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Defying Violence with Democracy

Why grassroots civil society - and not 'nation building' from on high - is key to the future of Iraq.

by Cynthia Boaz and Jack DuVall

The future of Iraq is in jeopardy, not primarily because of foreign occupation, aborted reconstruction, Iranian interference, unregenerate Baathists, venal Iraqi politicians, Islamist terrorists, or home-grown insurgents, but because the social body and the political mind of Iraq—the twin pillars of any nation—are endangered by this proposition: that the violence of a few will determine the prospects of the many.

In an article in *The Washington Post* in May, Nir Rosen of the New America Foundation, who has spent most of the last three years in Baghdad, wrote that every morning the streets “are littered with dozens of bodies, bruised, torn, mutilated, executed only because they are Sunni or because they are Shiite.” Militias retaliate, stopping buses, demanding passengers’ ID cards, and executing those of one sect or the other. Militias even enter hospitals “to hunt down or arrest those who have survived their raids.”

Rosen said that he asked a Shiite friend if, in light of all this, life had been better under Saddam Hussein. “‘No,’ he said definitively, ‘They could level all of Baghdad and it would still be better than Saddam. At least we have hope.’” To explain this, a German report on the reconstruction of civil society in Iraq noted:

... the Ba'ath regime effectively used extreme levels of violence and the powers of patronage to co-opt or break any independent vestiges of civil society. ... To take control over every part of the country and every segment of society, the regime (physically) eliminated any kind of self-initiative or independent organization. “Civil society” in Iraq was silenced by violence.

But subtract the dictatorship and offer the promise of democracy, however

defective, and violence cannot silence everything. Suppression of speech has given way to a deluge of debate. Restricted to four newspapers under Saddam, Iraqis now have a hundred dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and periodicals. As for civil society, on May 23 *The New York Times* reported that “5,000 private organizations, including charities, human rights groups, medical assistance agencies, and literacy projects” have been registered in Iraq. “It was as if they already had it inside of themselves,” said one Iraqi official.

The Times told the story of Najat al-Saiedi, a 35-year-old woman without a husband or a job, who nevertheless founded a group called Mesopotamian Orphan Relief. She and her volunteers gather donations from friends, and once a month “she picks her way around mounds of trash in Shoala in dainty sandals, taking blankets, slippers and towels to children.” One delivery last month went to the widow of a Shiite man who had been shot with three of his brothers by Sunni insurgents. All 15 of their children had been left fatherless.

The real war in Iraq is between the few who believe that the score of how many heads roll determines who is ahead, and the many who know that Iraq will not get ahead until they lift their heads above the slaughter and defy those who block rebuilding the nation. It is a war between the few who vie for control by saturating the rubble with blood, and those who will fight for their right to a society that they establish themselves.

From Fear to Solidarity. The belief that a contest of violence will decide Iraq’s fate will be self-fulfilling unless violent conflict is superseded by another kind of contest: between the many who wish to rule themselves and the few who wish to rule for their own benefit. The first is the primary impetus for democracy and the second the basis for autocracy or oligarchy.

How democracy germinates is a good predictor of its success. Because democracy is bottom-up politics, a government installed from the top—especially if it needs a military escort to function—is unlikely to be stable.

Democratization is a matter of transferring power from one entrenched, self-selected group to a commonly accepted framework for political competition, open to everyone, which only becomes stable when competitors agree to play by the rules rather than extort or shoot their way to power. Violence is not only lethal to

lives, it bleeds the legitimacy of those who succeed with it. Legitimacy must replace arbitrary fiat as the basis for governing if democracy is to work. Legitimacy then comes from the active consent of the people.

The conditions for creating this legitimacy in Iraq are actually not dissimilar from contests in many societies where people won power despite facing violent overlords or competitors. In Poland, the Philippines, Chile, Serbia, and Ukraine, violent repression was overcome by nonviolent resistance, and true democracies emerged. In India, the American South, Argentina, and South Africa, the rights of ordinary people to speak and vote and live without fear was recovered through nonviolent struggle from colonial occupiers, military rulers, and racist systems.

Strikes, boycotts, mass protests, and civil disobedience were among the most visible tactics used by civilian-based movements in overcoming violent persecutors. But while the climax of these revolutions was often marked by millions gathered on central squares, they began and gained momentum by acts of individuals to assert solidarity, expose official lies, condemn corruption, and represent the helpless. In other words, civic action by the people—not the violence of power-seekers—determined the nation's fate.

The vibrancy and sustainability of a government is furnished in part by its ability to win compliance without resorting to the use (or threat) of police powers. The persistence of a culture of violence and impunity in Iraq—uninhibited (if not made worse) by U.S. military occupation—is now the greatest threat to democratization and true liberation. But once violence is seen as an obstacle to rights, rather than the means to obtain those rights, it will no longer be excused.

From Crisis to Defiance. Abraham Lincoln said that the “first principle of popular government” was “the rights of the people.” It is not unreasonable to conclude that a military occupation is not succeeding if it has not assured a level of public trust and order that its political goals require.

In any democracy, the people have the right to hold government accountable for its action or failure to act. Holding the Iraqi government accountable for failing to do its part in controlling violence and meeting public needs is the right of the Iraqi people. Exercising that right is not simply confined to voting. Political rights—including the rights to speak, to assemble freely, and publicly to seek

redress of grievances—are universally recognized and appropriate to use at any time, although at present the new Iraqi constitution has no provision for protecting human rights.

This makes it all the more important that Iraqis learn how to apply the right that underlies all others: the right to resist abusive or unresponsive rule. Henry David Thoreau said that everyone recognizes “the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable.”

Democracy cannot take root unless the people are the trunk and branches of its tree. Cultivating genuine democracy in Iraq would be reinforced by education and training in the strategies and tactics of nonviolent mobilization and civic resistance. Neither this training nor the action it facilitates can wait until the violence abates. In fact, nonviolent, civilian-based campaigns are historically among the ways that violence is marginalized. The armed struggle against apartheid in South Africa was largely supplanted by nationwide civic defiance. The violent insurgency against Augusto Pinochet was eventually dwarfed in its impact on Chile by a civilian-based coalition that marched and organized until it defeated the dictator.

Violence in Iraq not only takes individual lives, it reaches into alleyways and attics, it walks abroad in daylight and is heedless of the age or sex or number of its victims. As a social nightmare, it outstrips even the crossfire between rebels, soldiers, and narco-lords of Colombia. But to call for nonviolent civilian organizing in such a context is not to call for utopian methods in dystopian conditions. The mothers of the disappeared in Argentina, who braved one of the most sinister regimes in Latin American history, did not wait until the disappearances stopped before demanding to know where their sons and daughters had gone. They began to march and pressure the regime at the height of its arrogance, and in so doing they opened up civil space that didn't exist before—which many other civic groups began to fill and expand, until the repression itself was eliminated.

From Violence to Valor. During the civil rights revolution in America, Martin Luther King Jr. told his followers, “I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from

narrow cells ... battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality." But he called on them to continue their nonviolent resistance until they destroyed the laws that upheld racial segregation.

Leo Tolstoy wrote, "Violence can never destroy what is accepted by public opinion. On the contrary, public opinion need only be diametrically opposed to violence to destroy its every action." The people are not only the source of legitimacy in any civil order, they are also the source of acquiescence or support that any group requires to operate and move at will within society. Those who use violence often claim to represent political, ethnic, or religious loyalties, but that claim has no credibility once the people organize themselves, reject violence, and retake control of their society.

The contest for the future of Iraq will not be won by the violence of the few if the self-reliance, solidarity, defiance, and valor of the many redeem Iraq's post-Saddam democratic opportunity. Violence is not a philosophy or an ideology, it rarely brings more than material destruction, and it has no lasting power if the people refuse to be immobilized. Iraqis will be liberated from the fear and violence in their midst as they write their own manifestoes, pursue their own way of struggle, and achieve their own revelation of power.

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