

Iraqi Constitution - Iraqi Thoughts

December 2003



info@iprospect.org.uk

www.iprospect.org.uk

Tel: +44 20 8450 0270

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Executive Summary

Iraq has embarked on a transition towards democracy and a key step in this process will be the conception of a new constitution. This report, a humble first step in the necessary process of engagement with ordinary Iraqis, was put together following numerous roundtable discussions with young Iraqi men and women in Baghdad, Al-Ramadi, Najaf, Nassiriyah, and London.

Iraq would be most stable under a federal state structure where many powers are decentralized. A federal state seems to be agreed upon by most political parties based on Iraq's ethnic diversity, but arguably the most powerful case for federalism does not rest on the country's diverse ethnic makeup but on its vulnerability to dictatorship.

Using the existing eighteen-province arrangement serves as a good starting point to defining constituent units since it avoids cutting new borders which could be a recipe for future unrest:

- Baghdad, owing to the size of its population and political importance, would need to be a constituent unit of its own.

Some provinces will also need to be awarded their own constituent unit including:

- Kirkuk, since it is likely to be a political flashpoint owing to its economic importance as an oil producing province and its multiethnic mix;
- An-Najaf, to give it the freedom to cater for its unique religious and spiritual importance which would not be appropriate in other regions in the country;
- Basra, since unlike all other provinces in southern Iraq, it has a significant Sunni Arab population whose voices would otherwise be drowned out if Basra was amalgamated with any other southern province;
- and possibly Ninawa (Mosul), based on its potential to be another political flashpoint, but it may also be worth considering merging all or parts of this province with neighboring constituent units.

Logical mergers of provinces into constituent units would include:

- Dahuk, Arbil and As-Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, since they have had a local government for several years;
- the sparsely populated provinces of Al-Anbar, Salah Al-Din and Diyala;
- the ancient and densely populated provinces of Babil, Karbala and Al-Qadisiyah;
- the tribal heartlands of Al-Muthana and Dhi Qar;
- and the eastern provinces of Wasit and Maysan.

In dividing power between central and local governments the aim must be to give regions significant authority so that they can practice and accommodate for local norms and culture, but at the same time maintain unity and equality in the country in more than just name. For Iraq this should entail, to some degree, the sharing of many powers such as environment, health, broadcasting, and labor regulation.

Education is likely to be a sensitive issue with a struggle between building unity and respecting cultural identity. A possible solution would be to have key stages in education, defined and examined centrally, at the ages of 12, 15 and 18, with education in all other years regionally defined.

Naturally there should be some form of federal law, but it is essential that each region should be given the power to draw up its own laws and punishments to accommodate for local norms and culture. This can be illustrated in the example of An-Najaf, which will likely want to ban the sale of alcohol which would not be appropriate in many other areas of the country.

In addition to core powers generally allocated to central government, powers that would be better suited to remain with central government to maintain the unity of a developing country such as Iraq should include communications, postal services, and the oil industry – which will probably be the basis of the country's economy for at least the next decade.

The separation of executive and legislative powers in a presidential system and a bicameral parliament containing equally powerful chambers would be necessary in Iraq to build significant checks and balances which can prevent Iraq from relapsing into dictatorship. All offices of central government should be directly elected to give the positions legitimacy and increase accountability. The first chamber should be elected in general elections through a proportional representation system thus preventing “*lost votes*”, improving country unity and focusing the agenda on political policies and not individual popularity. The second chamber, which would allow for regional representation, should give each constituent unit equal seating.

Arguably the most important aspect which needs to be successfully implemented is the rigorous application and maintenance of individual rights. As well as identifying the rights of citizens, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the constitution should provide a mechanism for the implementation of such rights. A parliamentary ombudsman should be set up, with a mandate to review all legislation and its implementation to ensure that it does not impinge upon any rights detailed in the constitution. In addition, a commission should be established to provide a mechanism whereby individuals can approach and register alleged violations of individual rights and thus provide regulation from the top and bottom.

The most effective way of preventing the emergence of a theocratic regime and to move politics away from the mosque is to include in the politic arena religious parties which are committed to only working within the legal infrastructure. The unnatural secularization of the country would inevitably alienate the majority of the population and strengthen support for extremists.

Introduction

Freed from the chains of Saddam's totalitarian rule, Iraq has embarked on a transition towards democracy. The process of democratic consolidation is complex requiring the establishment and development of basic democratic institutions and is fraught with political instability. Fundamental to this process is the conception of a new constitutional structure.

Iraq's constitution is set to be drafted by a directly elected body and is to conclude with a referendum. This process in itself will help root democratic values and set Iraq on a course to freedom. Vital to this process is the involvement of the Iraqi public through national debates and consultations. This report is a humble first step in what needs to be an extensive process of engagement with ordinary Iraqis.

This report was put together following numerous roundtable discussions during the month of November with young Iraqi men and women, primarily from inside Iraq. Members of the Baghdad Executive Committee of the Iraqi Prospect Organization (IPO) chaired meetings with university and college students, young graduates and members of youth organizations in Baghdad, Najaf, Al-Ramadi, and Nassiriyah. In addition, the London Executive Committee of the IPO held a smaller meeting in London to obtain the contributions of young Iraqi exiles.

Inevitably, Iraq's young men and women of today are its future. The structuring of a new Iraq will affect them most and therefore their role in drafting a new constitution cannot be excluded. This report is a sample of the views of young Iraqi men and women and is an indication of the constructive contribution they can offer in the drafting of a constitution.

State Structure

The state structure of Iraq, while much talked about and discussed, nevertheless remains to be quite ambiguous. While virtually all political parties lend their support to some form of federalism, very few address the additional questions that arise: the number of federal units, the borders of such units, and the distribution of powers between central and local governments.

Since the choice between a unitary state and a federal state has all but been decided politically, most significantly by the London conference in 2002, it may be argued that there remains little point of further discussion. However, such an assumption should not be made too easily without consideration of the advantages that such an option holds – most notably the ease of its implementation. Arguably the most powerful case for federalism does not rest on Iraq's ethnic diversity but on its vulnerability to dictatorship. In a federal state the decentralization of powers would contribute to making dictatorships more difficult to establish than in a unitary state.

The Kurdish draft constitution, while referring to the creation of a federal state in name, actually describes a confederation between an Arabic region and a Kurdish region. The few powers that remain with central government are shared equally between these most unequal regions. Such an unrealistic proposition, which surprisingly maintains the idea of minority rule, will also be a destabilizing factor in Iraq's relations to Turkey and is clearly a political maneuver that attempts to set a high starting point to allow for greater bargaining at the negotiating table.

The authors of the Declaration of the Shi'a of Iraq have recently expanded on their call for a federal state by specifying that there be five constituent units: the south, mid-Euphrates, Greater Baghdad, north-west, and Kurdish north.

The simplicity and logic of this proposition is very attractive, but it leaves several questions unanswered, such as the fate of sensitive areas like Kirkuk.

While the INC draft constitution rejects the perpetuation of the current eighteen-province arrangement, the report of the Democratic Principles Working Group proposes that the existing arrangement serve as a good starting point. This is a wise suggestion since drawing new boundaries can be very problematic and may be a recipe for future unrest.

Clearly there is a balance that needs to be struck between having too few constituent units to prevent separation and too many units that would undermine political stability and economic progress. Although some experts have proposed that Iraq aims for eight to ten constituent units, this should only serve as a rough guide and not a specific target. Instead, a logical process needs to be employed which considers the various issues at hand.

Baghdad, owing to the size of its population and political importance, is the first constituent unit. The provinces of Dahuk, Arbil and As-Sulaymaniyah, which is Iraqi Kurdistan, are an obvious constituent unit since they have been already established as a pseudo-country, running with a parliament and regional government for several years.

An-Najaf province holds a similar importance to Shia Muslims as the Vatican does to Catholics. It would be wise to make it a separate constituent unit to give it the freedom to cater for its unique religious and spiritual importance which would not be appropriate in other regions in the country.

Basra province is another candidate that would probably qualify as a separate constituent unit. Basra, unlike all other provinces in southern Iraq, has a significant Sunni Arab population. If Basra were amalgamated with other provinces, the voices of this minority would be likely drowned out. Furthermore, its economic importance and high population density would all qualify it as an individual constituent unit.

The city of Kirkuk is likely to be a political flashpoint owing to its economic importance as an oil producing province and its multiethnic make up, consisting of Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans, Assyrians and Armenians. The so-called Arabization of Kirkuk, undertaken by Saddam's regime, combined with the wishes of Iraqi Kurds that it be their "Jerusalem" makes this a potential flashpoint, and provides a strong case for awarding the province its own constituent unit. Such an approach may preserve the integrity of Kirkuk's multiethnic population and reduce the risk of ethnic violence.

The provinces of Al-Anbar, Salah Al-Din and Diyala make an ideal candidate for a combined constituent unit, since they are predominately populated by Sunni Arabs and are sparsely inhabited. The only major city in this area is Samarra and this would need to be established as the constituent unit's capital, a status it was deprived of by Saddam in favor of his home city, Tikrit.

The ancient provinces of Babil, Karbala and Al-Qadisiyah make up a densely populated region of Iraq, known as the mid-Euphrates. This would be a logical amalgamation to form a constituent unit, as would be the merger of the provinces of Al-Muthana and Dhi Qar, the tribal heartlands of the south. The provinces of Wasit and Maysan, which follow the river Tigris and are culturally very similar, can be combined to form a further constituent unit.

This would leave the province of Ninawa and its city of Mosul. Mosul has the potential to be another political flashpoint, owing to Saddam's program of Arabization and the city's multiethnic mix of Kurds, Arabs and Assyrian Christians. There are three possible solutions to this problem:

1. Award the province of Ninawa its own constituent unit since it is well populated and this would give minorities their best chance of representation in the region. This option is probably the easiest to implement and may prevent ethnic violence, however it may not suite the people of Mosul.

2. Since the province of At-Tamim (Kirkuk) has potentially very similar challenges, it may be an idea to create a corridor between the two provinces and link them into one. This would make the two regions economically and politically more viable. However, the creation of a corridor may become a sensitive issue and augment tensions that already exist.

3. The final solution would be to divide up the province between the constituent units of Dahuk-Arbil-As-Sulaymaniyah and Al-Anbar-Salah-al-Din-Diyala based on ethnic distributions. This is the most unappealing of all the options since it sets out on the dangerous path of redefining borders and can potentially be either the solution that can please all sides, or the one which may exacerbate tensions.

Such an arrangement (see figure 1) would give Iraq a total of either nine or ten constituent units. This would not overburden the country politically or economically and at the same time it addresses key regional challenges that face the federalization of Iraq. There is little point in having an arrangement that would only lead to disputes and conflicts in the future and neither would there be a point to an arrangement that would make the country non-viable. The above proposed solution is a pragmatic way of maintaining Iraq's unity and allowing for a democratic, representative administration.

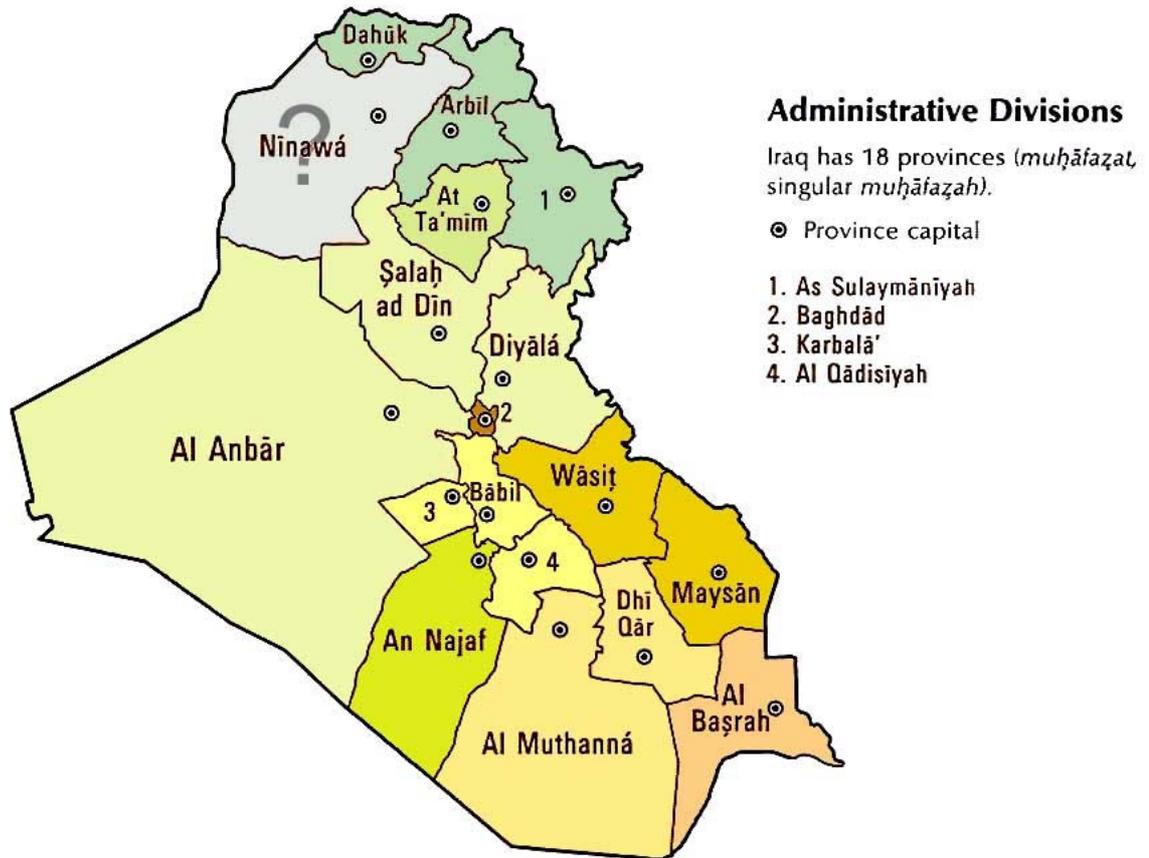


Figure 1: Central Intelligence Agency map, 1993, adapted to show proposed constituent units. Original map available from the University of Texas Library Online at <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/iraq.html>

Distribution of Power

Once the make up of the federal structure is established, the next consideration must be that of the allocation of authority between central government and federal units. The aim must be to give regions significant authority so that they can practice and accommodate for local norms and culture, but at the same time maintain unity and equality in the country in more than just name.

The Kurdish draft constitution again seems to be preparing for the bargaining table by setting a very limited role for the central government. The Declaration of the Shi'a of Iraq also urges for a high degree of decentralization, emphasizing the need to grant the regions legislative, fiscal, judicial, and executive powers.

In contrast, the INC draft constitution outlines the powers of central government as defense, foreign relations, economic regulations, taxation, the legal code, education and financial equalization, with all other powers delegated to the regions.

There is a bare minimum that must be allocated to central government and generally there is a core minimum that is allocated to regional powers. Perhaps the most interesting points to consider are the powers that can be shared between central and regional governments.

Naturally there should be some form of federal law to police crimes that affect two or more regions such as drug trafficking or money laundering. But each region should be given the power to draw up its own laws and punishments to accommodate for local norms and culture. For example, An-Najaf will likely want to ban the sale of alcohol to provide for the wishes of its inhabitants and its status as the spiritual heartland of Shia Muslims. Such a ban would not be appropriate in many other areas of the country and so giving regional powers

the right to draw up local laws and punishments would be in keeping with local cultures and attitudes.

Education is likely to be a sensitive issue since there will be a struggle between those wanting Iraq to develop a curriculum that strengthens the country's unity and those who will want to emphasize regional and cultural identity. There must obviously be a good balance between these legitimate requirements. Local governments must be given choice and freedom, while at the same time academic excellence is maintained. All this needs to be done within a system that is not too complicated or costly.

A possible solution would be to have key stages in education at the ages of 12, 15 and 18. At these key stages the curriculum and exams for the year are drawn up and defined centrally. This would allow for regional governments to have the ability to customize and prioritize the education they give their students during the other years, but at the same time maintain academic excellence since all regions will want to prepare their students best for the key stage years.

At the key stages there would be a core curriculum, which all students will be examined on, and optional subjects and modules that schools can pick and choose from. The core curriculum would consist of subjects such as the sciences, mathematics, language and literature, national and international geography and history, and technology. In addition, each school will then have a choice between certain modules in the core subjects, such as in history and geography, and a choice between additional subjects, such as second languages and religion. This will standardize education whilst at the same time maintaining cultural identity.

A unique authority in Iraq is that of the 'Awqaf', which is responsible for maintaining religious shrines and mosques. Central government will need to be responsible for national historical landmarks, such the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala and the Abu Hanifa mosque in Baghdad. This would prevent the neglect of major landmarks situated in regions that are not of the

same ethnic or religious beliefs, such as the Shia shrine of Imams al-Hadi and Al-Askari in the Sunni city of Samarra. All other shrines and mosques would be the sole responsibility of the region. Thus it would be up to each local government to decide the number of mosques they would like to have, thus catering for local needs.

Other powers which may be better shared to some degree include environment, health, broadcasting, and labor regulation, aiming for the central government to set basic standards for the country, while regional governments would have the power to deal with local challenges and address the particular needs of its constituents.

In addition, to core powers generally allocated to central government, which include defense, foreign affairs, monetary policy, inter-regional transportation, debt management, financial equalization, and management of the national economy, there are other powers that would be better suited to remain with central government to maintain the unity of a developing country such as Iraq. These can include communications, postal services, and the oil industry. While all other natural resources should be regionally controlled, the oil industry would need to be centrally controlled since it will be the basis of the country's economy, at least for the next decade.

The distribution of powers should be precisely and narrowly defined and applied symmetrically and universally to all regions to avoid disputes between central and regional governments or between regions.

Power Structure

There are three basic elements that make up a state: a legislative body, an executive body, and a constitutional judiciary. The main considerations in designing a parliament are whether it should be unicameral or bicameral, and whether the executive body should be separated or fused with the legislative powers. In addition, a system must be established for the election or selection of members of these bodies.

The Legislative Body

There is a strong nexus between federal states and bicameral parliaments, and both the draft constitutions of the Kurds and the INC reflect this. A bicameral system allows for greater checks and balances – something that is very attractive to a country like Iraq which has been through cycles of dictatorships.

The first chamber should be elected in general elections through a proportional representation system. As such, voters elect a political party and not a candidate, thus focusing the agenda on political policies and not individual popularity. Results are nationwide, not regional, and this means that there are no “*lost votes*” since the percentage of amalgamated votes a party receives from all regions of the country will determine the percentage of seats they secure in the chamber.

The advantage of such a system would be to encourage the entire population to vote and give each citizen the sense that they have a strong stake in influencing results. For example, someone living in Basra who would like to vote for party A, which are strong in the north but very weak in Basra, would be driven to vote by the knowledge that his vote will help increase the percentage of votes that party A receives nationally and thus guarantee them a larger share of seats. In a plurality-majority system, or even in a proportional

representation system that is regionally defined, many votes will not have the influence they otherwise would, and thus discourage voters and weaken the involvement of people with central government.

Generally, in federal states, the second chamber allows for regional representation to protect the diverse interests of a state. It improves the stability of the state and reduces corruption to some degree by providing a second open forum in which proposals are considered. Throughout the world there are wide variations in the manner in which representatives are selected for the second chamber, and in the composition of the chamber.

To best protect the interests of minorities, Iraq would be best served with a second chamber that holds equal legislative power with the first chamber and each constituent unit is given equal representation. All representatives should be directly elected by their constituents since this will improve accountability and strengthen people's interest in politics generally and in the second chamber specifically.

The Executive Body

In structuring an executive there is essentially a choice to be made as to whether it should be separate from the legislative powers, as in a presidential system, or fused, as in a parliamentary system.

Parliamentary executives tend to ensure the efficient operation of government; however they are liable to instability from collapsing coalitions. Moreover, a parliamentary system is less subject to checks and balances and in a country like Iraq, which has a long history of totalitarianism and corruption, it is less likely to protect against a repeat of history.

A presidential system, where legislative powers are separated from the executive body, would be more appropriate in Iraq than a parliamentary one. Not only would a presidential system be more stable, it adds an additional

layer of checks and balances that would strengthen the integrity of the political process and protect the country through the initial years of instability.

The Iraqi Opposition Conference and the INC draft constitution call for the separation of the executive, legislature, and judiciary. The later goes into further detail and proposes that the president and vice president are elected by parliament and not by the general population. This would not be wise since many Iraqis have the perception that the executive is the most important constituent of power and excluding the general public from the direct election of the president and vice president may be interpreted negatively. More importantly, in a nascent democracy the direct election of a president will add legitimacy to the position.

With the above outlined state structure, there should be sufficient checks and balances to not warrant a pluralistic executive, which would not be able to meet the needs of the emerging democracy and only make the country less efficient. Furthermore, based on Iraq's rich mix of cultures, it is likely that successful candidates will need to appeal outside their own group and this will help guarantee that moderate presidents are voted in.

Constitutional Judiciary

The final component of the state is the constitutional court which will be charged with resolving disputes between central government and constituent units. The selection of judges for the constitutional court should be done by regional governments. All constituent units should be responsible for one seat in the constitutional court to ensure that each region has adequate representation.

Terms of Office

The final consideration in this section is how frequently elections take place. Generally, central government carries out long-term plans, while local

governments deliver short-term results. Therefore, a balance must be struck between making office terms too short, which would not allow adequate time for government policies to take effect, and too long, which may reduce accountability. In addition, the voters must not be overburdened with a complicated system and numerous disjointed elections, especially in a nascent democracy.

It may be worth considering elections for the president and the first chamber of parliament as one set, since both are related to national issues, and elections for the second chamber of parliament and local government as another set, since both are related to regional issues. Taking into consideration the points mentioned previously it would be logical to have elections every four years to choose the president and members of the first chamber and elections every two years for the second chamber and local governments. This would create a relatively simple system for citizens to understand, which is especially important in Iraq where they have had no real experience of elections.

A problem which may arise from such a system is that the country grinds to a halt every four years since all seats are up for election. This can be very destabilizing for a country. One way to minimize such disruption would be to give members of the second chamber six year terms and have a third of them changed every two years, thus creating some continuity.

Another issue which needs consideration is whether there should be a limit to the number of times a person can hold the same position. The fact that a person would be voted back in tends to imply that they are doing a good job and people are pleased with their work. Re-electing a person also improves continuity and provides stability. However, the danger is in having someone who is so well liked, that they always get reelected. This has the potential to drain away any new talent and could prove to be disastrous for the country's long-term future. This problem is most apparent for the office of president and it would be wise to create a maximum limit of two terms for each president.

Human Rights

The former regime is primarily identified with abuses of human rights. Arguably the most important aspect which needs to be successfully implemented is the rigorous application and maintenance of individual rights. Furthermore, the rights of minority groups need to be protected to preserve stability and strengthen democracy.

The Iraqi Opposition Conference endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the INC draft constitution extensively lists basic human rights that are protected by law. The specific articulation of individual rights in the constitution is an essential component in developing an effective structure for protecting human rights.

In addition to identifying the rights of citizens, the constitution should provide a mechanism for the implementation of such rights. A mechanism suggested by the INC draft constitution would be to create a parliamentary ombudsman who would have the mandate to review all legislation to ensure that it does not impinge upon any rights detailed in the constitution. The ombudsman would also serve to ensure that new laws are implemented in a manner which respects human rights. In addition, there should be a mechanism whereby individuals can approach and register alleged violations of individual rights, for example through a special commission. This would allow for regulation from two angles, from the top and bottom, and should thus be robust and effective at preventing any repeat of recent Iraqi history.

Religion & State

In designing a democratic constitution for a state, there is little point in alienating the vast majority of the population. What seems to be clear is that Iraqis will not tolerate constitutional secularization. This is especially true in the Arab population, and seems to produce the strongest agreement between Shias and Sunnis.

The Iraqi Opposition Conference stated that Islam is the state religion and the basis of legislation. The Iraqi constitution should contain these same points so that Iraqis feel it reflects their wishes and aspirations. This will create a sense of pride and healthy patriotism to the constitution, and will stabilize Iraq and release it from the cycle of upheavals.

The fact that all legislation will still have to go through two open forums, be subject to the same checks and balances, and is subject to review by an ombudsman for any infringement of individual or minority rights, state religion and source of legislation are actually more about a point of principle for Iraqis than anything else. Furthermore, the balance between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq will mean that only general points that are agreed on by both groups will become law, and this dynamic will create its own checks and balances which will cancel out any extremism in either side.

It would be wise for the constitution to not outlaw political organizations based on whether they are religious or secular. Instead, a differentiation should be made between groups committed to violence and those willing to work within the legal infrastructure to achieve their goals. It would be up to voters to choose whether to elect a secular or religious group. The public will then vote out or re-elect a party on the work they accomplished whilst in power, and not on the ideology they may hold. Such an adaptable system will give Iraq the opportunity to evolve and develop as a democratic state and diminish the influence of fundamentalism.

Roundtable Participants

I r a q

Chairman

Adil Shalan, Iraqi Prospect Organization

Roundtable Discussion with Executive Committee of Iraqi Prospect Organization

Sabah Muhsin

Sajjid Adam

Sadi Adnan

Haman Falh Hassan

Faaiz Jawad

Mohammed Kamil

Roundtable Discussion at Nassiriyah City

Ali Abdilridha, Employee in Interior Ministry

Khalid Aydan, Graduate, Faculty of Arts, University of Kufa

Ayad Bastaan, Graduate, College of Arts

Hameed Hussain, Graduate, Technology College

Anwar Saad, Undergraduate, Department of Education, Community College

Ayad Shamnaara, Entrepreneur

Roundtable Discussion at Najaf City

Haydar Abbas, Hawza Student

Ahmed Kassad, Hawza Student

Jassim Mohammed, Department of Education, Community College

Jafar Razzaq, Undergraduate, Faculty of Engineering, University of Kufa

Aqil Salam, Hawza Student

Roundtable Discussion at Al-Ramadi City

Atheer Khamees, Undergraduate, Department of Education, Community College

Ali Mahdi, Employee in Interior Ministry

Omar Mahdi, Undergraduate, Business Administration

Mohammed Naseef, High School Student

Mohammed Turki, Electrical Engineer

Nashwan Turki, Graduate, Business Administration

Roundtable Discussion at University of Baghdad

Ahmed Abdallah, Undergraduate, Faculty of Arts

Ali Abdilrahman, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Hussain Ali, Undergraduate, Faculty of Arts

Laith Ali, Undergraduate, Faculty of Arts

Tariq Fakhir, Undergraduate, Faculty of Engineering

Amir Hadi, Undergraduate, Faculty of Languages

Hassan Jawad, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Hamid Khalaf, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Khidher Mahdi, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Ayad Muhsin, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Jassim Muhsin, Postgraduate, Faculty of Engineering

Ahmed Nasir, Undergraduate, Faculty of Languages

Muhannad Rahim, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Hussain Sahib, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Mohammed Yunis, Undergraduate, Faculty of Languages

Roundtable Discussion with University of Mustansiriya & Nahrain University Students

Wathiq Abid Qanbar, Undergraduate, Faculty of Science

Iktisaab Adnan, Undergraduate, Faculty of Arts

Zeinab Ali, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Mohammed Faris, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Muhannad Hamza, Undergraduate, Faculty of Arts

Suaad Hussain, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Sajid Khamees, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

Sabah Majaal, Undergraduate, Faculty of Arts
Muhannad Nadhim, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education
Ali Naji, Undergraduate, Faculty of Science
Mohammed Naji, Undergraduate, Faculty of Engineering
Kamal Nasir, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education
Najah Rahi, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education
Iktifaa Yaser, Undergraduate, Faculty of Education

**Roundtable Discussion with Debating Society and Newsletter
Committee, University of Baghdad & Mustansiriya**

Wissam Abdilzahra
Raad Abdilnabee
Nabil Ali
Tahseen Ali
Hani Falah
Mahmood Mahr Hafidh
Areej Ali Mohammed Hassan
Firas Haydar
Mohammed Jadaan
Mohammed Kadhim
Seif Khidhr
Nabil Qassim Muftin
Abdilhassan Salih

Roundtable Discussion with Dawn of Democracy Organization, Baghdad

Layla Adheem
Abbas Alaskari
Jafar Alkattan
Jawad Lafta Almaliki
Hamd Allah Alrikabi
Maytam Nasir Alyassiri
Jassim Hilu Alzarkani
Zuhair Kuwaid Assalami
Hussain Karim

Issam Radhi

L o n d o n

Chairman

Ahmed Shames, Iraqi Prospect Organization

Roundtable Participants

Yasser Alaskary, Iraqi Prospect Organization

Abtehale Al-Hussaini, Iraqi Prospect Organization

Hayder Al-Khoei, High School Student

Hadi Allawi, Undergraduate, Faculty of Law, City University

Inas Almosawi, Iraqi Prospect Organization

Mousa Baraka, Iraqi Prospect Organization

Sama Hadad, Iraqi Prospect Organization

Raeid Jewad, Postgraduate, Faculty of Engineering, Cambridge University

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About the Iraqi Prospect Organization

The Iraqi Prospect Organization (IPO), a not-for-profit and non-partisan group, was established in January 2002 by a group of Iraqi exiles in London. Following the fall of Saddam's regime, the IPO expanded to Iraq, where its headquarters now resides. The IPO aims to promote the establishment of a proportional democracy, increase understanding amongst young Iraqi men and women about democratic values and civil society, and increase the participation of young Iraqi men and women in the political process.

www.iprospect.org.uk

Baghdad Branch



Chairman: Adil Shalan

Telephone: +1 914 822 9405
E-mail: baghdad@iprospect.org.uk

London Branch



Chairman: Ahmed Shames

Tel/Fax: +44 (0)20 8450 0270
E-mail: london@iprospect.org.uk