

IRAQ ELECTION PREVIEW

January 26, 2005

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Anthony Cordesman

CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy

Jon Alterman

Director CSIS Middle East Program

Bathsheba Crocker

Codirector CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project

Moderator: Mark Schoeff

CSIS Director for External Affairs

Mark Schoeff

Thank you all for joining us today for this panel previewing the Iraq election. I'm Mark Schoeff, Director of External Relations here at CSIS, had of the press office.

Before we get started here just a couple of housekeeping notes. One for the reporters in attendance, make sure if you didn't pick it up on the way in to grab on the way out one of these media information sheets. It's double-sided. It's a partial list of our scholars and their direct contact information including the three participants today. So if you have followup questions you don't have to call the press office, you can call them directly. You don't get caught in the press office loop.

Secondly, the media advisory, which I hope you all picked up, and if you didn't you can get it on the way out, has biographical information for each of the scholars participating today, so I will dispense with long introductions but just tell you who is here, and I'm introducing them in the order that they'll speak.

On my far right is Jon Alterman, the Director of the CSIS Middle East Program. In the middle is Bathsheba Crocker, Co-Director of the CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project. Immediately to my right is Anthony Cordesman, CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy. Also on the advisory there are Web links underneath each of their names where you can find on the Web the latest writing that they've done, not only about Iraq but about other regions around the world.

So we'll get started with opening statements, and then we'll go to Q&A. So Jon, go ahead.

Jon Alterman

Good morning, and welcome to what is certainly not your last Iraq panel of the week.

It seems to me the first thing you have to keep in mind about the voting story in Iraq is there's not one voting story in Iraq. There's a remarkably complex and varied environment on the ground.

According to an IRI poll that was conducted and released earlier this month the percentage of Iraqis polled who said the country's going in the right direction as opposed to the wrong direction was about 70 percent in some of the Shia and Kurdish areas and 14 percent in the Sunni areas, and surprisingly, only 19 percent of Iraqis said things were going the right direction in Kirkuk.

To put that in perspective, for all that we in our country have talked about red states and blue states and a really divided country, we don't have gaps like that. The states John Kerry did worst in was Utah. He still got 26 percent of the vote. We don't have that kind of gap and Iraq has that gap everywhere. There are going to be places in Iraq where 80 percent of the people are going to turn out, and there are going to be places in Iraq where 10 percent of the people turn out. There are going to be places with remarkable normalcy and places of remarkable violence, it seems to me. There's not one story. There are going to be 29,000 polling stations spread throughout the country and there's going to be a remarkable variation on what happens. There isn't going to be a single story.

The campaign thus far has been, I think, a complete bust. The Web page for the Alawi-led Iraqi list which is www.Iraqilist.org hosted out of Atlanta, is impressively designed. It has these beautiful faces merging in and out of Iraqi voters and the slogan, "Strong leadership, secure homeland." Then you go to "list of candidates" on the bar to the right -- It's in Arabic, I apologize, but I don't have to apologize, I didn't make the page. But if you go to the list of candidates and you click on it, it says, "under construction." The election is four days away and their list of candidates for party is under construction because people are still afraid to say they're actually running in this election.

To the extent that this election is not about issues, and I think it's very clear this election thus far is not about issues, there aren't key issues that are driving things, there aren't key issues that are being raised, there aren't key differences between the different parties and coalitions. It becomes about ethnicity. You sort of have a zero-sum game, and issues haven't really even come into the game yet.

It creates the threat, it seems to me, of a Lebanon-like solution in which politics basically become about the allocation of resources based on identity rather than allocation of resources based on need, competence, or merit. It didn't have to be that way but I think that's the way Iraq is going unless people can turn things around.

If you look at the countries surrounding Iraq you actually have a better environment than you've had for some time. The Iranians feel basically that things are going their way. Iranians have felt that the Shia in Iraq have been gaining power, that the election is going to legitimize Shia power, consolidate Shia power, and while the Iranians are happy to lay deeper lines, to build cultural and political ties with Shia parties, they don't feel a need to really get directly involved and they certainly don't feel a need to disrupt the elections because the elections are going their way.

If you look at the other countries surrounding Iraq, it seems to me that they're actually getting to be on the right side of things. The thing that countries surrounding Iraq feared at the time Saddam fell was that it would destabilize them, either because Iraq would really get its act together and become a strong military power, and would destabilize the Gulf, or that the real success of an Iraqi political transition would inspire people in their own countries to shirk off their own governments. With neither of those things happening, or even in the prospect of happening, the real fear that all these countries have is that Iraq's going to turn into Somalia and that the problems of Iraq are going to spill across the borders and create problems for them. Consequently, all these countries are inclined to help but I think the caveat here is they're inclined to help to the extent that Iraqi performance remains somewhere in a band between complete success and complete failure. They don't want Iraq to become Switzerland. They also don't want Iraq to become Somalia. There's a pretty comfortable band in there, but as soon as anything gets too close to one end or the other, I think you're going to see a lot of these countries take a different attitude. At this point they're really trying to help, to the greatest extent possible, rather than hurt.

I don't know about you. I'm not staying up late on Sunday night waiting for electoral returns because what's going to matter isn't what happens on Sunday. What matters is not the electoral returns but the electoral outcome and that's going to take some months it seems to me to become clear.

What really matters is that out of this election comes some processes. Will disenfranchised voters, or people who feel disenfranchised, certainly Sunnis but also others, be successfully drawn into this process? Will there be some sort of unified national leadership that emerges?

When you look at the inclusion of Sunnis, and I'm sure that Sheba and Tony will have other things to say about this, but it seems to me the Sunnis have a simultaneously weak and strong hand in this. The Sunnis can be a spoiler and it's hard to make Iraq work as one country if the Sunnis are playing a spoiler role. But quite frankly, the Sunnis don't live where the resources are. The oil is in other parts of the country, so they're going to make a bid for inclusion which is simultaneously weak and strong and how they manage that is going to be a key issue.

Ultimately this whole thing comes down not to electoral politics but to back room politics, whether people can make the deals and create the alliances and then sell their decisions to their supporters.

Iraqis are exhausted. There's no question. Iraqis are exhausted but they're also not about to surrender. What's remarkable is the extent, it seems to me, that after this election we're going to find ourselves in almost exactly the same place that we found ourselves on April 14, 2003, at a conference the U.S. sponsored in Nasiriyah right after the fall of Saddam to see if we could get Iraqi political leaders to come together and begin to lead the country in a different direction.

The key uncertainty we're facing now is this one. Does our failure to succeed in the past suggest that this whole thing is hopeless? Or is it going to galvanize the stakeholders into action in the coming months? That's really the key question. Not who wins the election, but what comes out of the election and whether that process is going to lead to ongoing processes that begin to unify the country, unite the country, and lead it forward into a more stable future. Thank you.

Bathsheba Crocker

Thanks, Jon. I think Jon's story about Alawi's Web page reminds of the DoD weekly status report at some point last spring that had a series of pages on things like electricity and Iraqi security forces that had been trained, and then there was a governance page and it was blank, and in parentheses it said "(Still awaiting governance page)". I think in some ways we are still awaiting the governance page in Iraq.

I will try briefly today to cover sort of two themes. One is what I see as some potential pitfalls of the elections on Sunday; and two, how to get to a more legitimate Iraqi political process after these elections, which I think as Jon suggested, is really the key question here.

I think perhaps as an important starting point we might also remember what it is that Iraqis are voting for and are not voting for on Sunday. What they are voting for is a transitional national assembly that will be responsible for drafting Iraq's constitution. What they are not voting for is a permanent government. Nonetheless, the makeup of the government that's elected could have some lasting implications, assuming that all the other political markers set for 2005 actually stick.

We obviously have no crystal ball to predict the election results. We can safely assume, I think, a few facts that are well known to all of us. We'll see a high Shiite and Kurdish turnout. We'll see a low Sunni turnout. The elections will not, at least in the short term, impact the insurgency. Sunnis at least in some places in large part will question the credibility of the elected government as could Iraq's neighbors. If the elections are marred by a high level of violence that impacts the ability of Iraqis to vote in non-Sunni areas I think it's arguable that some other Iraqis could also question the credibility of the government that's elected.

I think there are some bad scenarios that we can imagine flowing from the election on Sunday, and again, some of these will be things that we've all read about and talked about in recent weeks including a further hardening of ethnic and religious divisions in Iraq; fueling of the insurgency, including by more active Sunni participation in or support for the insurgency; the Shiites' potential to use what is likely to be their overwhelming electoral win to entrench a majority rule that actually eschews the kind of political negotiations and compromise that will be needed after these elections; continued Sunni intransigence in terms of again the kinds of political participation, political negotiations that we'll need to see after these elections including the potential for a boycott of the constitutional drafting process, the potential eventually for a veto in fact of the draft constitution; the Kurds leveraging what is also likely to be a strong win for them in this Sunday's elections to further their expansionist tendencies which would impact most negatively the Sunnis again; and I think a worsening of the civil war.

There is some potential I think for better news in the sense that there have been some encouraging signs lately that the worst case scenarios might not in fact unfold, and in particular these are that Shiite and Kurdish leaders over the past months have given assurances that they really want to encourage and increase Sunni participation in the political process. Sunni leaders, at least some, have recently stated that they intend to join the political process after the elections even while they're calling for a boycott of the elections. And at least in some parts of the country there is extreme Iraqi interest and devotion to the idea of voting in this election.

So again, this all leads us to the key question of how do we improve the political process after the election? How to avoid a political vacuum emerging from these elections that is worse than the political vacuum we have right now. How to get to a legitimate government in Iraq that leads to Iraqis taking responsibility for the key issues in their country -- things like the continued presence of U.S. forces and how to deal with oil. And a government that Iraqi security forces will be willing to fight for. This entails, of course in part, figuring out how to ensure some meaningful Sunni participation in the political process after these elections. In other words, how do we correct what we know will be a flawed process leading to a less than legitimate Iraqi transitional government.

The Transitional Administrative Law, which as many of you know is Iraq's interim constitution, is complex; it's fraught with potential dangers over the coming year; but

it also might allow for the kinds of mid-course corrections that I think we need. In particular, although the TAL spells out that the National Assembly is to draft the constitution, it does not spell out how the National Assembly is supposed to draft the constitution other than to say it is to be drafted by August 15, 2005. Thus if the elected politicians are smart, one thing they will do is devise some accommodation that enables meaningful and representative participation by all Iraqis in a constitutional drafting process including minorities that will be under-represented in the National Assembly.

I think in terms of the political process going forward, the United States needs to use any remaining leverage we have in Iraq both cautiously and wisely. We have been unwilling to cede real control up until now, but if we continue to try to socially engineer the political process in Iraq it will not be seen as legitimate in the eyes of Iraqis or the region or the broader Muslim world.

I think clearly the other looming question here which is again tied to this issue of how do you get to a legitimate government is how to stabilize Iraq where, as we know, almost two years into this occupation even Baghdad itself remains unsafe.

There is no question, I think, that the training and equipping of the Iraqi security forces remains the ultimate goal, but as we have seen so far, first, that training program needs a considerable degree of improvement; and second, the Iraqi security forces will not fight for a government that the Iraqi population does not view as legitimate.

In the interim, of course, we have this Catch-22 that we've been caught in for some time. U.S. and coalition forces as the only available alternative on the security front to capable Iraqi security forces, until we get there. But the real question that flows from this reality is how can that need be accommodated given the reality in Iraq, that Iraqis want the coalition at least out of sight if not out of the country. So how can we accommodate the security realities in Iraq and the real potential for chaos if the U.S. leaves too soon when faced with this reality that the Iraqis really don't want us there.

In a New York Times OpEd piece last week, Rick Barton and Craig Cohen and I argued that, we raised the possibility of an Iraqi referendum on the continued presence of U.S. troops in Iraq. There are of course other options for answering this question and dealing with this conundrum, but I think to remain effectively engaged on this issue will require a lot more on the part of the United States than an announcement that 120,000 U.S. troops will remain in Iraq until the end of 2006, or placing too much weight on the value of these elections or what we have as a flawed political process.

I think there are some key issues to ponder as maybe potential election flash points, and one in particular would be to watch for the results and turnouts in key cities. This is something also that Jon touched on. So, for example, what's going to happen in Kirkuk? What will the turnout be? Will it be largely or only Kurds? Baghdad a

similar question. We may see a large turnout in Sadr City but much less elsewhere. In Fallujah, will anyone vote? In Mosul, will anyone vote? In Basrah will we actually see as a result of this election a turning away from Islamist parties due to frustration so far with their inability to provide basic services?

Also we have this issue of the pluralism or potential coming splits within the Shia and other communities. What will Sistani and his followers do next? They have proved to be very moderating and practical voices up until now, but will they be drowned out? What about Sadr and his followers and his future after this election?

We have the possibility of the emergency of a pro-Iranian Shia government in Iraq. To be detrimental to U.S. interests that government need not be theocratic in the sense that the Iranian government is, but it still could prove a devastating strategic blow to U.S. interests in the region. Unless we can really count on moderation and political sophistication in terms of the kinds of wheeling and dealing that Jon was referring to in doling out ministries and leadership positions, the power-sharing arrangements, and constitutional negotiations going forward.

And although, as I noted earlier, we shouldn't count out that we'll continue to see that kind of moderation and political sophistication, I think it's also not necessarily a given that we can hang our hats on.

Anthony Cordesman

I think I would like to talk around the politics of the election and really concentrate on what has to come out of an Iraqi government. And as Jon and Sheba have pointed out, this is not simply a matter of electing a government, nor is the constitution going to be seen as a constitution in our terms. If it can be agreed, the agreement has to be an agreement on how to share power and how to share oil wealth and how to deal with the country's economic structures in ways where minorities as well as the Shiite majority can reach some kind of agreement.

It is not simply a matter of political federalism, it is a matter of power and money. That is a challenge for a government that is fully representative of all of the minorities, much less a government which is largely going to be exclude one.

One of the other insights that may or may not come out of this election is what factions really have given strength? The estimates we have of the percentage of Shiites in Iraq are approximately 20 years old. They were never based on a census in the first place. The CIA's working data seemed to indicate that they could sharply underestimate the number of Arab Shiites and sharply overestimate the number of Arab Sunnis. If that's true, the election by definition will be a great deal more representative than we have thought. If it is wrong, we are going to find ourselves with more serious problems.

The fact is we don't know what power sharing should be and no one has yet begun to debate it.

Sheba pointed out a critical factor. Elections do not produce governance. Regardless of what happens in the National Assembly, the issue is who will govern?

The single greatest occupation in Iraq is being a civil servant. There are 1.2 million civil servants in Iraq out of a labor force of approximately 7.8 million. What happens there is critical at a time when the economy in so many other ways is crippled. But it is not easy to settle how this will be distributed when you not only have to agree on a prime minister and a presidency council, but on who gets what out of 28 ministries in the coalition to follow. And there will be regional elections. And as Sheba pointed out, one of them is likely to provoke considerable violence, at least one. That is the election in Kirkuk. If not immediately, in the weeks that follow.

We're talking some 18 governorates which for the first time are going to have truly elected governments and we also are talking not simply about Mosul, Baghdad and Basrah, but some 27 major cities.

The problem in this country has very little to do frankly just with the insurgency which affects four provinces. I think it is fair to say that there is not an effective urban government in more than two-thirds of the towns and cities, and there is probably no clear structure or relationship between the central government and the governorates in ministry after ministry. Can this be resolved by creating a National Assembly? I don't know.

Sheba focused on the security forces. The numbers are extremely controversial. But as Jon pointed out in the polls, the number one concern of Iraqis is security. The polls indicate that this concern has risen very sharply, steadily for a year.

We have some 127,000 Iraqis military and security forces on paper; in practice we have an army of about 4500 men, about 11,000 to 12,000 Iraqis with any kind of meaningful training and equipment; and exactly two battalions which can operate without the direct support at this point of U.S. forces. The last time we had an election it disrupted the building of the Iraqi army and the police force for three to four months, and the ministers who were chosen could not agree to talk to each other on many issues or work with the Minister of Finance who may be the next prime minister.

The economy is something that we also have to remember. Elections don't fix economies. Arguably this is an economy with 29-40 percent unemployment, probably 60 percent indirect and direct employment among young men and women. It is not getting better.

There were about \$18 billion worth of oil revenues last year -- that's half of the GNP but it's two-thirds of the budget, and that assumes you don't have any operating

expenditures. Our aid program is totaled under the two major programs about \$22 billion. We've disbursed \$4 billion, a little under \$3 billion out of the last aid program of \$18.4 billion.

To put the impact of this aid program in perspective, there is a 7.8 million man workforce and right now it's hiring about 121,000 Iraqis and the number of Iraqis who have jobs because of the aid program has recently been dropping at a rate of about 10,000 people a week -- partly because of security and partly because of the season.

We do not see coming out of this any of the elements of economic stability as yet emerging that underpin the election.

I think my colleagues have made the political issues quite well, but let me just remind you a little of the fine print here. The National Assembly once it is agreed on who is in the National Assembly, has to then agree on a three-man presidency. That three-man presidency has a president and two vice presidents. It was designed originally so every major faction could have a senior figure. Once it is chosen, and it has to be chosen on the basis of a two-thirds vote from the new National Assembly, the vice presidents have to agree with the president on virtually every issue the president takes, which then within two weeks is to select a prime minister. The prime minister is then going to have to choose all 18 of those ministers.

Just one final cheerful reality here. Sheba referred to the constitutional schedule. The fine print says that if by the first of August the National Assembly decides it can't get to the constitution it can put the whole process off for six months which means it throws open the whole issue of what happens next in the entire political process. That's assuming that you could ever have two-thirds of the National Assembly vote on any issue this controversial for or against the constitution.

One of the other issues here is what happens if the constitution fails? If the constitution does not get a majority vote for it, or if two-thirds of the vote in any three provinces vote against the constitution, the constitution fails and what happens next is a new National Assembly has to be elected.

So the Catch-22 here is unless they announce by August 1st they're not going to have a constitution, we will have an election at the end of the year whether we have a constitution or not. It's going to be a very interesting year, and it isn't going to be a matter simply, not only of who is elected but backroom politics and maneuvering are going to take at least three to four weeks to get to the point we know how good or bad the situation is.

One last point. Jon pointed out quite correctly that nobody's had the opportunity to really campaign. You look down the lists of people here, and we have over 7,000 candidates. Most of the people on these lists have never been a functioning politician. Most of them have never administered or managed or run anything in their

lives. They are in general ideologues, religious figures, oppositionists. So we are drawing on a pool of people who have remarkably little practical experience and who are being thrust into one of the most complex realities that anybody has ever thrown together. Thank you.

Mark Schoeff

We'll take questions now. I ask that you please wait for the microphone from either Ramel or Gilton and please state your name and your affiliation. Thank you.

Audience

Q: Roy Ekleston from the Australian Newspaper.

Anyone on the panel actually. What prospect do you give for the United States military remaining in Iraq? I know you talked about it, Sheba, but do you think that the U.S. will stay for the year? Do you think the Iraqis will want to put a timetable on it? And I did read a story in the last couple of days suggesting the Pentagon was actually hoping to establish long-term military bases in Iraq, so I'm just interested also to get from you guys what you think the U.S. would like to see.

Anthony Cordesman

Let me make a comment first. The two parties who thought of calling for the phased withdrawal have both changed their mind in the last week. There is at this point no significant political party in Iraq that has advanced that as part of its campaign.

The realities are simply this. It isn't a matter of who would like U.S. withdrawal, it is a matter of realism in terms of how quickly Iraqi forces can be put together that can replace the U.S.. That figure for 120,000 men through 2006 is conditional. It's conditional on how quickly Iraqi forces can be created. The U.S. would like to phase down the U.S. and coalition presence as quickly as possible for the reasons that Jon and Sheba outlined.

The other thing I would have to say here is that one problem is the Iraqi people have absolutely no understanding of the strength and weaknesses of these forces. And as a result, when you look at a lot of the attitudes here, people simply do not know in Iraq what Iraqi forces can do. And you get people calling for bringing back the army or bringing back the police force, which would be fine except there's no conceivable way you can do it. Or you get people who believe that the Iraqi forces are much stronger than they are, and the numbers I've quoted are numbers that come I think from both the Iraq Ministry of Defense and the Iraqi Ministry of Interior as well as the U.S.. They are that low and there's no one in the Iraqi government who disputes it.

Jon Alterman

If I can just add, I think everything Tony has said is true, and especially the part about Iraqi politics. My sense is what's really going to drive this are going to be Iraqis setting the agenda and setting the terms rather than America. I think Washington is going to be absorbed in a debate about how we should do it, and Congressman Meehan yesterday was talking about, we have a debate and ultimately we're going to be debating and Iraqis for their own domestic political reasons are going to start setting an agenda. They may make catastrophic mistakes in doing that, but I think ultimately they're going to be the ones who drive this process, not us.

Audience

Q: Robin Wright, the Washington Post.

Some of the names of the candidates and the slates have leaked. Has anyone tried to do a calculation of how many are clerics, what percentage might be particularly from the alliance?

Anthony Cordesman

There have been efforts to do it, Robin. I think frankly one question is who's a cleric? If you had clerical training or some kind of title people are being counted, but most of them obviously are not. There has, because of the quietus bias in Iraq, been an effort to avoid having clerical candidates named. But if you went back and looked at the training of some of those people they have clerical backgrounds or they have to all intents and purposes been involved in clerical affairs, but getting any kind of count is something certainly I have not seen anybody do with any accuracy.

Audience

Q: Tim Phelps from Newsday.

What do you make of the low registration of Iraqis abroad? Does that low registration have any particular meaning? And what do you think the effect of that vote abroad might have on the elections?

Bathsheba Crocker

There was a Reuters piece this morning talking a little bit about some of the reasons that are leading to the low turnout. I think it's been in some ways a bit of a surprise. The estimates are that 250,000 or 300,000 have registered out of what people assume is an eligible population of about a million voters, expatriate Iraqi voters. And some of the reasons they listed include fears, but maybe also just sort of the same feelings that are going on for a lot of people in Iraq which is a real questioning of the legitimacy and credibility of this process.

So other than that I'm not sure whether anyone has done a whole lot of speculation as to why the turnout is as low. And I think given that it is that low it is probably unlikely to have the kind of effect on the results, obviously, that it could have had if we had really seen a million expatriate voters coming out to vote on Sunday.

Anthony Cordesman

I think we need to be very careful here, however. In a lot of cases it was extremely difficult to vote. In many cases the registration areas were not properly organized. Even in the U.S. for many Iraqis it's a very long drive to actually get to a polling place. I think one key sign of the fact this may be more a matter of difficulty or transportation issue than will is that inside Iran where presumably people have no reason to be particularly frightened of registering, the last count I saw was all of 68,000 registrations for Iran. That indicates that the problem is much more a matter of the mechanics of getting registered than it is some sort of complex political issue.

Jon Alterman

Just to toss out some numbers, the number I recall seeing this morning was 138,000 or so people had registered abroad. Iran, Sweden and the UK I think are the top three countries, interestingly. And also I think you need about 35,000 votes to get a seat in the Transitional National Assembly if you sort of divide the registered voters by the number of seats. So my guess is the outcome on, the influence on outcomes will be pretty much nil of expatriate voters.

Audience

Q: Louise Branson, USA Today's Editorial Page.

I'm curious to get from each of you how optimistic or pessimistic you are that the Iraqis will somehow muddle through in the next year or so to some sort of workable system, and also if your opinion has changed over the past few weeks and months and whether anything surprised you and why.

Anthony Cordesman

In reality everybody muddles through, including the United States. So you never get better than a muddle. The question is whether you're going to have anything worse.

I think so far Iraqi politicians, particularly those who have participated in the government process and in the elections have been relatively pragmatic and they've been willing to make compromises and they understand that if they push on religious lines or they push on ethnic lines, they're going to create a climate which could be extremely difficult to ever bring any kind of peaceful order to.

But I still think it's at best a 50/50 proposition. Partly because this is so much of a political experiment with so much uncertainty; partly because we wasted well over a year in beginning to try to train effective Iraqi military, security and police forces, and let an insurgency take hold that probably could have been avoided with anything approaching an effective approach to the problem; and third, because what could have been a critical underpinning of the Iraqi economy and something that could have brought stability which was the massive amount of U.S. aid that was funded by the Congress, has been largely either wasted or simply not spent. That is the chief reason I would be I guess very cautious about success.

On the other hand, in addition to the pragmatism of Iraqi politicians, we are reprogramming the aid to deal with short term needs and security needs. It is moving where it is needed rather than where USAID would like to put it. And you are beginning to revitalize the U.S. military training effort and give it real meaning and real scale. And if these things come together with effective Iraqi political leadership, and I completely agree with Jon and Sheba, it's up to the Iraqis now to shape the political climate. Then things could work well. How is it going to really play out? We'll know a lot more in a month to two months when we see how well the political process comes out of this election.

Bathsheba Crocker

I think I would agree completely with Tony's 50/50, although maybe I'm slightly more on the pessimistic side. I have to say following Iraq as closely as I have for about 2.5 years now, I get worried every time I find myself being slightly optimistic as a result of certain stories that come out in the recent past, because those who have tried to be optimistic about Iraq have not really been the ones at the end of the day winning the argument. I think every time we've seen things reported in newspapers or elsewhere that suggest some cause for potential optimism, that has proven to be shortlived.

Having said that, as I suggested in my opening statement, I see a lot of potential fault lines as a result of the political process going forward and I listed some of those, but I also agree with Tony that thus far the Iraqi politicians have shown themselves to be pragmatic and willing to make the kinds of compromises that will be needed going forward. At the same time there are a lot of sort of self-interest things that one can look at, particularly on the side of perhaps the Shiites and the Kurds that might suggest that when finally in power, as they will be and the Kurds over-represented and the Shia represented in their numbers for the first time, that self-interest may start to creep in and play a larger role in their willingness to make the kinds of power-sharing arrangements and other things they'll need to make.

I see some hope in the sense that the leaders are proving themselves thus far to be pragmatic and certainly saying the right things, and again on the fact that the Iraqis themselves, at least those in the non-insurgency parts of the country seem quite optimistic and welcoming of the coming election, but at the same time I see a lot of very serious potential fault lines. And I think again, sort of counting on everything

going forward, first of all looking at some complications that Tony set forth in terms of the time line that we will be under through the rest of 2005 and sticking to some of those dates or what happens if we don't stick to those dates, and the potential that what this election could lead to over the coming months is actually sort of a worsening of all of the positions that we see now, and more of a political vacuum than we see now. And I have to say maybe I agree that it's 50/50, we could go one way or the other.

Jon Alterman

I'm in the unusual position of being the optimist. Although I'm reminded, Arneau de Borgraf who is the Director of our Transnational Threats Initiative here, told me a definition he'd heard of an optimist in the Middle East is someone who's always wrong.

It seems to me that it's going to be ugly, it's going to be messy, but it's less likely to completely fall apart which seems to me to be the downside threat. Is it going to be a city on a hill, a beacon to the Middle East? No. I don't think Iraq is very likely to get there at all. But is it going to turn into Somalia? Is everything going to fall apart? Is the country going to break up and turn into warring factions? I think that's less likely as well. It seems to me the most likely outcome and probably in the 60-70 percent range is that Iraqi politics will be ugly, they will be fast-changing, they will be unstable, but they will be Iraqi politics. They won't completely fall apart. I think that's the pessimistic scenario, that they do fall apart, and I don't think we're likely to get there.

Audience

Q: Yosen Arbarski with [inaudible] of Kyrgyzstan.

If it is as expected the Sunni turnout is going to be very low. What would you suggest the Iraqi government should do to defend the legitimacy of these elections? Should the Sunnis be given a certain percentage of seats in the National Assembly regardless of the turnout in this election? What do you think about that? Thank you.

Anthony Cordesman

The Transitional Administrative Law is structured so that votes have to be allocated to the parties on the basis of the votes they are given and then the people in the National Assembly have to be chosen in the order they are named on the list. To make any change in that you have to essentially reject the TAL as a binding structure on the Iraqi government. Now that is not impossible. We are in the awkward position of having a law passed by the occupier now being seen as binding a sovereign government, and I am far from clear that this really would hold up in international law if the National Assembly chose to reject the TAL. It would be a very interesting issue. But they can't do it without rejecting the TAL. The other problem is including what Sunnis? Because the problem that you have to remember here is there are some

Sunnis boycotting the election but who support the political process who presumably could be included. There are quite a number of Sunnis on the lists but who may not represent a fair proportion of the vote. And in the insurgent areas the two provinces where you really have the most serious insurgent efforts, we're talking about less than six percent of the population of Iraq.

So when you say include the Sunnis, include what Sunnis to do what under what conditions? Even if you could choose to reject the TAL.

Bathsheba Crocker

I might just add on to that that in addition to the question of which Sunnis, there is the question of who's choosing which Sunnis, which is also another problematic layer.

And I would note that the TAL itself does contain the possibility that its provisions could be amended, I think with a 75 percent vote for the National Assembly, as I recall. So there's the one possibility that Tony raised, that potentially we could just see a rejection of the TAL as the governing law in Iraq. There's the other possibility that some have suggested that the TAL itself should be amended to allow for additional seats on the National Assembly to make up for what is expected to be the low Sunni turnout, but I find it hard to believe that you would get to a 75 percent vote of the National Assembly to make that amendment.

I think what we can hope for is that the National Assembly ultimately can come up with some kind of a political accommodation in the form of a mechanism that will enable adequate participation not only of the Sunnis but of other minorities that may be under-represented and of Iraqis more generally in the constitutional drafting process. But again, I think that gets you back to my initial question which is who is doing all of this choosing and deciding who is participating and from what groups.

Jon Alterman

Two just very quick points. One is that the TAL also says that people can't simultaneously be in the Assembly and be in the government leadership, so the elevation of people to take leadership positions means that you create some vacancies and you can appoint Sunnis that way. But I think what we see from the pre-election process, as you have anonymous lists basically, that what this really is going to produce is bargaining between the parties and coalitions, and you don't have to be in the National Assembly to be part of that bargaining process.

So again, I think as we've all been saying, really what's important is not exactly who's in the National Assembly and how that all works, but whether this bargaining process comes out of it, or the bargaining process doesn't come out of it and then the Iraqis really have a problem.

Audience

Q: Jaber Stricht from the European Commission.

I have a question about the influence that will be of the development among foreign military presence other than U.S. and British in Iraq. For example, the Dutch will go home in March, and there is a [scandal] going on in Danish. How important will this be for the support of Iraqi public for the entire coalition presence in Iraq for the next year?

Anthony Cordesman

The fact is there are all of 10,000 various groups from different countries. When they phase out they'll phase out over time. Most of those elements are not visible in terms of nationality except in a few specific communities and those are not major cities. It certainly would be desirable if you had as broad a presence and as many people as possible, but in terms of Iraqi perceptions, if most of the 10,000 that are not British or American go home, it's not going to have a material impact either on the security situation or what most Iraqis have seen from day to day. And at present that's probably going to be about half the 10,000 so a lot of them will be staying.

Audience

Q: My name is Jeffrey Winnegrad. I'm the Editor of Focuses Real Newsletter. I apologize, I came in late, so if you covered this before I came, I apologize for asking.

I'm interested in two things. The involvement of several of Iraq's neighbors in the elections, specifically Saudi Arabia, Jordan, maybe Turkey, what they've been doing. Also what would the likely effect be of these elections on those countries, and even as well, Israel. Thank you.

Anthony Cordesman

I think to the extent that they have been involved. First, Saudi Arabia has virtually no impact or presence or influence.

Jordan has, I think, been supportive of Sunni participation in the political process. How much influence it has had I think is extremely questionable. Maybe Jon and Sheba have different views, but there were some rather strange statements made about large numbers of Iranians being present in Iraq which none of us have been able to detect coming out of Jordan and I don't think those exactly had a high level of impact on Iraqi perceptions.

Obviously Syria is having an impact because it is tacitly allowing Baathist elements to operate out of Syria and has a meaningful impact on the insurgency.

The Iranian presence that people were so concerned about so far has been remarkably invisible. We've had Iraqi ministers talk about very large numbers of Iranians coming, and I think one Iraqi, the Defense Minister at one point referred to

1.2 million Iranians coming into Iraq to register. Quite aside from the fact that the registration system made that impossible, we haven't seen any indication whatsoever that it ever took place. But obviously people on the outside have some impact. I don't see governments really affecting this political situation much on the outside as yet.

Jon Alterman

My sense, as I said earlier in I think some comments you missed, that most of Iraq's neighbors want Iraq to be in some sort of a band between utter success, which they find destabilizing, and utter failure, which they also find destabilizing. At this point, as things move closer to the utter failure mode, they're more supportive of the process.

Certainly all the Sunni governments -- that's Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and others -- are concerned about the sense they have of Iranian influence in Iraq and Shia power and everything else and they want Sunni voices. I think on the unofficial level you're seeing money and arms flowing into Iraq from Saudi Arabia, from Syria, from other places. But whether this actually drives the politics, my sense with Tony is that it's not really driving the politics. What's driving the politics is Iraqi politics. This huge diversity of Iraqi political parties, many of which started as expatriate groups. As Tony suggested, people with no real experience in government administration forming these huge, unwieldy coalitions and the coalitions enter into other coalitions and that's going to be what drives the politics rather than any individual country being able to steer Iraqi politics in one direction or another.

Audience

Q: James Rosen, McClaskey Newspapers.

I was at a National Security Council background briefing I think it was last week, and I was struck by the disparity between their optimism and their take on the overall situation. I mean obviously they admit the insurgency now and they admit other problems. But when you listen to them and other administration people speak, people in the State Department, versus when I hear folks like you talk and some of your peers, other experts on the Middle East and Iraq, there's just a complete gap. It's like two competing different realities talking about two different places.

Could any of you take a stab at why you think that's the case and how that can possibly be the case?

Anthony Cordesman

First, we're all using the same numbers, so to the extent people are basing this on facts they're coming out of the administration.

Second, in 40 years of being around in Washington, and two-thirds of that in government, having had to spin everything when I was in government as favorably

as possible, it's scarcely an unfamiliar or partisan activity. Governments are not objective, regardless of what government is involved. They're always defending their policy and putting the most favorable face on it they can.

But I'd also have to say that the three of us not only visit the region but talk to a lot of people from the region, and a lot of them are U.S. military and a lot of them are officials. And people who have to solve problems have to admit the problems to begin solving it, so I think there's a great deal of realism among the military, the people in the State Department, the people working in the field, and they're not spinning things favorably or unrealistically when they go out and try to deal with the realities on the ground.

Bathsheba Crocker

I think, again I agree with everything that Tony just said. I think maybe a point to add would be that it has been possible throughout this entire post-Saddam period, and I alluded to this earlier, to pick up particular things that one can point to and say look, this is a sign of progress, or we're doing okay in a certain area, or things look slightly better in this area or whatever it is.

I think my sense all along has been that the problems of the type that the three of us have been alluding to today are large enough that they basically overwhelm and undermine any particular instances of progress you might be able to turn to.

I think on that note I might just pick up on something that Tony was talking about earlier which is the fact that we have an enormous amount of focus on the insurgency which is now, as you suggest, something administration is admitting exists. And understandably why that remains the bulk of our focus here.

For the average Iraqi, it's arguable that their main concern on the security front is not necessarily the insurgency which is largely confined to particular regions in Iraq, but rather just the rampant law and order that pretty much exists throughout the country.

Those are the kinds of things that we don't hear as much about, but I think again do tend to overwhelm a bit any notion that in a particular area you may be able to point to something and say look, things are actually going okay.

Audience

Vacuum of law and order.

Bathsheba Crocker

Vacuum. It's a lack of law and order throughout the country.

Audience

Q: Pasquale Ferrat at the Embassy of Italy.

Mr. Cordesman, you mentioned before that after the election we could witness the emergence of a pro-Iranian Shia dominated government in Iraq. This is one possibility. But don't you think there are also other elements to be taken into account? For instance, the different brand of religion between the Iraqi Shia and the Iranian Shia, and the Iraqi Arab Nationalists. In that case we will not have a so-pro-Iranian government.

Anthony Cordesman

I think you are misquoting me. I didn't say anything of the sort. I think my own experience with Iraqi Shiites has been that there is a strong sense of religious identity, and having been in Iraq since 1973 the reality is that people who say that Iraqis are nationalists or Arabs first and are not split by sectarian or religious differences are people who simply deny elementary reality.

I watched throughout the Iran/Iraq War constant problems between Sunni and Shiites even in the field. There was a low-level guerrilla war between the regime and the Shiites that lasted until basically Saddam fell. The Kurdish issue has been an ongoing mess at least since the early '70s when I had to deal with the elder Barzani and was at the embassy in Tehran. If you go through Iraq and you want to know about nationalism, let's remember that there are at a minimum four times as many Shiites as there are Sunnis, three perhaps, and yet for some strange reason under Saddam Hussein they built more than two to three times as many Sunni mosques as they did Shiite mosques. Now those are realities, but that doesn't make Iraqi Shiites pro-Iranian. Some of them come from Iran. They are exile parties that have very strong elements that spent a great deal of time in Iran. Talking to them during the period from 1991 to the present, I have not seen them in any sense as people who are going to rush out and fall into the model of a theocratic government in Iran. Even the people I have talked to over the years in the clergy have never shown any interest in the supreme leader or the activist group.

Out of the Shiites in this political structure the only Shiite cleric who is not a quietus is Sadr, and he is not a senior cleric. But one of the future problems we face is that if we have a Shiite dominated Iraq and it cannot work with its Sunni neighbors, and Jon hinted at this and raised the issue, then it may be pushed towards Iran, but that's something that is in the future.

But I certainly did not say at any point that I felt you were going to get a pro-Iranian government. You may get a pro-Shiite government, but that's a different thing.

Jon Alterman

If I could just add, I think in some ways when people talk about Shia influence in Iraq we sort of think of Poland during the Cold War. Basically a satellite with no independence. And I think there is an Iraqi nationalism. There is a sense of difference. There may be a sort of -- There are issues on which there would be more commonality and issues on which there would be a distinct difference. So I think that one of the things that we have to do is get off a Cold War paradigm for how states would relate to each other and start thinking in more fluid ways about the kinds of things in which people who cooperate, the kinds of ideas which would flow across borders, and the kinds of distinctiveness which would persist because it seems to me that again it's this variance in Iraq that we have a hard time accepting, but it seems to me is going to be one of the dominant characteristics of Iraqi governance going to the next decade.

Mark Schoeff

We have time for one more question and it will be from Louise again.

Audience

Q: Just on a practical level, on Sunday what can we expect to see in the way of results? I know that we won't get exact results, but how long is it going to take to know how many people voted, what's emerged?

Anthony Cordesman

The background briefing from the U.S. Embassy was it would take about ten days to two weeks to get a count and then some statement of who the candidates were, in what numbers. I can't give you a more precise estimate than that. I would hope that it would be sooner, but as Jon pointed out with all of the polling places, with the level of violence, involved, with the difficulties of assembling the ballots, and with the problems in any case of going into a polling place and having to vote with what, 111 entries? Things can get confusing and uncertain. So we may get a good count on the large parties early on, but trying to figure out whether the smaller parties got enough votes to qualify for the National Assembly on the basis of this nationwide election with no regional representation, that could be a counting exercise on the order of a nightmare simply to assemble it.

The other thing to remember is that all of the governance in the Kurdish areas will also have local elections, and a lot of these local elections could be extremely important because in the present structure the central government is not always in charge. In many communities in governance, basically there are sort of considerable independents, and you may get in these areas where it's a regional election governments which have very strong views about what the central government can

and cannot do. And it can take us a long time to figure out how those governates actually have voted.

Mark Schoeff

We want to thank each of you for coming over today and we'll have a transcript of this session up on the CSIS Website, CSIS.org by Thursday morning, maybe earlier.

###