

**IRAQIS DISCUSS THEIR COUNTRY'S FUTURE:**

**POST-WAR PERSPECTIVES FROM THE IRAQI STREET**

Findings from Focus Groups with Iraqi Men and Women  
(Conducted June 29 – July 9, 2003)

Prepared for the  
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs by  
Thomas O. Melia and Brian M. Katulis

July 28, 2003  
Baghdad & Washington

**Table of Contents**

	<b>Pages</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive summary .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Principal Findings .....</b>	<b>10</b>
1. Broad Support for the Demise of Saddam’s Regime .....	10
2. Strong Desire for Order and Governance .....	11
3. Excitement and Fear about Prospect of Iraqi Democracy.....	15
4. Mixed Feelings about Islamic Rule.....	19
5. The Enduring Strength of Iraq’s National Identity .....	22
6. Ambivalence about Iran and Shi’a Clerical Rule .....	24
7. Challenges for Iraq’s Emerging Leaders.....	25
8. New Political Organizations: The Struggle for Credibility .....	26
9. Challenges For Women in the New Iraq.....	28
10. Justice and Reconciliation .....	29
11. Iraqis Living in a Fog of Disinformation .....	36

**Table of Contents (Continued)**

	<b>Pages</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>34</b>
Appendix A – Demographic Composition of the Focus Groups.....	36
Appendix B – Notes on Methodology .....	38
Appendix C – About the Authors.....	43

*NDI would like to acknowledge the support of the National Endowment for Democracy, which funded this report and the Institute’s focus group research in Iraq.*

Copyright © National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) 2003. All rights reserved. Portions of this work may be reproduced and/or translated for noncommercial purposes provided NDI is acknowledged as the source of the material and is sent copies of any translation.

*Questions about the content of the document should be directed to Les Campbell, NDI Senior Associate, 202-728-5695, les@ndi.org, or Jean Freedberg, Director of Public Affairs, 202-728-5527, jfreedberg@ndi.org.*

### Preface

**Purpose.** The principal objective of this report is to introduce perspectives of ordinary Iraqi men and women into the discussions about the future of Iraq. For the foreseeable future, Iraq will be governed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), an American-led multinational effort based on President George W. Bush's "coalition of the willing" that removed Saddam Hussein's government from power in April 2003. While the CPA has appointed an Iraqi Governing Council – and scores of political parties, tribal and religious leaders and others have put themselves forward to represent the people of Iraq – there has not yet been a way for those Iraqis who are not deeply or directly involved in the new politics to make their views known. As part of its introductory visit to the country, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) commissioned a series of focus group interviews that would capture the views of a broad cross-section of Iraqis.

**Sample.** Fifteen focus groups were conducted across Iraq from June 29 to July 9, 2003 with a broadly representative selection of citizens – men and women, Kurds and Arabs, Sunni, Shi'a and Christian – in order to learn how they perceive the new political dynamics in Iraq. Organized in seven different locations across the country – Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, Diwaniya, Kirkuk, Mosul, and the small village of Sehil El-Hamad – the research provides insight into popular expectations, and gives texture to Iraqis' understanding of their present circumstance, as well as their views on political democracy and its place in Iraq. Appendix A provides more detail on the specific composition of each group.

**Method.** As is explained in greater detail in Appendix B ("Notes on Methodology"), focus groups are semi-structured group interviews that proceed according to a research design that includes careful recruitment of participants. Groups are recruited to be homogeneous (according to gender, age, education, ethnicity and/or religious affiliation) for two reasons: in order to clarify what are the views held by a particular sub-group of the population, and to enhance the comfort level of participants, so they feel they are among peers and that everyone involved is equally entitled to express an opinion. Done well, focus groups are free flowing, open-ended, and often unpredictable.

**Difficulties encountered, and largely overcome.** Public opinion research is not well established in Iraq, for obvious reasons relating to Saddam Hussein's grisly despotism. Though there have recently been some small surveys conducted in various places, there is as yet no Iraqi organization capable of conducting nationwide research. Even published demographic statistics must be viewed with some skepticism, and accurate quantitative research will not likely be practical for some time. Moreover, in the widespread disorder of post-war Iraq, with mortal combat still underway in scattered locations, and with many people still anxious about the "rules of the game," enlisting and training the requisite local Iraqi partners turned out to be a substantial, time-consuming challenge.

Our work in this regard was made possible by my partner's proficiency in Arabic and his intrepid nature. Brian Katulis worked with NDI operations officer Aleksandar Sukiban for 10 days before the arrival of the balance of the NDI assessment team and stayed 10 days longer to ensure the integrity of each of the focus groups. In Iraq, he traveled widely to identify in each major community a local project coordinator, who in turn would find

recruiters and moderators. Brian then returned to each location to coach recruiters and train the moderators, and was present at virtually every group discussion to ensure it was conducted properly. We were obliged to re-create our local team in each place we worked because we sought people who were familiar with each town. One good moderator recruited in Baghdad was able to visit the mid-south regions, and so was able to learn and improve his facilitation skills while he traveled. Yet the most difficult aspect of the project – recruiting women to serve as moderators of female groups, in order to enhance comfort and frankness – had to be done anew in every location. This is because, in surprisingly tradition-bound Iraq, women generally are not able to travel far from home, or at all. Days of labor-intensive travel and scores of meetings, trainings and de-briefings were required to put together each of the 15 groups.

Members of the NDI delegation who were meanwhile conducting a political assessment of the country during much of the same time also advanced the project, by interviewing local recruiters and moderators, scouring potential venues, and otherwise moving the process forward. Particular appreciation goes to NDI program staff James Della-Giacoma and Mohamed Rherras who traveled in the North, and Makram Ouais and Hatem Bamheriz in the South.

One anecdote indicates the difficulties encountered, and generally overcome. In Baghdad, where we enlisted four university students to recruit the groups according to specific demographics and a particular methodology, we were generally successful in assembling the groups we wanted. Two groups were to be recruited from Sadr City, the largely Shi'a Baghdad neighborhood (previously known as Saddam City) in which millions of generally poor Iraqis live. Afterwards, we learned that our team of university students had attracted crowds of children who followed them through the streets. In one case, our student recruiters were pelted with rocks and tomatoes by these children, as unwelcome "outsiders." The team decided afterwards that they were conspicuous because of the clothes they wore and the papers they carried, but never considered abandoning the project. The story is interesting because it demonstrates that our young Iraqi partners would not be dissuaded from their appointed rounds. They remained committed to the method of random recruitment which required them to knock on doors in inhospitable communities. It also underscores how unlikely it is that Americans or any other outsiders could have recruited in these streets and thus assembled the representative and random groups we sought.

**Democratization.** This kind of research – listening intently to citizens in order to convey their hopes and aspirations to decision-makers, both Iraqi and international – is an inherently democratic, and democratizing, activity. We are pleased to have had the opportunity to do this for Iraqis, in what we hope is only the first of many phases of an ongoing dialogue between ordinary Iraqis and those who will play a leading role in deciding the course of their country's future.

**Thomas O. Melia**  
**July 21, 2003**

## Executive Summary

Three months after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, a set of 15 focus groups conveys important insights about Iraqi public attitudes in this crucial formative period. The main findings of the research include the following:

**1. Iraqis are glad to be rid of Saddam Hussein and do not want a return to the past.** Iraqis are grateful for the ouster of Saddam, universally reviled as a criminal whose principal legacy is "mass graves."

**2. Iraqis have a strong desire for order and governance.** While some lingering anxiety over the fate of Saddam Hussein and his henchmen remains, most Iraqis have already moved on with their lives and are focused on the major problems they now confront – namely establishing law, order, and new forms of governance, revitalizing the economy, and creating jobs.

- The American-led military forces and governing Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) have naturally become a lightning rod for criticism in this context, with no one else available to respond to complaints and take responsibility for current problems.<sup>1</sup>
- At the same time, the recurring attacks against Coalition forces find virtually no support among Iraqis, despite signs that some Iraqis' patience with the occupation is wearing thin. A few participants say that Coalition forces only understand "the language of force."
- Iraqis want foreign military forces to depart, yet many are also very worried that if Coalition forces leave too soon, Iraqis will turn on one another and there will be widespread violence.

**3. Iraqis feel a mix of excitement and fear about the prospect of freedom and democracy.** Iraqis are excited about their newfound freedoms, yet anxious that too much freedom may lead to chaos. Many Iraqis want to be sure that there are "rules" and "limits" in the new democracy that emerges in Iraq.

- There is a strong degree of support for writing a new constitution, and a desire that it be done by Iraqis.
- The idea of re-establishing a monarchy in Iraq receives little support.

---

<sup>1</sup> On July 13, after the fieldwork was completed for this research, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, the Presidential Envoy to Iraq and senior Coalition official in Iraq, announced the appointments of a 25-person Governing Council of Iraqis which will assume most executive authority in Iraq, subject to Bremer's veto. It remains unclear how this will work, or how it will be perceived by Iraqis.

- In several groups, participants raise the notion of term limits. Even those who feel the need for some strong hand to take charge of the country say they do not want to empower one person indefinitely, and would prefer to see a chief executive who is permitted to govern only for four years or so.

**4. Iraqis have mixed views on Islamic rule.** Some Iraqis support the notion of Islamic governance. There is a relatively broad consensus that Islamic values should infuse the new political order.

- Just as Iraq is geographically located between Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, its national mindset on the proper mix of religious life and government probably lies in a similar middle ground – not as secular as Turkey, yet not as strictly Islamic as Shi'a Iran or Sunni Saudi Arabia.
- Reservations about whether religious leaders should have a *predominant* say in political matters are expressed in almost every community interviewed, especially among women – and even in the largely Shi'a regions of south central Iraq.
- Sunni and Christian participants, more so than their Shi'a counterparts, express an interest in building a society that keeps religion separate from state politics, though they generally recoil from the phrase “secular” to describe such a system, as it sounds too atheistic.
- There is broad support among average Iraqis for creating space and respect for Iraqis to practice their own individual religion.

**5. Iraqis remain strongly committed to the integrity of Iraq as a state.** This includes a substantial portion of those Kurds who lived under Saddam's rule over the past decade.

- While some non-Kurds indicate qualified support for federalism as a measure to accommodate diversity, Iraqi Arabs are more generally nervous that a system that formalizes autonomous regions may lead to the break-up of the country, which they strongly oppose. Steps toward federalism, therefore, should be accompanied by measures that emphasize Iraq's unity.
- Hostility between Sunni Arabs and Kurds in the north comes to the surface in our discussions, a tension fueled in part by property disputes. Southern Shi'a Arabs are more favorably disposed toward Kurds, whom they view as "fighters" against Saddam, and thus kindred spirits.

**6. Ambivalence about Iran and Clerical Rule by Shi'a.** Despite the overall strong support for the vague notion of an Islamic democracy, there are numerous

voices in Iraq's Shi'a community raised against clerical control and domination of politics. The reference point is the case of neighboring Iran. Notwithstanding some considerable affinity for Iranians and measures taken by the Tehran government over the years to provide safe haven for Shi'a dissidents and clerics, opinion is clearly divided on the extent to which Iraqis want to emulate Iran's political model.

**7. Challenges for Iraq's Emerging Leaders.** A pervasive cynicism about virtually all political leaders in Iraq is one of the main challenges in building a new Iraq. Focus group participants generally had more negative than positive things to say about virtually all of the emerging political and religious leaders in Iraq. Cynicism about leaders, especially acute regarding some exiled leaders who were objects vilification campaigns led by the previous regime, may be another enduring scar from Saddam's era.

**8. Iraqis are skeptical about the new political organizations.** Although Iraq has seen a proliferation of new political parties and civic groups (especially those dedicated to human rights concerns), many participants say the parties are only working for their own benefit, and few of our discussants see them as essential to building a new democracy.

- Even the Islamic Da'awa party, one of the better organized political forces at the moment, meets a great deal of skepticism.
- The notion of independent civic groups on the whole is not well understood, and there is some trepidation expressed about who really controls independent groups and whether they would be prone to conflictive behavior.

**9. Iraqi women face particular challenges in ensuring their full political participation in a new Iraq.** There is strong support for a woman's right to vote, but Iraqis are divided on the question of whether women are qualified to hold senior leadership positions in politics and government.

- Even among women, there is a strong sense that their place is in the home and not in the public arena.
- The fact that much of the hesitation expressed about the "excesses" of democracy as practiced in the West is articulated with reference to women's roles in society and family, suggests there will be significant cultural obstacles to the empowerment of women in the new Iraq.

**10. Iraqis have a long road ahead in the journey towards justice and reconciliation.** One component of building a better future for Iraq is finding ways



to move beyond its bloody past. The focus groups indicate that average Iraqis have only just begun to contemplate the various ways Iraq may punish those responsible for atrocities. Most Iraqis in the focus groups support punishing senior leaders from the Ba'ath party with blood on their hands, but they have mixed views on how broadly the veil of guilt extends.

**11. Iraqis are living in a fog of disinformation.** Even as they rejoice in the demise of Saddam Hussein, the people of Iraq are still encumbered by much of the vitriolic propaganda he drummed into them over the past decades. Despite Iraqis' hatred for Saddam, they still believe much of what he told them. Absent a vigorous, persuasive information campaign – on behalf of the CPA, the new Governing Council, or even on the virtues of political democracy itself – this distorted worldview will shape the way Iraqis interpret events and rumors.

- For instance, antipathy for the United States and Britain is not overcome by the fact that these two countries are responsible for the country's liberation from the tyrant they despise.
  - Many Iraqis, in fact, believe the U.S. is deliberately sowing chaos in the country – chaos it could avert if it wanted to do so – as part of a hostile action that extends well beyond Saddam and his regime.
  - Virtually no one (excepting some Kurds in the north) believes the United States intervention in Iraq is motivated by a desire to help the Iraqi people. Usually people say the U.S. "is acting in its own interest" – which is often viewed in terms of access to Iraq's oil reserves.
- Fantastic stories about Osama bin Laden (and even Saddam) as agents of American imperialism are present in most groups, as are tales of Zionist machinations.
- People distrust most forms of news media – and many people say with pride that they rely principally on word of mouth to gather their news.
  - There is no reference to any of the scores of new broadsheets and other publications that have emerged in recent weeks, when participants are asked where they get their information.
  - In terms of broadcast media, Iraqis in the focus groups cite media sources outside of Iraq – *Al-Arabiya* and *Al-Jazeera* satellite channels.

**Conclusion.** Iraq faces a unique opportunity to transform its politics and create a new democratic government. Though the country bears the visible, raw scars of three

decades of tyrannical rule by the Ba'ath party and Saddam Hussein and is plagued with sporadic violence and the disruption of basic public services, the political situation in Iraq is evolving rapidly. The outcome is not yet certain.

Political parties and civil society organizations are forming each day, dozens of new media outlets have emerged, and Iraqis have opportunities to express themselves more openly than they have in decades. Still, a great deal needs to be done to foster the development of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of exercising its rights with some wisdom. This will require, among other things, access to a broad array of information about the world and coherent models about the workings of free societies.

In trying to build popular momentum for constitutional democracy in Iraq in which majority rule is tempered by respect for the rights of minorities and tolerance of diversity, it will be necessary to build on those attributes of democracy that address strongly felt needs. To the extent Iraqis identify "democracy" with structured liberty, rather than chaos and criminality, they may be motivated to embrace and enlarge democratic institutions and habits.

In the present aftermath of Saddam's criminal regime, where the most atrocious crimes against persons were committed by agents of the state and were widely known, it is reasonable that Iraqis should hanker for decency in the public sphere. If democracy is seen as a system that protects immoral behaviors, rather than fostering decency, then it will be quickly discredited.

If men and women across the country come to believe their voices will be heard and their basic needs met in a new Iraq, then the liberation of the country from Saddam may yet lead to the establishment of a recognizably democratic country.

## Principal Findings

### I. Broad Support for the Demise of Saddam Hussein's Regime

**Iraqis are delighted to be rid of Saddam Hussein and do not want a return to the past.** Iraqis are grateful for the ouster of Saddam, who is universally reviled as a criminal whose principal legacy is "mass graves."

There is absolutely no desire among the Iraqi public for Saddam Hussein to return, and it is important not to confuse the chorus of complaints about what has followed with a desire by a few diehards to return to the past. Most participants say that the best thing about the current situation is that Saddam is gone. His removal from power is the best thing that the Coalition forces have accomplished, say many participants. Saddam and his Ba'ath party are almost unanimously hated, and the focus groups serve as an opportunity for Iraqis to vent about the injustices they suffered. We had to stop the session in Karbala briefly when one woman wept at the mention of Saddam Hussein's name – she said that Saddam had her son killed right before her eyes. The list of the regime's crimes seems endless.

The only good thing that participants have to say about Saddam Hussein is that there was at least some order and security during his time. A few participants were pleased that Saddam distributed food – more than what the Coalition authorities are distributing, some claim. But most say that Saddam Hussein did nothing but steal from the country. A few participants claim that he helped the Palestinians more than he helped his own people.

Out with the old and in with the new, Iraqis are saying. They have high hopes about what the new government will provide, though several participants express dismay that the formation of an Iraqi government was delayed for a while:

*We need the government right away. We need facilities where we can go and talk to someone about the negative things in our lives and tell them our problems.* (Shi'a Man, Najaf)

*I want Bremer to fulfill his promises to establish a new government.* (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)

*Bush and Tony Blair promised they would make an Iraqi government in forty days – and they didn't. I hope this message will go to them.* (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*The American government – all of the Iraqi citizens are asking why have they delayed organizing an Iraqi government? They want to know. This is why we don't have security or services. We have heard in Baghdad that three or four people are killed each day. We want to ask the people in charge why are they delaying this? Haven't they haven't found anyone suitable yet?* (Kurdish Man, Sehil El-Hamad)

*Now we need some people who will represent us, someone who will respond to our demands and needs. They are just promising a future government and future elections, but we need a temporary Iraqi government, so Iraq can have its power again. They have to organize us in an interim government. (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)*

*They have to give some authority to a temporary government so the situation can be control. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

*We think that nothing good is going to come as a result, unless there is an Iraqi government organized. We want a democratic government that can feel our sufferings and know our problems and solve them as soon as possible. (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)*

The formation of the Governing Council is a good start, and with some visible success in the areas of security and basic services will be welcomed by Iraqis.

## II. Strong Desire for Order and Governance

Iraqis have a negative outlook on the current situation – most participants in these focus groups say the country is headed in the wrong direction. Baghdad residents are the most negative, while participants in the northern areas of Mosul and Kirkuk are somewhat more upbeat about the situation.

The public's concerns are centered on three main issues – security, basic services, and rebuilding the economy. Security tops the list of concerns among Iraqis in these focus groups, and trepidation about the absence of law and order threatens the entire prospect of building a new democratic Iraq.

At the core of the public's concerns is the lack of clear governance structures to respond to the public's demands. Iraqis want to know who is in charge; they are looking for the right place to file a complaint, register a marriage, or settle a land dispute:

*The problem with democracy is that no one is there to control you, and you can do whatever you want. And we need somebody to be in control. (Kurdish Man, Kirkuk)*

While some lingering anxiety over the fate of Saddam Hussein and his henchmen remains, most Iraqis have already moved on with their lives and are focused on the major problems they now confront – namely establishing law and order, establishing new forms of governance, revitalizing the economy, and creating jobs.

If there is one point that shines though in this regard throughout these sessions, it is that Iraqis want governance. When asked what should be the first priority of the CPA, the leading responses are security and then basic services, which Iraqis connect to the need for better governance:

*There is no place to go, no one responsible – there is no police, no one to take your problems to. (Shi'a Woman, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*This is the main problem. There is no one who is responsible for all of these things. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

*We want a responsible person to lead us; now there is nothing at all leading us. (Shi'a Woman, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*It would be better if the United States stayed but put one Iraqi in charge, even if takes time. We want the United States to install a manager. (Kurdish man, Kirkuk)*

*If someone stole something from you, where do you go to complain about that? Who will listen to you and give you your rights? (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)*

Over the last two months, the CPA set up local councils in various communities around Iraq. The CPA has appointed most of these leaders, and in many cases a form of consultation and concurrence among elites was a part of the process.

The research uncovers two primary concerns about these experiments in local government. First, in several of the areas, there is a perception among some participants that the Coalition authorities are not finding the right individuals to serve in the regional and local governments. Secondly, in some cases, misbegotten appointments serve to reinforce a notion that the U.S. is *deliberately* fomenting bad governance and general chaos (a point we return to later in this report).

For instance, in Najaf, there is some discussion about Abdul Munim Abud, the American-appointed mayor who was arrested a few days before our focus group sessions in Najaf on charges of corruption and kidnapping. One Shi'a man there says, "When the Americans appointed the mayor in Najaf, people demonstrated for his removal, but the American forces insisted on keeping him. He was one of Saddam Hussein's right hand men, but the Americans insisted on keeping him, because they wanted to make the Iraqis angry and drive them to the edge and create a reason for Iraqis to attack them."

Shi'a men in Sadr City also voice similar complaints about three people from the previous regime picked to work on their local council. Sunni men in Mosul complain about the composition of the regional council, and one woman says, "When they chose the city council here in Mosul, they only picked old men, and no women at all."

Comments such as these are not unexpected; it is only natural for some people to complain about the composition of their government, however it is derived. But allegations that some current appointees have ties with the previous regime are potentially serious, given the CPA's expressed intention to prohibit these figures from reclaiming power.

The second concern Iraqis have about these local councils is connected to their desire for more governance – some participants complain that the local governing councils have been given no authority to respond to the public's concerns:

*There is no real governor here. When you go to the governor to tell him your complaints, he has to take the Americans' advice before doing something. (Shi'a Men, Najaf)*

*In Karbala, they started a local council to deal with this situation, but it hasn't done anything. The main problem here is that we have no order here. We have to have some plans and rules so you can walk outside. I am one of the people who do not know what will come in the next few days. Who knows? We might have electricity and water tomorrow, or not. It is total chaos. Just like any ship, if it doesn't have a strong captain, it will sink. (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

In the coming months, it will be important to devolve power to these local governments effectively and help them succeed in responding to the public, so that Iraqi local officials win credit and credibility for achievements made at the local level.

**Tackling the law and order problem.** The CPA has taken its first steps in creating an Iraqi force to respond to the law and order challenges that Iraq faces. Participants generally have a positive impression about the new Iraqi police, but they are concerned that it is not enough. In the north, Kurds are enthusiastic about the Pesh Merga militia that patrol in tandem with Coalition Forces, though men in Kirkuk say they wish they were empowered more by their American friends. These complaints parallel concerns about the lack of governance – things are not happening quickly enough, and the police do not have enough power:

*Where are they? We want them so we can be secure and feel safe in walking the streets. Of course, even if they were in the streets, the people would not be afraid of them, because they have no authority. (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)*

*If there is an officer standing there, no Iraqi would be afraid of him. But if an American soldier were there, they would be afraid of him. (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)*

*They (the Pesh Merga) help the Kurdish people and now they are ready to help all of Iraq. (Kurdish Man, Kirkuk)*

**Rebuilding the economy.** The CPA, the new interim Iraqi government, and the local councils face daunting challenges in restructuring Iraq's economy and putting people back to work. Along with security and reestablishing basic services such as electricity, the economy is a leading concern:

*Fifty percent of Iraqis are out of jobs – especially the former armed forces personnel. Bremer put them out of work, but the Iraqi army did not commit crimes. They were trying to defend Iraq and not Saddam. (Kurdish Man, Sehil Al-Hamad)*

*We can take the shortage of water and electricity, but we can't take the lack of money in our pockets. We can't buy food for our family. My husband is an employee, and he used to take home 75,000 Dinars a month and we have a big family. Now he is waiting for work. (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)*

*I am afraid because maybe the situation is not completely stable. This makes me afraid. I want the situation to calm down, and I want there to be no more fighting. If the fighting stops, then everyone will get a chance to work.* (Kurdish Man, Kirkuk)

For many Iraqis, the economic concerns are even more basic, and several participants worry about the food that they are receiving. Most seem to make do with what is available from the United Nations and charitable organizations, or in the market. One Shi'a man in Karbala does not understand why certain goods are flooding the market while many Iraqis lack the means of basic survival: "The main problem of the Iraqi people is the lack of food. We don't want dishes, clothes, or even freedom, we want food. In most Iraqi markets, there are air conditions, televisions, satellites. What are these? People are tired, and they are looking for food and rice."

Redemption of the 10,000 dinar bill is also at the forefront of many of participants' concerns. The envisioned move to establish a new currency in October will help address this problem, though a discussion of the issue points to another problem, that of a failure to communicate, on which this report expands below. In Mosul, three days after Ambassador Bremer announced in a press conference that the 10,000 Dinar bill would be honored at full face value, none of the focus group participants had heard this news and many complained that the bill was a major problem for them, because money exchangers were only honoring it as 6,000 Dinars.

The fact that no one in the focus groups seemed to know about the announcement demonstrates the challenge the CPA faces in conveying vital news to the public, and underscores that the public will judge by what they see in their lives, rather than announcements they may not or may hear in the media.

**Rising frustrations, yet no support for current attacks.** The American-led military and civilian authorities have naturally become a lightning rod for criticism in this context. Although tensions over the current situation are on the rise, very few focus group participants support attacks against Coalition forces, with most saying that it is further destabilizing the country. As one Kurdish man in Kirkuk says, "Nobody should do something like that, shooting the soldiers." The few who support the attacks say that the attacks are the only way for the CPA to get the message that Iraqis do not want to be ruled by foreigners – "through the language of force." But by and large, participants do not support the attacks, and instead talk about their rising frustration and other things, such as demonstrations, that may come to pass if things do not change:

*There will be a revolution in Iraq. It is like a volcano, and it may blow like an atomic bomb, boiling and then an explosion. There may be an explosion inside of us. This is a bad thing.* (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*We want to warn them, we are the owners of this country. We are Shi'a, and don't think that we are going to be quiet for a while. We have our limits, and we are going to explode after a while. The religious men are advising us to be patient and wait – they say maybe the Americans will accomplish something."* (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)

*If they keep treating Iraqis this way, it means they are lighting a fire that can't be extinguished, because the Iraqi people cannot be patient. (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)*

**Iraqis can't live with the Coalition forces or without them just yet.** Though several Iraqis are angry with the CPA for what it perceives as a slow response to the country's growing problems, most participants reject proposals suggesting that the Coalition forces might leave soon. There is no appetite for an indefinite stay by the Coalition, but most Iraqis in the focus groups expect that the Authority will remain in Iraq to fix things and maintain some semblance of peace and order:

*Just like they have led us to this problem, they have to get us out of it. They have to fix it and then leave. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

*Where are the principles of the Americans if they leave here after creating chaos? As long as they are here they have to finish the job. (Kurdish Man, Sehil El-Hamad)*

*We need the Coalition forces because there are too many problems – salaries for the retired need to be paid, and there are no chances for work. They need to reconstruct buildings, and deal with health and education. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

Indeed, a great tension exists between Iraqis' desire for national independence and self-determination, on the one hand, and Iraqis' fears, on the other hand, about what might happen if the Coalition forces leave too soon. As one older, illiterate Shi'a woman in Baghdad says, "If the Americans are not here, everyone will kill one another, so they are good for the security."

### III. Excitement and Fear about the Prospect of Democracy

Iraqis are conflicted about democracy and things they associate with it. There is a mixture of excitement, fear, and concern for defending their culture from the imposition of "Western" values.

Overall, the participants have positive associations with the term 'democracy', and many think that it is desirable and feasible for Iraq to develop a democratic system. Some of the associations with democracy are strongly positive, and a full-fledged electoral democracy is what a few of the participants call for:

*We have to have a democratic government – this is the first thing. A government elected by the people themselves. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

*It was something that we have heard about, and we want to try this thing, and see what it is about. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

*If we want to choose a party that represents us, there has to be voting, elections, and some democracy, so we can choose who will represent us. I think that the people are the only ones*



*who can decide who will represent them. That doesn't mean that we just get some guy without education and put him in power. We need an engineer, doctor, lawyer, or teacher. If he is good enough, we will judge him by his opinions, promises, and what he plans to do. Let them bring us some nominees and we will choose one of them if he is good enough. Then we will choose if we want an Islamic government or to be ruled by a king or a republic. (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)*

Several participants have a more circumscribed view of what democracy means to them, usually not involving a system with all of the trappings of democracy. These include “freedom of thought and speech,” “respect for the rights of others,” and “respect for others to practice their own religion.”

*We wish that democracy could be achieved here in Iraq. We don't want a total opening for democracy. At the same time, we don't want a limited democracy. Right now, we don't have the ability to choose. We wish that we would get this in the future. (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)*

Other participants say that Iraqis do not know enough about democracy, and that they need help understanding how to put it into practice:

*Democracy in Iraq – everyone talks about it, but no one knows what it means. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*Democratic principles must be known to everyone. People need someone to educate them and push them and help them become more self-confident. Before we used to say we had democracy, but we didn't see this, the only democracy we had was Saddam. We need someone to teach us what democracy means. (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)*

**Saddam muddled the meaning of democracy.** Finally, there are a handful of participants who have a mostly negative association with the term democracy – this sentiment is largely concentrated in the more traditional Shi'a cities of south central Iraq, but even within this community there are important cleavages. For some of these participants with negative associations, it is in part linked to Saddam Hussein's cynical use of democratic parlance in an attempt to build his credibility and legitimacy. It was “used as a curtain to cover the dictatorship,” says one Shi'a woman from Diwaniya. Iraqis have been living for more than three decades with Ba'athist rhetoric, and the gaps between democratic assertions and practices have been conspicuous and wide.

**Fear of the Pandora's Box of democracy.** Others fear the apparently limitless freedom that democracy offers in many other countries, particularly in the West. Some worry that a Pandora's Box of democracy is about to be opened in Iraq, an opening that will destroy the country's culture and moral values. Some of the participants equate democracy to total freedom, and they link that freedom to the chaos that surrounds many Iraqis' lives these days:

*It (Democracy) is a door that will be opened that you can't close again, so we are afraid of it. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*(Democracy is) anyone can do anything they want. You don't be afraid from God or anyone. It's not good. (Shi'a Woman, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*The Iraqi people have lived for thirty-five years under a dictatorship, and it is not good to give them freedom too fast. It should be called chaos, not freedom. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

*We want freedom of opinion, but that doesn't mean that anyone can act the way they want to act. (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

*Of course now it is 100 percent freedom, and in the previous regime we did not have this, and we want something in the middle – not totally free, and not totally controlled. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

*Democracy does not mean that a person can walk naked in the streets. Of course there are going to be limits and rules. Even in England, almost everything is allowed there, but there some rules and limits. In England, you can kiss a lady while in the park, while you are parking the car. You can buy beer wherever you want, but it is forbidden to drink on the street, or in the car. There are signs on the iron fences, whoever drinks in the street, they will fine them 50 pounds. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

**Strong desire for a government based on law.** There is a strong consensus among Iraqis in diverse communities for a constitution that not only ensures rights of citizens but also protects Islamic religious values and Iraqi culture. Iraqis very clearly want to be sure there are "rules" in the new democracy that is created in Iraq, and there is a clear desire by most for Iraqis to write the new constitution. After living for decades under a regime that conspicuously flouted the rule of law, Iraqis express strong support for building a new constitution to bring order to Iraq. As one Sunni man in Baghdad says, the first priority of the new Iraqi government should be to “put a constitution into place.”

Though most of the focus group participants want to see elections as soon as possible, rather than having to endure a long period of governance by foreigners, most participants also recognize the “chicken and egg” conundrum that exists – the tension between the impulse for immediate democracy with popular elections now versus the need to establish constitutional and electoral frameworks that are fair for everyone.

*We want a constitution that represents the people's interests – the economy, trading, agriculture, everything about our country. (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)*

*They should put the primary objectives of the constitution so it can be voted on by the people. We have to establish a congress to write a constitution and show it to the people so that they can vote for it. (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)*

*I want the right law. If it is Islamic or Jewish, or whatever it is, we just want a good law. (Kurdish Man, Sehil El-Hamad)*

*We want an American constitution, put by Americans. (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)*

*We have to elect some Iraqis and then choose the people who are going to write the constitution. If the Americans pick the people who write the constitution, then another Saddam Hussein will come to power. (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)*

The unchecked and unaccountable rule of Saddam Hussein evokes a desire among Iraqis to set clear term limits to keep future leaders in check:

*We want a small point in the next constitution, which would determine the period of the ruling president, like in the United States. There are elections every four years, and they have a democratic way of choosing their leaders. (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)*

*I think the elections should be every six months so the leaders would be afraid that they might lose the positions that they have. (Christian Woman, Baghdad)*

**Little support for re-establishing the monarchy in Iraq.** Though there is marginal support for re-establishing a monarchy in Iraq among some women and older Iraqis in our focus groups, most of the participants do not see a monarchy as the answer to today's problems and the future basis for governance. For most, a return to the monarchy seems like a return to a past they would like to move beyond:

*The monarchy will go back to take agricultural land for itself, and they would return to the old system. Monarchs get along with the Americans and do what they want. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*A king here will mean a new type of dictatorship. It won't be just like Britain. He won't be a symbol. There would be benefits for some guys to get this guy in power. When Sharif Ali arrived, he visited the head of the tribes, but not the educated people. If he gets into power, he would serve only the head of the tribes. (Sunni Man, Mosul)*

**Seeing the long road ahead.** The focus groups demonstrate that although Iraqis want immediate answers to some of their most pressing problems right now, there are voices that understand that the overall project to rebuild Iraq with a new face will take some time:

*Democracy is like raising a little child. When he grows up and becomes an adult, he needs some time, so he can get more strength and confidence in himself. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

*The organization of an Iraqi government is going to take a long time because there are a lot of divisions between different Iraqis – Shi'a, Sunni, and others. I think that the Iraqis can't choose for themselves. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

*The Iraqi people are sick, and they cannot choose right now. We can choose the government according to the plans they are going to have. We have to do it on a constitutional basis. But that does not mean that we can have freedom to do whatever we want.* (Shi'a Man, Karbala)

*The political situation in Iraq is not clear. Political loyalties are not clear, and we do not know who is good and who is corrupt.* (Sunni Man, Mosul)

*We have waited for thirty years, and we can wait another five years.* (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)

*We need a two-year period so we can know what parties are thinking about, what their principles are, and what are their goals.* (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)

*We would like the temporary government for two years, so we can have more time to organize our thoughts and choose wisely.* (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)

#### **IV. Mixed Feelings about Islamic Rule**

Some Iraqis support the notion of Islamic rule. There is a broad sense that Islamic values should infuse the new political order, although participants struggle to explain how this would actually work in practice. At the same time, reservations about whether religious leaders should have a predominant say in political matters are expressed in almost every community interviewed, especially among women – and even in south central Shi'a regions of Iraq.

Just as Iraq is geographically located between Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, its national mindset on the proper mix of religious life and government probably lies in a similar middle ground – not as secular as Turkey, yet not as strict as the Shi'a rulers found in Iran or the Wahabi Sunni ruling family in Saudi Arabia.

This research indicates that Iraqi Sunnis and Christians more strongly support a secular form of government, though we noticed problems with the use and translation of the word “secular.” Several focus group participants seem to interpret the word “secular” as something akin to “atheistic,” or the complete absence of religious values – the separation of religious belief from self, rather than from government.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars may debate whether and how Islam and democracy may be compatible, but it is a political reality in Iraq that many future voters believe that Islam serves as a basis for democracy. This has practical implications for international organizations working to foster and strengthen democracy in Iraq. In the focus groups, several participants, particularly Shi'a participants, call for an Islamic form of government:

---

<sup>2</sup> This is an important note for future research in Iraq. The literal translation and use of the word for secular government is dangerous because of the atheistic connotations associated with this phrase. It is better to use more descriptive phrases that explain a government that creates a separation between religious affairs and politics, but does not seek to banish religious values from public life.

*Because the Islamic religion covers these things and is established here, the constitution must be written by the Iraqis. The Americans have their own religion. We are here in Iraq, we are Sunni and Shi'a, and our constitution is the Koran. We should create an Islamic government, one that ensures the rights of all of the Iraqi people. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*Religious people will put rules that will serve everyone in an organized way. There is a perfect constitution, and this is of course the constitution of God. (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

*The constitution should be established after taking into account the people's opinion, and of course that means as an Islamic country, we will take Islamic rule as a principle. The religious men's opinions will be above all. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

*America and Britain want us to have a secular constitution, like Turkey, which is a secular country that is drifting away from Islam. If there is an Islamic constitution, the first thing we will face is another war with America, because they will not allow it. (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)*

*We want to have Islamic law, but we do not want an extremist version. We want something in the middle. (Kurdish Man, Sehil El-Hamad)*

Islamic democracy is thus a "brand" that has penetrated the mindset of Iraq's Shi'a community, to varying degrees. Some put a blind faith in religion and their clerical leaders and see it as the answer, while others in the Shi'a community hold more nuanced views about the relationship between religion and democracy:

*Democracy is here. It is in our values. We want the old democratic basis, not the new democratic basis, the one based on Islam. (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)*

*Democracy is an Islamic idea, because Mubammad used to consult his people, even though he was the Messenger of God. (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)*

*(We want a) democracy based on the true Islamic foundations. I think that such democracy should be created. But other democracies are not consistent with Islam. (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)*

*The best democracy is the religion of Islam. (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

*We don't want the foreigners' democratic system. We want the Islamic democracy, which is of course the respect of the social rights and another's opinion. (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)*

*Democracy is good, but it may bring corruption and immoral behaviors. Religious democracy brings safety. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

**Few clear ideas on implementing an Islamic government.** When asked about what the first priority of a new Iraqi government should be, one Shi'a woman in Najaf said, "Establishing a government based on Islamic principles, so they could be afraid of God and they could put God up front as they take decisions." But the participants offer few ideas on how this would work in practice, even after the moderator probed for more specific details on how this would be implemented and who should lead it. The only clear idea expressed comes from a Shi'a man in Diwaniya, who suggests that a consultative council with several committees – a committee for ordinary people, a second committee for the educated people, a third committee for the Shi'a, a fourth for the Sunni, a fifth for the Kurds. "Of course this has to be an Islamic council," he says.

**Some concerns about a religious takeover.** These focus groups offer signs that Sunnis and Christians are concerned about a religious takeover – even a handful of Shi'a expresses this sentiment. The Sunni Muslim and Christian focus group participants expressed more unambiguously similar sentiments about the need to build a society that keeps religion separate from state politics:

*We should rule as a secular society. Of course you are going to pray, but this is something between you and God.* (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

*Religion has to be separate from politics, so everyone can practice their own religion freely.* (Sunni Woman, Mosul)

*The Shi'a Muslims shouldn't be given power because if they get it, there would be problems with the Christians and the Sunni. Religion is supposed to be separate from the government.* (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

*The government should be secular. Religion should be put on the side. The separation between the religions was created in the last few years. Before Iraqis used to love Iraqis, but feelings of enmity are growing between us. Religion should not be related to the government.* (Christian Woman, Baghdad)

*If it is Islamic, we fear that it will be extremist.* (Sunni Woman, Mosul)

*Ruling by the religion of Islam is the worst rule that you can get.* (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

*First we want democracy, and then we can be Muslims within the rules set by democracy. If you start with Islam first, then that means there is no democracy. So it must be democracy first, and then Islam.* (Kurdish Man, Kirkuk)

*We don't want any differences between us (Sunnis) and them (Shi'a), but we are afraid that if there is a Shi'a president, then he might take the Shi'a's side on issues – like jobs and appointments to important positions in the country.* (Sunni Women, Mosul)

*If it is an Islamic government, there will be divisions between religions. The religion doesn't create this division, but the people in power use it to create divisions.* (Kurdish Woman, Mosul)

One Christian woman speaks about the problems her daughter has had because she refused to wear the Islamic head cover. Another Christian woman talks about the pressures she feels from Muslims to stop selling alcohol out of her house, something she says she does to feed her children.

**Support for Religious Freedom.** One common point in the discussions on this complex question is the need for religious freedom, and most participants say that every Iraqi should have the freedom to practice his or her religion. This is expressed most vociferously among Sunni and Kurdish groups, but belief in at least some freedom of religion, and therefore a less dogmatic government, cuts across all communities in Iraq:

*Let anyone be in power, but I don't want them to interfere with my religious values.*  
(Christian Woman, Baghdad)

*We have witnessed how Saddam has destroyed us. But that doesn't mean that ruling under secular basis is bad. We think it is good. It is better than Islamic rule.* (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)

*Since the Americans entered here, they have not gotten involved in religious affairs here. I mention this as an example. They have left the Sunni and Shi'a free, and the point I am leading to is that freedom of religion has to be given to people.* (Shi'a Man, Najaf)

*Islam is the main religion for this country. But of course we have to take care of the other religions. Not secular or an Islamic government – just not totally Islamic but not totally secular.* (Kurdish Man, Sehil El-Hamad)

*We have to take selected persons from each of the different religions. Even if there are Iraqi Jews – they should be a part of the new government. There are Arab Jews in the Knesset in Israel. Because there is justice in Islam, we do not reject Christians and Jews in our religion. We have to make sure that their opinions are included.* (Kurdish Man, Sehil El-Hamad)

## V. The Enduring Strength of the Iraqi National Identity

Iraqis evince a strong commitment to the integrity of Iraq's borders as presently constituted – including a substantial portion of those Kurds who lived under Saddam's rule over the past decade. While some non-Kurds indicate qualified support for federalism as a measure to accommodate diversity, Iraqi Arabs are generally nervous that autonomous regions may lead to the break-up of the country, which they strongly oppose. Tensions between Kurds and Arabs lurk beneath the surface in northern Iraq, where land disputes have the potential to spark conflict.

When asked to choose from a list of words that describe them best (Iraqi, Arab or Kurd depending on the group), Muslim, a member of a particular family or tribe, and either Sunni, Shi'a, or Christian, the leading response is "Iraqi." Any suggestion that the country

might have decentralized authority raises the specter of division in the minds of Iraqis. Iraqi nationalism and a sense of unity live on:

*We are all Muslims and we all have the same goals and direction and there won't be any division or separation. There has to be freedom and balance. We don't want Shi'a or Sunni to take over.* (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)

*It would be better if we all belonged to an Iraqi democracy.* (Kurdish Man, Kirkuk)

*There are no differences between us because Saddam didn't discriminate in torturing and killing.* (Sunni Woman, Mosul)

The symbols of Iraqi nationalism matter and remain relevant. A Shi'a man in Diwaniya expresses his disappointment that the Iraqi national football team played in uniforms that did not have the Iraqi national flag. Despite the horrors and agonies of Saddam Hussein's rule, and acknowledgements in some groups that the country's isolation from the rest of the world is due to wars and other provocations by Saddam, Iraqis remain proud of their national identity. It is a common ground where Iraqis of different backgrounds meet.

A fear of a divided Iraq exists – suggestions that the Kurds or any other group might have a strong degree of autonomy in a decentralized federal system raised concerns that Iraq would become divided “like Palestine” or that Iraq would not attain democracy. Iraqis fear the Humpty Dumpty scenario – separating the country would make it hard to put it back together again. As one Shi'a man from Najaf says, “Of course if they come here and separate Iraq into different parts, and it would be hard to put Iraq back together again.”

There are some strong binds between Arabs and Kurds. The Shi'a participants in particular express a strong connection with Kurds and describe their leaders as “fighters.” (In fact, the Shi'a focus group participants seem to have a more positive view of Kurdish leaders overall than do the Kurds, who are divided in their allegiances.) Any discussion of the Kurds breaking away from Iraq causes an uproar. As one Shi'a man in Baghdad says, “Iraq is a body, and you can't cut one of the limbs of the body.” Many participants see any divisions that might exist between Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds as something fabricated in part by Saddam Hussein, a strategy of divide and conquer.

All of this does not mean that ethnic and religious divisions are absent in Iraq. Rather, there is a danger that these divisions could bubble up in a period of crisis.

**Tensions in the North.** The most acute source of tension seems to exist between Arabs and Kurds in the north. As a Sunni woman in Mosul says of Saddam, “He destroyed the Iraqi people in the north, and put them in great pain. In Kirkuk he created racial problems between Kurds and Arabs.”

Property disputes seem to be at the core of the problems in these northern territories. Several Kurdish participants say that in order to feel welcome in Iraq, the land taken from Kurds needs to be given back. One Sunni man says, “Let's go back to the



registration of the lands and see what the records say about who owns the disputed land.” Balancing the competing interests of Iraq’s diverse population could be a major challenge as work moves ahead on writing the constitution and setting up the government.

## VI. Ambivalence about Iran and Shi’a Clerical Rule

The focus groups provide a glimpse into the ways that Iraqis – both Shi’a and Sunni alike – look at the role of neighboring Iran and its militantly Shi’a clergy-based system of governance. Non-Shi’a are clearly nervous about the implications of growing Iranian influence in Iraq. Iraqi Shi’a are also reluctant to embrace Iran unquestioningly, notwithstanding some considerably affinity for Iranians and measures taken by the government over the years to provide safe haven for Shi’a dissidents and refugees.

Despite the overall strong support for the vague notion of an Islamic democracy, there are voices clearly raised against clerical control and domination of politics. The views of religious thinkers and the values of Islam must be taken into account in building a new government, some Shi’a say, but this should not be taken too far. Some say that religious men simply are not qualified to run the affairs of the country. These sentiments are expressed somewhat more strongly by Shi’a women, as well as a few men:

*I am tired of the religious values, and all of the pressures coming from our people, our husbands, and our families. We need freedoms!* (Shi’a Woman, Diwaniya)

*We want the religious men far away from the politics.* (Shi’a Woman, Karbala)

*The best thing for every country is that we have to choose our representatives in a very democratic way. We want to choose the people who represent us, it doesn’t matter if they are religious or not.* (Shi’a Man, Diwaniya)

*The clerics, these religious people can’t government. They are only there for education and for religious faith.* (Shi’a Woman, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*If religious people like the people from the Hawza are in the government, it is not good. The clerics are only good for praying, but it is not good for providing for petrol and gas. The government should be lead by other people.* (Shi’a Woman, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*Of course religious men are respected, but that doesn’t mean that he is always going to work for our benefit for society’s benefit.* (Shi’a Woman, Diwaniya)

*The Hawza’s main concern should be religion, and not politics. It is good if they have some sort of impact on the situation.* (Shi’a Man, Najaf)

**Views on Iran’s influence.** For all of the worry among Western analysts about an Iranian takeover, these Shi’a focus groups offer signs of the wide differences of opinion about Iran and its potential influences. Not surprisingly, many Iraqi Shi’a feel a strong bond

with Iran – they share religious and cultural ties, and many appreciate the humanitarian support that Iran has provided to their community, and the safe haven provided to many refugees from the previous regime. One Shi'a man from Diwaniya says, “Without Iran, there wouldn't be any Shi'a in the world.”

But the views on Iran are not all positive – some Iraqi Shi'a, in fact, have quite negative views on what is going on in Iran and what Iran is doing in Iraq. Some these feelings are residual, scars from the battle fought in the Iran-Iraq war, and some of it is based on the perceptions that Iran is currently interfering in a negative way in Iraq:

*The ruler in Iran is not good– they have no justice there. It is not good in Iran.* (Shi'a Woman, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*They (The Iranians) hate us. This hatred will continue for a long, long time, as long as Iraq exists.* (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)

*They (The Iranians) have an unjustly judged the Iraqi prisoners of war.* (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)

*We don't want any foreigner to rule us, no Iranians, and no foreigners. We must be the ones to govern here.* (Shi'a Woman, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*Iran is interfering with the internal affairs of Iraq.* (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)

*We don't want drug dealing like they have in Iran, and we don't want them to come here.* (Shi'a Man, Karbala)

## VII. Challenges for Iraq's Emerging Leaders

A pervading cynicism about virtually every emerging political leader in Iraq is one of the main challenges in building a new Iraq. Focus group participants generally have more negative than positive things to say in reaction to a list of emerging political and religious leaders in Iraq, and this cynicism about leaders may be yet another enduring scar from Saddam's era. Cynicism about leaders, especially acute regarding some exiled leaders who were objects vilification campaigns led by the previous regime, may be another enduring scar from Saddam's era.

This basic obstacle to building a democratic Iraq – the lack of credibility of any leader at all – is a challenge that can be overcome in time. The Iraqi public is ready for a new government, and their opinions about various leaders will in large part depend on the successes and failures in this crucial early phase.

A key issue that may come up as the CPA and the Iraqi governing council moves forward in its work is the question of appointing exiles versus people from the inside. Focus group participants do not blame exiles for leaving Iraq – the general attitude was that they understood why these individuals left – to escape Saddam's injustice or to feed their families.

As one Shi'a man in Najaf says, "We have an example from our Messenger, Muhammad, who left Mecca when he found out that people didn't want him there."

But the suggestion that some from the exile community might serve in a new government receives a very mixed reaction. Some participants reject this suggestion, usually on grounds that the exiles did not "suffer" along with most Iraqis:

*The people who went outside, they lived in the West, and they lived a free live, and now they come back, and they are happy. He is not hungry. He just came from under the air conditioning. (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

*We suffered for twenty years, and I won't accept anyone who will come to rule Iraq. He doesn't know how the situation is. The person who should rule is the one who lived and suffered with us. He can do the best for us. (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)*

Other participants are open to the idea of having members of the exile community serve their country:

*If they have the will and intention to help people, and the strength to carry on and do the work, then we will respect them. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

*If they have experience and if they are capable enough – why not? (Kurdish Woman, Mosul)*

*The well-educated people, the people who used to live outside, they should take part (in writing the new constitution). Before they put anyone in power, they have to ask others, and look at his file, and search in his file if he was working with Saddam. (Kurdish Man, Sehil El-Hamad)*

## VIII. New Political Organizations: The Struggle for Credibility

**Iraqis are skeptical about the emergent political parties and civic organizations.** Although Iraq has seen an explosion in the creation of new political parties, most participants say that parties are only working for their own benefit, and no one sees them as essential to building a new democracy and government. In fact, several participants think that it would be better if parties were not involved in the next government. Iraqis have not seen anything yet from these newly emerging parties.

The Ba'ath party has damaged the credibility of political parties – both old and new. The focus group participants suspect that parties are only working "for their own benefit," and few see them as essential to building a new democracy and government.

*What is their role? What is their purpose? What do they want to do for us? (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

*It is not fair that there are too many political parties. These should be set up according to the constitution – there should be rules to establish new political parties. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

*They are just talking nonsense, and they have done nothing. Shouting and screaming, but doing nothing. (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)*

*Any person who holds a high position in the next government should not be a member of a political party. (Christian Woman, Baghdad)*

*It is just as if they were not here. They are not doing anything. They are just symbols and names on the walls. Where were they when we were suffering? (Christian Woman, Baghdad)*

*What are their plans for the future? What are their activities? We don't know. They were hiding in Saddam's era. We think they are going to cause problems in the future. (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)*

Even the more organized parties that have existed for some time in Iraq are criticized by the participants. One man in Karbala says about the Islamist Da'awa party, "We don't know their goals, their purposes, and results. What are they going to develop? Even the basics, we don't know."

The parties have a lot of work to do to win voters over. As one Christian woman in Baghdad says, "These parties have to walk on the streets and meet with the people and the leaders in each of the communities to explain their goals and principles and values so we can know who they are and choose. We should kick them out of the places they took over because we don't know what they are doing."

The main point is that political power has not coalesced just yet in Iraq. As one Shi'a man in Karbala says, "I haven't heard about anyone yet who can represent me in the next government. There isn't anyone I would vote for in elections." There are many new options surfacing, but these parties' roots are not very deep in society; they must start building from scratch. These parties' roots will presumably deepen as time passes, organizations are developed, and the interim government moves forward in its work on rebuilding the country.

**The newness of civic groups and civil society.** Some Iraqis are uncertain about civic organizations that have appeared on the scene. This uncertainty is probably borne out of a lack of close familiarity with these groups – Saddam's regime dominated the scene and stifled most opportunities for independent civic groups to organize. Some of the focus group participants have a hard time giving their reactions to the idea civil society organizations – defined as organizations working outside of the government. A few participants seemed confused and thought the idea of groups working outside of the government framework referred to terrorist organization or groups like the ones conducting the current wave of attacks against Coalition troops. As one woman in Karbala says, "We

haven't heard of such groups during the last government. The ones that were outside of the regime were executed and closed down."

But after some description and explanation, several participants expressed knowledge and appreciation of the value of these groups:

*It (non-governmental organizations) is a good sign of democracy. If they are acting to the benefit of the country, of course we want them. But if they are acting for their own benefit, we will stand in their face and reject everything they do.* (Sunni Man, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

*...there are groups acting to help people, like gathering weapons and buying bullets from the market and giving them for free to the allied forces, just to make things safer. Or others created a factory, and helped a lot of people to work.* (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)

*In every street and every place, there are some groups protecting their area. They are from the neighborhoods, working as night watchmen for free, because they want to protect their friends.* (Shi'a Woman, Diwaniya)

## **IX. Challenges For Women in the New Iraq**

Women in Iraq, as elsewhere in the world, face special challenges in their quest to fully participate in their country's politics. The challenges became evident even in the preparations for this research – getting a full turnout for the women's groups was a greater challenge than it was with the men's sessions. Some of our male recruiters would say they did not even *know* a woman who was qualified to recruit women participants. Furthermore, several women seemed more reluctant than their male counterparts to talk about issues related to politics and the future Iraqi government. Some of the women, particularly those with less education, simply professed ignorance on many of the topics – something one rarely sees in sessions with men.

A great deal of the problem seemed to be related to self-confidence. One Christian woman in Baghdad said in response to a question, "I don't understand the basic principle of democracy. My husband is a college graduate, and he could explain it better." A Shi'a woman from the Sadr City district of Baghdad tried to turn questions on politics back to the female discussion moderator and get the moderator to answer her own questions. Another woman from Sadr City said, "We are simple people – we take care of the house and we are setting cake and tea for others." So, for many average Iraqi women, the first barrier to full participation may be centered on basic issues of access to information and self-confidence.

Despite these challenges, Iraq is not Kuwait – no one in the focus groups thinks that women should be barred from voting in the election. This is not even a question for the most conservative male focus group participant.

The question of women serving as political and government leaders is more complicated. Most male participants – and a few women, too – did not think that a woman could lead the country or hold senior positions in the government, mostly on the basis that women are too emotional and not capable of handling leadership positions:

*Women work from their heart, not from their brains. Men are efficient and can manage.* (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*In Najaf, I don't think that (having female political leaders) could be accomplished here. Maybe in other places, but here in Najaf, families are very religious, and the father can't allow their daughters to go out. It is not socially accepted.* (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)

*As an Islamic country, it would be hard for a woman to rule in Iraq. Men are better than women in holding such strong positions, because women are emotional.* (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)

There are a few voices – both male and female – in support for having women in leadership positions in the new government. In fact, one Shi'a woman in Diwaniya believes that women would be better leaders than men, saying, “We think that in the current circumstances, women are more reasonable than men. Men are reckless, angry, upset always, and taking reckless actions... Women are reasonable. Men here in Iraq are more revolutionary than reasonable.”

Working with women to overcome the obstacles to their equality and full political participation will be a key challenge in building a new democratic Iraq.

## X. Justice and Reconciliation

One component of building a better future for Iraq is finding ways to move beyond its bloody past. The focus groups indicate that average Iraqis have only just begun to contemplate the various ways Iraq may punish those responsible for atrocities. Most Iraqis in the focus groups support punishing senior leaders from the Ba'ath party with blood on their hands, but they have mixed views on how broadly the veil of guilt extends.

The focus group participants spoke briefly about what should be done to achieve a sense of justice and reconciliation with Iraq's past. Because they were more focused on the immediate concerns of governance, security, and basic services, it was apparent that many had not given the question much thought.

First, on the question of who should be punished, most participants agreed that the efforts should be focused on top officials in Saddam Hussein's government, though several said that people should be punished according to what they did, not their level of responsibility. There was no clear consensus on this question of how far the veil of guilt

extends. Many participants note that it would not be possible to punish all Ba'ath party members:

*Seventy or eighty percent of Iraqis are Ba'ath party members, but that doesn't mean that they are all criminals. Those who reached high positions under the name of the Ba'ath party, these are the ones who should be removed from their positions. (Shi'a Man, Diwaniya)*

*They were just following Saddam Hussein's orders. Of course we know that the Ba'ath party had members, people who were members – my brother, your brother, and you and me, and they can establish a clean slate and work again. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

There are differences in opinion about what should be done to punish individuals who committed atrocities in the previous regime. Most think that they should be expelled from their positions in government and banned from power. Some other suggestions include:

*They should be slaughtered. (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)*

*We have forgiveness in our blood. Our religion made us learn how to forgive. We have mercy on people. Before we think about killing him, we should think about his family. Because of the mistakes of one person, we should think about how that will affect others. (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

*We Shi'a, we have Islamic councils. If these councils said to go and kill them, we would have to go and obey them. Of course these leaders should be killed. (Shi'a Men, Karbala)*

*We want them to be outside of society and have no role. They have to be judged, and everyone should receive the punishment that gave to others. (Shi'a Women, Karbala)*

Although Iraqis are not sharply focused on the question of justice and reconciliation, it is not something that can be swept under the rug. Once a degree of stability and normality returns to Iraq, the public is bound to start asking questions about what will be done to the leaders, many held in detention since April without a clear idea of what will be done with them. As one Christian woman in Baghdad says, "We want them to pay for the crimes they have committed. As long as the occupation forces arrested these people, they should present them for trial."

## XI. Iraqis Living in a Fog of Disinformation

**Despite Iraqis' hatred for Saddam, many still believe a lot of what he told them.** Even as they rejoice in the demise of Saddam Hussein, the people of Iraq are still encumbered by much of the propaganda he drummed into them over several decades. For

instance, a strong antipathy for the United States and Britain is not overcome by the fact that these two countries are responsible for the country's liberation from the tyrant they despise.

The lack of reliable media sources has made it difficult for the CPA's messages to penetrate in this resistant environment. According to the participants, the best sources of information include *Al-Arabiya* satellite television, the radio, and the word on the street. A Shi'a man in Najaf says that he sits in the mosque and hears a lot of news from the Hawza, the leading Shi'a religious school.

Hardly anyone mentions Iraqi media sources, including the twenty or more newspapers now published in Iraq. The exceptions to this are found in the northern city of Mosul, where a few participants cite Radio Sawa as one of their favored sources for information. Also, one Shi'a man in Najaf mentions the local television channel as a good source.

**Conspiracy theories.** In the current context, the rumor mill is strong, and Iraqis' frame of reference for interpreting current events remains grounded in the past. Though Saddam may be gone, his propaganda lives on in the minds of Iraqis. Anti-American and anti-Jewish vitriol is embedded, helping to inform Iraqis worldview and determining how they interpret current events.

According to some participants, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are doing the bidding of Jewish or Zionist interests, and Israel is buying houses and land in Iraq. One woman in Najaf says that a majority of the American soldiers here are Jewish, which is further evidence of a plot to keep Iraq down while the Coalition, backed by Israel, steals the wealth of Iraq. When asked about the recent audiotape purportedly from Saddam Hussein, some participants thought this was part of a U.S. plot. As one Sunni man in Mosul says, "It is another American game – the CIA is trying to make the Iraqi people frightened. They are trying to blackmail the Iraqi people to make them fear."

In several groups, particularly in the south, participants mentioned the rumor of an American tank driving around Baghdad with a sign saying, "If you give us security, we will give you electricity and water." The actions of the soldiers on the street play an important role in defining the image of the CPA, and Iraqis seem almost bound to misinterpret any gesture. A Shi'a man in Diwaniya complained about the fact that soldiers are giving children chocolates, saying that they were trying to humiliate Iraqis by taking pictures as the children bend over to pick up the candy at their feet – he says the soldiers want to show the world that Iraqis are beggars.

Two points are clear from these comments – a significant chunk of the CPA's public information campaign rests in the hands of the troop presence, and Iraqis are prone to misinterpret things. Not one participant says that the CPA is communicating clearly with the public. As one woman in Mosul says, "Until now it (the CPA's communications) is not clear. All we have seen from them are the soldiers in the street." Some other comments on the difficulties people have in hearing the CPA's message include:

*He [Ambassador Bremer] is separated and isolated from the Iraqis. (Sunni Man, Mosul)*



*Bremer is appearing every Saturday and announcing problems, but unfortunately, there is no central channel so we don't hear what he says. (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

*Like a piece of furniture from the Pentagon, it [the CPA] was put here in Iraq. (Shi'a Man, Karbala)*

**Transition from liberators to occupiers.** For many Iraqis, the American presence in the country has not met their sky-high expectations – expectations anchored, in part, in the language of liberation used by Coalition forces during the war:

*They said they would come as a liberator, but if they said they were coming as an occupation force, we would have defended Iraq. Not defending Saddam Hussein, but defending Iraq. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*Are they occupiers? Or are they not occupiers? That is my question. When Abd al-Karim Qasim<sup>3</sup> came and took over Iraq, he organized ministries in fifteen days, and he is an Iraqi. These guys are American, and we are living in a new, modern age. Why are things going this way? (Shi'a Man, Najaf)*

**Disarray and confusion is the perfect plan.** Several Iraqis in the focus groups express a belief that the chaotic situation since the war has been part of the plan. What analysts in the West see as lack of organization and planning is interpreted by Iraqis as completely perfect organization and planning – Iraqis believe that the United States should be able to do what it wants. Few participants believe that the United States is motivated by an interest in what is best for Iraq. Many think that the United States is here for its own interests – it came here to improve the American economy and to steal Iraq's resources.

*All of the ministries are burned, except for the Ministry of Oil – all for their own benefit. (Shi'a Man, Sadr City, Baghdad)*

*All they care about is the oil right now. They didn't care about us. They took from us, and robbed us. (Shi'a Woman, Najaf)*

*They are protecting their own interests, under the name of doing all of these things for the benefit of Iraq. (Shi'a Woman, Karbala)*

*They took the petrol and they strengthened their own economy, but there is nothing for us. (Kurdish Man, Kirkuk)*

---

<sup>3</sup> Abd al-Karim Qasim, a military leader in Iraq, overthrew the Iraqi monarchy headed by King Faisal II in July 1958 and ruled until 1963, when his government was toppled by dissident factions in the military.

The exception to this is in the northern areas of Iraq, particularly among Kurds, who are generally more supportive of the Americans. But overall, the bulk of the comments from the focus group participants focus on a presumed conspiracy to sow chaos in Iraq:

*It is part of their plan – if it is not part of their plan then it means they didn't know what they were doing.* (Sunni Men, Raghaba Khatun, Baghdad)

*We think that they absolutely know and understand the total situation. They know about everything. They enjoy watching this for no reason. We don't know why they do this.* (Shi'a Women, Karbala)

*They want disorder, and they want their companies to come and use our resources.* (Shi'a Men, Sadr City, Baghdad)

*Until now, the American forces did not do anything for us – yes, they did one good thing (getting rid of Saddam), but why are they still here? There must be a lot of hidden things.* (Kurdish Man, Kirkuk)

Few participants have a sense of the CPA's vision for Iraq, with several participants saying that the CPA works secretly, and that it seems like a puzzle to them. In stark contrast, media outlets like *Al-Jazeera* seem to do their utmost to get Saddam Hussein's message across to the public. During the second week of the focus groups, a recorded message allegedly from Saddam Hussein appeared on *Al-Jazeera*, which put a sign language interpreter in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen to make sure that deaf viewers were able to get Saddam's message in its entirety.

## Conclusion

The Coalition Provisional Authority and Iraq's new Governing Council are constructing an airplane even while it is barreling down the runway about to take off – they will be working to set up the governing structures of Iraq even while it is responding to immediate crises in security and the provision of basic services. This presents daunting challenges on many fronts and raises several sensitive questions.

Iraqis are ready to move beyond their grisly past and build a new country based on the rule of law and some form of democratic rule. Although Iraqis' feelings about democracy combine excitement, fear, and concern for defending their culture, there is a consensus for the basic elements of a democratic system: a society governed by fair rules, and not the ruthless authoritarianism they knew under Saddam; a government that listens and is responsive to citizens, rather than Saddam's closed system of government which responded only to the interests of a select few; and a government that creates opportunities for all to share in the country's wealth, rather than a corrupt government that stole the country's wealth and built palaces while average Iraqis got the bare minimum.

Three months after the fall of Saddam's regime, three challenges are particularly daunting. The first challenge is establishing law and order. Without this foundation, chaos and instability will continue to undermine efforts to build a new Iraq. Iraqis are pleading for basic governance – police to keep the peace, officials take decisions, and a representative who listens to concerns.

The second building block is writing a new constitution, setting the legal framework, and establishing new government structures. Having suffered under Saddam's rule, Iraqis are very clear about what they do *not* want, but they may need some time to figure out what they want. Iraqis may need time to sort out many thorny questions, including how to balance the competing interests of different ethnic groups and what is the right way, if at all, to include values from the many different religious faiths in shaping their new government.

The third building block is creating new ways to organize political debate and channel the will of all Iraqis, both men and women. Iraq has witnessed an explosion of new political parties since the fall of Saddam, but most of these parties lack credibility at the popular level. New media outlets and newspapers appear every week, and Iraqis have opportunities to express themselves more openly than they have in decades. Still, a great deal needs to be done to foster the development of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of exercising its rights with some wisdom. This will require, among other things, access to a broad array of information about the world and coherent models about the workings of free societies.

In trying to build popular momentum for constitutional democracy in Iraq wherein majority rule is tempered by respect for the rights of minorities and tolerance of diversity, it will be necessary to build on those attributes of democracy that address strongly felt needs. To the extent Iraqis identify "democracy" with structured liberty, rather than chaos and criminality, they may be motivated to embrace and enlarge democratic institutions and habits.

In the present aftermath of Saddam's criminal regime, where the most atrocious crimes against persons were committed by agents of the state and were widely known, it is reasonable that Iraqis should hanker for decency in the public sphere. While Islamic values seem to many to provide a basis for a good government, there are reservations in diverse quarters about to large a role for clerics. However, if Western-style democracy is seen as a system that fosters immoral behaviors, rather than protecting decency, then it will be quickly discredited.

Iraq faces a unique opportunity to transform its politics and create a new democratic government. Though the country bears the visible, raw scars of three decades of tyrannical rule by the Ba'ath party and Saddam Hussein and is plagued with sporadic violence and the disruption of basic public services, the political situation in Iraq is evolving rapidly. The outcome is not yet certain.

If men and women across the country come to believe their voices will be heard and their basic needs met in a new Iraq, then the liberation of the country from Saddam Hussein may yet lead to the establishment of a recognizably democratic country. These focus groups show that the Iraqi public understands that these efforts may take some time, and that they are anxious to get started.

**APPENDIX A**

**Demographic Profiles of the Focus Groups**

---

**Sunday, June 29, 2003**

10 AM            **Baghdad, Sadr City:** Shi'a women, less than high school education, ages 35 to 60.

2 PM             **Baghdad, Sadr City:** Shi'a men, high school education, ages 18 to 29.

**Monday, June 30, 2003**

10 AM            **Baghdad, Raghaba Khatun:** Sunni men, college education, age 45 and above.

**Tuesday, July 1, 2003**

5 PM             **Karbala:** Shi'a men, high school education, ages 18 to 29.

**Wednesday, July 2, 2003**

10 AM            **Najaf:** Shi'a women, less than a high school education, ages 30 to 50.

5 PM             **Najaf:** Shi'a men, less than a high school education, ages 20 to 40.

5 PM             **Kirkuk:** Kurdish men, high school education, ages 18 to 29.

**Thursday, July 3, 2003**

10 AM            **Diwaniya:** Shi'a women, high school education, ages 30 to 44.

5 PM             **Diwaniya:** Shi'a men, less than a high school education, ages 18 to 29.

**Friday, July 4, 2003**

10 AM            **Karbala:** Shi'a women, less than a high school education, ages 30 to 44.

**APPENDIX A (continued)**

**Demographic Profiles of the Focus Groups**

**Saturday, July 5, 2003**

10 AM        **Baghdad:** Christian women, high school education, ages 30 to 44.

**Tuesday, July 8, 2003**

10 AM        **Sehil El-Hamad:** Kurdish men, high school education, ages 30 to 44.

5 PM         **Mosul:** Sunni men, high school education, ages 45 and over.

**Wednesday, July 9, 2003**

10 AM        **Mosul:** Sunni women, high school education, ages 30 to 44.

5 PM         **Mosul:** Kurdish women, high school education, ages 20 to 35.

**APPENDIX B**

**NOTES ON METHODOLOGY**

**1. Focus Group Research.** Focus groups are semi-structured group interviews that proceed according to a careful research design. Groups are recruited to be homogeneous (according to gender, age, education, ethnicity and/or religious affiliation) for two reasons: in order to clarify what are the views held by a particular sub-group of the population, and to enhance the comfort level of participants, so they feel they are among peers and that everyone involved is equally entitled to express their opinion. When done well, they are free flowing, open-ended, and often unpredictable. They are designed to elicit a wide range of ideas, attitudes, experiences, and opinions held by a selected small sample of recruited respondents on a defined topic.

Focus groups are useful in helping understand the language that people use when they discuss particular ideas or concepts. They are also useful in gaining a deeper appreciation for the motivations, feelings, and values behind participants' reactions. It is a flexible form of research that allows one to probe into issues important to the sponsors, while also permitting participants to raise other issues or concerns that might not have occurred to the researchers. As an organized group discussion, it provides a form that enables participants to stimulate each other in an exchange of ideas that may not emerge in individual in-depth interviews or quantitative surveys that rely on one-on-one questionnaires.

Some opinion research, including polls, has been conducted in Iraq over the past few months. They provide quantitative information such as what percentage of Iraqis approves or disapproves of the work being done by the Coalition authorities. These polls are not able to tell us why Iraqis feel this way, what motivates them to support or oppose certain things, and what might persuade them to change their minds or embrace new things.

Furthermore, because of limitations in resources and staffing, no Iraqi organization has been able to conduct a poll with a representative nation-wide sample of Iraqis. Poll results that are presented as what Iraqis think are actually based on public opinion surveys conducted in a few select cities, most of them from Baghdad to the north. Most of the available polls are heavily skewed toward the male perspective, with the vast majority of the sample made up of male views. There are good organizations building their capacity to obtain more representative samples, but this will take time.

Focus groups such as these can help us better understand the many shades of gray – hesitations, enthusiasm, anger, or uncertainty. Focus groups are first and foremost concerned with understanding attitudes, rather than measuring them. In a society like Iraq's that has been closed for decades and has never really allowed open discussion or democratic debate, focus groups can be a valuable tool for understanding attitudinal complexities that lie beneath the surface.

Because of the small numbers involved, however, focus group participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly and statistically representative of the larger population from which they are drawn, and findings ought not be generalized beyond the small number of participants. They offer insight into emerging ideas and popular attitudes on key issues, but

it would be unsound to extrapolate to firm conclusions about what all or most Iraqis believe based on such a small sample of individuals.

The findings from this first set of political focus groups in Iraq provide hypotheses and tentative conclusions that require further investigation. Often a quantitative survey can build on these kinds of findings and test hypotheses with a larger and more representative sample.

**2. Special challenges of research in Iraq.** When we embarked on this research project, Iraq had virtually no infrastructure available to conduct these focus groups. Except for northern territories that had a degree of autonomy over the last decade, no public opinion research has been conducted in many of the areas where we organized these focus groups. Iraq does not have a history of permitting basic market research, and the free expression of opinions on politics was severely restricted under Saddam Hussein. No focus group facilities currently exist in Iraq. Although a few Iraqi groups have begun conducting public opinion research through public opinion polls in the last few months, these groups require training and assistance in order to improve the quality of their research. So, we had to build most of the project from scratch.

The volatile security situation and the lack of basic services such as electricity added to the challenge. Because of the lack of order and higher level of crime in Baghdad, the local recruiters in Iraq's capital had a more difficult time getting participants to attend the sessions. Because of instability in the central region of the country, we were unable to conduct focus groups in towns and villages surrounding Baghdad. We bought a small gasoline-powered generator in order to power the sound equipment that enabled us and our simultaneous translator to monitor the groups and to provide power for fans to make the focus group participants more comfortable in the heat that ranged above 115 degrees (F).

Organizing sessions with Iraqi women presented an additional challenge, given existing cultural constraints that make it more difficult for many average Iraqi women to attend sessions without a male relative. We assured female participants that they were welcome to bring a male relative to the site of the focus group session, though these male relatives were not permitted in the room where the focus group was conducted.

**3. Defining Specifications.** In order to enhance the comfort level of participants, each of the fifteen groups was recruited to be relatively homogeneous. The groups were stratified by gender, age, ethnicity, religious background, and educational attainment. In this manner, each participant is more likely to feel that everyone's opinion matters equally, that there is no need to defer to another person, which encourages frankness and participation. Homogeneity of each of the groups also helps us understand the diversity of opinion that may exist within certain demographic groups.

The starting point for defining the scope of research was available demographic data on Iraq. This data suffers from serious limitations. The last official Iraqi census was conducted six years ago, and there is no assurance of validity of the data. Given the sensitivities associated with basic information on the religious and ethnic mix of Iraq's diverse population, it is not inconceivable that Saddam Hussein's government manipulated some of the official demographic data. In setting the parameters for the research, we



therefore examined all available sources of information on Iraq's demographics, including information from international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

**Gender.** Of the fifteen focus groups, eight were held men and seven with women. We had intended a 50-50 gender split between the number of groups, but the last minute cancellation of a focus group with Sunni women in Baghdad because of logistical difficulties prevented us from attaining our goal of a gender balance that reflects Iraq's overall demographics.

**Age.** Iraq has a very young population. According to available demographic data, over 70 percent of adults over the age of 18 are under the age of 45. Over two of the fifteen groups were organized with adults over the age of 45, and most of our groups were organized with the core of Iraqi adults who fall into the age range of 20-40 years old.

**Ethnic and religious background.** Overall, we succeeded in hitting the basic demographic targets on ethnic and religious factors. Twelve of the fifteen groups were with Iraqi Arabs, and the remaining three groups were with Iraqi Kurds, reflecting what is generally accepted as the demographics of Iraq – 20 percent or so of the overall population is assumed to Kurdish.

Eight groups were organized with Shi'a Arabs, and three groups were with Sunni Arabs. Overall, about 60 percent of Iraq's population is Shi'a, and about 20 percent are Sunni Arab. We organized one session with Christians in Baghdad. Time and logistical constraints prevented us from organizing sessions with other minority groups such as Turkmen.

**Political affiliation.** Most political focus group research also includes screening questions on political affiliation or support for particular political figures. Shortly after our arrival on the ground in Iraq, it became apparent that it would be premature to screen potential participants on the basis of political sympathies or affiliation. As we mention above, there are few (if any) credible leaders or movements with broad support in Iraq. Political sympathies need some time to gel. So, we did not screen on political affiliation.

**Geographic locations.** Four sessions were held in Baghdad, and six sessions were organized in the Shi'a regions of south central Iraq. The remaining sessions were organized in the northern territories of Iraq, all in areas that were under Saddam Hussein's rule in the last twelve years (as opposed to the autonomous areas protected by the Anglo-American "No Fly" zone).

**4. Gaps in the research.** Any research project, particularly one organized in such a short period of time and in difficult circumstances as this one was, will suffer some shortcomings. There are four main perspectives missing in this first set of focus groups we feel it is important to note:

- **The autonomous Kurdish regions in northern Iraq.** None of the focus groups were organized in cities or towns of northern Iraq that had been

nominally independent for the last twelve years, mostly due to time and logistical constraints. We decided to focus on the areas where such research had never been permitted previously.

- **The Sunni heartland.** Instability and ongoing fighting prevented us from organizing sessions in the mostly Sunni territories to the north and west of Baghdad.
- **Small towns and villages.** Most of the focus groups were held in larger towns and cities – only one focus group was held in a remote village. While Iraq's population is largely concentrated in urban areas, and one could argue that the politically salient population especially is concentrated in towns and cities, one would nevertheless have preferred to know more about the perspectives of the rural population.
- **British-controlled Basra.** While preparations were made to hold groups in and around Basra, in the time available we were not in the end able to complete them. Basra is Iraq's second largest city, very close to the Iranian border and the Gulf, and the center of the failed rebellion against Saddam in 1991 (and thus the object of particular depredations by his regime thereafter). Moreover, it is currently controlled by British military forces, and so might have provided a complementary perspective on how the CPA relates to Iraqis.

**5. Random Recruitment of Participants.** We sent advance teams to each of the seven locations where we organized the focus groups at least five days ahead of the session. The advance teams found suitable location for the focus groups and recruited and trained a team of Iraqis to conduct the participant recruitment.

The local recruiters set out to find 20 participants who fit the demographic specifications outlined in advance. They used a random pattern to avoid “cluster sampling” and went door-to-door using a random approach pattern to find and invite participants. Land-line telephones are generally not operational in many parts of Iraq. The main goal was to bring together a group of Iraqis who did not know each other previously and were not from the same extended families.

The local recruiters recorded the names, addresses, and basic demographic information from participants who fit the specifications and accepted the invitation to attend the session. The local recruiter organized transportation arrangements for each of the participants, and participants were re-screened on the same demographic questions once they arrived at the site of the focus groups to ensure the quality of the research and recruit.

**6. Acknowledgements.** More than three dozen Iraqis were instrumental in making this research possible. Raed Jarrar of the Iraqi human rights group CIVIC was instrumental in providing contacts for the local recruiters for the focus groups in Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, and Diwaniya. Many of CIVIC's volunteers, who have conducted fieldwork since the end of the war in a project aimed at recording the number Iraqi civilian casualties during the war, served as local recruiters, including Saif Al-Khafaji, Riyal Hassan, Sattar Jassim, Abdel

Zahra Hamid, Hussein Al-Wan, Hussein Alawy, Sijad Abed, Ibtisam Salim, and Abbas Farhan. In the Mosul region, Ibrahim Shekko played the main organizing role for the sessions. Herish Marash in Kirkuk identified recruiters and moderators and otherwise provided vital facilitation.

There are several individuals in the civil military affairs of the Coalition forces who were instrumental in helping us make connections with nascent civic groups and leaders who helped with this project. In Kirkuk, we would like to thank Major John Basso, Lieutenant John Evans, and Jamar Hall. In Mosul, Major John Breland and his team in the Civil Affairs Battalion based at the Ninevah International Hotel were very welcoming and friendly.

**6. Location of Sessions.** The sessions were organized in a variety of locations, depending on what worked in each of the locations. In Baghdad, we held the sessions in the meeting room of a nascent Iraqi human rights organization. In the relatively more conservative areas of the south, we held the sessions in meeting rooms in public hospitals, a relatively safe and socially acceptable location for men and women of different backgrounds. In the northern regions, we organized sessions in a hotel conference room and in a social meeting place in a family home.

**7. Discussion Moderators.** We hired and trained moderators for each of the sessions. Firas Imad was the discussion leader for most of the groups with Arab males, and Naif Talal led a few of the sessions. Because we were unable to hire an Iraqi woman who could travel outside of Baghdad and lead sessions in cities and towns across the country, we had to hire and train female moderators in each of the locations where we held groups with women.

**8. Translation and Transcripts.** In order to enhance the comfort level of the participants and remove potential incentives to alter responses, we kept a distance between ourselves and the participants. When it was practically possible, we listened to the session from a room adjacent to the focus group room with audio equipment and a simultaneous translator. This simultaneous translation provided an opportunity for interventions in the groups, which was done on several occasions via written notes. The quality of the translation was good, but necessarily incomplete. A tape recording was made of each discussion, and the initial notes from the session were verified with the tapes of these sessions to provide a more complete transcription. These transcripts served as the basis of the final report.

**APPENDIX C**

Principal Investigators and Authors

**Thomas O. Melia** is Director of Research at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, and Adjunct Professor in the School of Foreign Service, both at Georgetown University. During more than a dozen years at the National Democratic Institute from 1988 to 2001, he held various senior positions, including Director of Programs in the Middle East (1993-1996) and Vice President for Programs (1998-2001). He has worked as a professional opinion researcher, at the firm of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, Inc. Earlier in his career, Melia was Legislative Assistant for Foreign and Defense Policy to Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY) between 1980 and 1986, and was Associate Director of the AFL-CIO's Free Trade Union Institute 1986 to 1988.

**Brian M. Katulis** works as a consultant to several organizations, including Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute, Philip Gould Associates, and Pal-Tech. He previously worked on international political research and strategy projects in about a dozen countries as a senior associate with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. His experience includes work on the Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State and the National Security Council during the Clinton Administration. Between 1995 and 1998, he lived in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Egypt where he developed and managed civic education projects for the National Democratic Institute. He is a graduate of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.