq is already the battleground between Arab authoritarianism and participatory politics. Its fate, we must know, will either embolden the forces of openness or sustain the autocrats in their argument that there is no alternative to their way.”

The transformation from autocracy and anarchy to democracy will never be free from dangers and pitfalls. Nevertheless, the Iraqi people now face an historic opportunity to vote for democracy itself over its enemies—both foreign and domestic.

Those young men who throw threatening tracts from Baghdad automobiles see the Iraqi elections as a threat to their ability to spread lawlessness, tribalism, and Islamic extremism throughout the nation. Those who contend for democracy in Iraq should see those leaflets as a chilling compliment—confirmation that the enemies of democracy know what this election really means.

