This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30067789

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2012, Ashgate
Introduction

The events in Iraq do create opportunities to examine democracy, power, tyranny, military force, cultural differences, law, civil liberties, Islam, Christianity, economic development, and even human nature. We ought to understand these issues, because they arise in our own lives and communities; because they are intrinsically interesting and morally serious. (Levine 2004: 22)

Democracy in Iraq

On 7 March 2010, the sun rose over the city of Baghdad much as it had since the dawn of human civilization. As the call to prayer rang out across the city, the seven humble families of one particular apartment block in Karkh\(^1\) (Western Baghdad) went about their usual morning rituals: the devout among them prayed, the children stirred and played games, the women prepared breakfast for their families, and the men completed the first of their morning chores. However, today was no ordinary day. Today was the day of Iraq’s latest round of national elections. Today held the promise of moving Iraq beyond the violence and trauma of the US-led occupation, beyond the 35 years of Baathist oppression, and beyond the succession of largely ineffective governments that had ruled over Iraq since its creation by the British in the 1920s. For these seven families – and indeed for all Iraqis – today represented an opportunity to ponder these hardships and to elect a government that might represent the needs and interests of the heterogeneous Iraqi population and deliver them a more stable, secure and democratic future.

The residents of the small apartment block in Karkh were thus more reflective than usual.

Sadly, this mood of quiet contemplation was soon shattered. At around 7am a deadly explosion tore through the building. In an instant the place these families called home had transformed into a pile of rubble, pinning them under the weight of the twisted debris. Neighbours and friends rushed to the scene and were soon joined by rescue teams and ambulances, all searching for survivors. Tragically, four innocent Iraqi civilians were killed in

---

\(^1\) The story of this household in Western Baghdad is taken from an article written by Qassim Al-Hilfi and published in the Iraqi newspaper *Al-Sabah (The Morning)* (Al-Hilfi, 2010).
the explosion and seven others were badly wounded. Seeing the bodies of their friends and family lying prostrate and bleeding on the street, the women embraced the limp and lifeless bodies, tears streaming down their faces as they wailed with grief. The men, overwhelmed with sorrow, beat their heads with their hands and fell to the ground. The people in the crowd shifted awkwardly on their feet, unsure of where to look or how to help as another tragedy unfolded in Iraq. Gradually, the survivors pulled themselves together and said their goodbyes to the dead, making the appropriate arrangements for the bodies to be sent to the local mortuary.

Remarkably, these seven grief-stricken families were still determined to vote. They began searching through the rubble in the hope of finding their official documents so that they could proceed as planned to the nearest polling station. Once they had the documents, they set out together on foot, walking for miles before lining up and then placing their ballot paper in the plastic tubs provided. Among them were Abu Nour and his wife Um Nour who had lost two of their children in the blast. Reflecting the bravery of the Iraqi people, as well as their determination to create a more democratic future, through her tears Um told reporters that she knew there were ‘still terrorists supplied by actors who are against the success of democracy in Iraq. We pay with our blood and our children to sacrifice for our nation which is our salvation and our home’ (Um Nour cited in Al-Hilfi 2010). Despite his pain, her husband agreed:

This process must have sacrifices … I was chosen by God to be one of those who sacrifice pure blood to enable the right way and state-building which are sought by all good people in this country and the sacrifices are required … But our response [to the terrorists] was greater because we bid farewell to our martyrs and then we went to the polls to say ‘yes to Iraq and no to all its enemies’. (Abu Nour cited in Al-Hilfi 2010)

In total, around 11.5 million Iraqis joined with Abu and Um in saying ‘yes to Iraq and no to all its enemies’ by taking part in the 2010 elections. Although the security clamp-down had left the streets of the nation eerily quiet in the lead up to the vote, this soon changed as scores of Iraqi citizens – men and women, young and old, Sunni and Shia, Kurd and Arab, Christian and Muslim – filled the streets with their chatter and excitement. Some had arrived early and now
paraded their purple ink-stained index fingers to the growing crowds; others arrived later, preferring to wait in the long queues as a sign of their solidarity and to discuss politics, religion and football with their friends and fellow citizens. Like Abu and Um Nour, each had their own tragic story to tell of war, loss and oppression, and each was acting in defiance of the violence and chaos of post-Saddam Iraq, ignoring the blood-curdling threats issued by various insurgents and terrorist networks.

However, these were not the first successful elections to have been held in Iraq since the US-led invasion and occupation began in 2003. Just over 12 months earlier in January 2009, Iraq witnessed relatively free and fair elections for 14 of Iraq’s 18 provincial councils. These elections were preceded by a series of democratic elections and a referendum that were held throughout the nation in 2005. These included the January elections which saw some 8.5 million Iraqis vote to nominate a national assembly which went on to draw up the Iraqi constitution. A draft of the constitution was then circulated to the citizens of Iraq via the nation’s diverse media sector before they gave their verdict in a nationwide referendum in October. This time their ballot paper posed a simple question printed in both Arabic and Kurdish: ‘Do you support the draft constitution?’. Approximately ten million Iraqis answered this question and, despite some opposition, the overwhelming majority replied in the affirmative. With the constitution officially accepted, the Iraqi people went to the polls for the third time in December 2005 when 11 million Iraqis elected their own government.

The series of democratic elections that have occurred throughout Iraq since 2005 have attracted the attention of scholars, foreign policy pundits and journalists from across the political and ideological spectrum. While such coverage is critiqued and problematized throughout this book, it is worth noting here that, for the most part, coverage of Iraq since 2003 has emphasized horrific violence through depictions of suicide bombings, kidnappings, mortar attacks, improvised explosive devices, sectarian hostility and the threat of all-out civil war. One

---

2 The remaining four Kurdish provinces held separate local elections in July of 2009.
might argue that the tendency of the ‘Western’ media, academics and other commentators to focus on the daily atrocities of post-Saddam Iraq has largely obfuscated the positive political developments and seen successful stories of Iraq’s fledgling democracy buried beneath a seemingly endless reel of bloodshed and chaos. Where attention has been paid to the political landscape in Iraq it has tended to privilege disagreements and disunities among Iraq’s myriad ethno-religious factions over the complexity of Iraqi politics and the highly inclusive and progressive nature of the democratic deliberations being conducted.

Much of the coverage has also argued that Iraq simply lacks the social and political prerequisites necessary to build towards democratic forms of governance. For example, only months after the relatively free and fair elections of 2005, *USA Today* published an editorial by former US army officer, Ralph Peters, in which he discussed his concerns about Iraq and expressed his opinion as to why democracy would not take root there. It is worth citing at length:

> Iraq is failing. No honest observer can conclude otherwise. Even six months ago, there was hope. Now the chances for a democratic, unified Iraq are dwindling fast … Iraq still exists on the maps, but in reality it’s gone. Only a military coup – which might come in the next few years – could hold the artificial country together … Yet, for all our errors, we did give the Iraqis a unique chance to build a rule-of-law democracy. They preferred to indulge in old hatreds, confessional violence, ethnic bigotry and a culture of corruption. It appears that the cynics were right: Arab societies can’t support democracy as we know it. And people get the government they deserve. For us, Iraq’s impending failure is an embarrassment. For the Iraqis – and other Arabs – it’s a disaster the dimensions of which they do not yet comprehend. Iraq was the Arab world’s last chance to board the train to modernity, to give the region a future, not just a bitter past. The violence staining Baghdad’s streets with gore

---

3 The use of the terms ‘West’ and ‘East’ throughout this project is in itself problematic given that it relies on a Eurocentric vision of the world. Unlike the terms ‘North’ and ‘South’ which have a clearly defined geographical boundary in the equator, the terms ‘East’ and ‘West’ are ideological, originating in Europe to divide the Eurasian landmass between the European or ‘Western’ world and the Asiatic or ‘Eastern’ world. Despite their Eurocentric origin and their geographical inaccuracy, these terms remain in common parlance and will be used throughout this book.
isn’t only a symptom of the Iraqi government’s incompetence, but of the comprehensive inability of the Arab world to progress in any sphere of organized human endeavour. We are witnessing the collapse of a civilization. (Peters 2006)

On the one hand, balanced assessments of the deep-seated and intractable problems that Iraqi democracy faces along with an open acknowledgement of the failures of the US occupation and the Iraqi government are welcome. On the other, it is instructive to note how often assessments like Peters’s seek to connect such concerns to a series of widely held assumptions about Iraq’s political history (or, more broadly, that of Arabs or Muslims). For Peters and those of his ilk, whatever problems Iraqi democracy faces, they are not the fault of the invading and occupying forces of the West, nor of the political system they tried to install, but indicative of the backward and barbaric nature of the Iraqi people. Not only is Iraq ‘failing’ but, even when offered a way out in the form of democracy and freedom, Iraqis prefer ‘to indulge in old hatreds, confessional violence, ethnic bigotry and a culture of corruption’. Arab society as a whole has not only missed the ‘train to modernity’ and failed to ‘progress in any sphere of organized human endeavour’, it is also incapable of supporting ‘democracy as we know it’. Arabs are locked inside an anti-democratic cage built by their own ‘culture’, their ‘bitter past’, and their ‘civilization’.

The central argument of this book is that not only are such notions remarkably common in discussions of the entire effort to bring democracy to Iraq, but also that they are – sometimes unwittingly, sometimes deliberately – couched in a series of very old ideas about the supposed political divide between East and West. This divide relies on a distinct dualism: the West is seen as having a unique inclination towards democracy, it tolerates diversity and opposing points of view, it encourages innovation and excellence, and it supports freedom, equality and the rule of law. Paradoxically, the East purportedly is driven by impulses that give way to vice and violence, that rely on stagnant traditions and out-dated modes of culture, that limit freedom and expression, and that give rise to unimaginably cruel tyrants who rule by fear, oppression and
bloodshed. These are, of course, overly simplistic ways of looking at both the political history of the Occident and the Orient. Not only do they reduce rich and complex histories to a storybook narrative, but they routinely ignore the myriad places and times in which the West itself has acted oppressively and tyrannically, while the East has practised tolerance, cooperation and the rule of law. Repeated and recycled with little critique, this simple dualism has amounted to an intellectual orthodoxy that helps explain away complex realities: the West has a duty to spread democracy among the uncivilized ‘lesser breeds’ but the project is futile because the East is trapped in an unescapable web of barbarism and bellicosity.

The aim of this book is to demonstrate the myriad ways in which – despite all its obvious flaws and inherent racisms – this dichotomy has been brought to bear on discussions of the complex political history of Iraq. It then seeks to expose the manufactured and arbitrary nature of this false dichotomy by examining Iraq’s long and complex history of struggling towards egalitarianism, collective governance and democratic reform. From ancient Mesopotamian assemblies, through Islamic philosophy and doctrine and, despite foreign interference and autocratic tyrants, Iraq has a democratic history of its own. This alternative history of Iraq forces us to acknowledge that democracy is not ‘ours’ to give to the Iraqis; it is a dynamic system of governance underpinned by virtues of justice, equality and liberty. Virtues that the people of Iraq (or Arabs or Muslims) have at least as much historical claim to as anyone in the West.

**Critical Theory, Orientalism and the Democratic History of Iraq**

In order to challenge this intellectual orthodoxy and to unearth the democratic history of Iraq, however, this study must first come to terms with a body of scholarship referred to here as critical theory. For Max Horkheimer, such critical theories set out to challenge ‘The world that is given to the individual and which he must accept and take into account’ and is therefore ‘wholly distrustful of the rules of conduct with which society as presently constituted provides each of its members’ (Horkheimer 2007 [1937]: 350, 352). In other words, critical theory can be seen to involve the questioning of ideologies – that nexus of received wisdoms, beliefs, values
and attitudes inherited from the world around us. In critical theory, these ideologies are scrutinized in order to highlight the assumptions that underpin their claims to truth, their processes of inclusion and exclusion, their relation to other ideological positions and assumptions, and the problematic nature of their universal application.

Arguably, the most influential example of this kind of ideological critique is Karl Marx’s body of work relating to the rise of capitalism. Here, Marx proposed a radical new approach to history, focusing on the ways in which the ruling elite sought to justify and maintain the imbalances that came with capitalism by making capitalism itself appear as a legitimate mode of production (Marx 1977 [1887]-a, 1977 [1887]-b). As Marx and his long-time collaborator, Freidrich Engels, articulated elsewhere, the ruling elite were successful in doing this because,

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: that is, the class which is the ruling material force in society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force … In so far, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the whole extent of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in their whole range and thus, among other things, rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. (Marx and Engels 1974 [1846]: 64)

By propagating these ‘ruling ideas’ the elite are also able to establish a certain degree of consent from the masses. In other words, as Antonio Gramsci put it, cultural hegemony is achieved when otherwise ordinary ideas are repeated and recycled to such an extent that they become what everybody knows, but few dare to question (Gramsci 1971 [1929–1935], 1978 [1921–1926]).

Perhaps the best application of this critical-theoretical approach to political history and political discourse is found in the work of Michel Foucault. Throughout his work, Foucault developed a model of history which ‘breaks off the past from the present and, by demonstrating

---

4 It is worth noting here many of the scholars discussed here like Marx, Gramsci and Foucault also relied heavily on Orientalist stereotypes throughout their work. This problematic legacy in the Western humanities and social sciences – and especially its consequences for thinking about the history of democracy - is examined in detail in Chapter 1.
the foreignness of the past, relativizes and undercuts the legitimacy of the present’ (Poster 1984: 74). To do this, Foucault attempted to move the debate over issues of power away from the hegemonic proliferation of dominant ideologies (or ‘ruling ideas’), towards a more complex understanding of the constituent layers of power (or ‘discourses’) which criss-crossed the social world. Foucault was able to demonstrate that these various discourses converge to provide a given society a particular view of the world (or ‘episteme’) which can unwittingly be underpinned by discontinuities and distortions that are embedded within the discourses themselves (Foucault 1970). Despite its potential to be grievously flawed, each successive episteme both drives and unifies intellectual production and thereby constitutes itself as the legitimate and righteous view of the world (Foucault 1981, 1991 [1979], 2005 [1969]). In this way, overly simplistic and often erroneous ideas – such as the suggested incompatibility of democracy with Iraqi / Arab culture or the Islamic religion – are fed into the complex matrix of political, social and cultural discourses that surround us. They are taught in the classroom, they form the plotlines of comic books, novels and cinema blockbusters, they are repeated by journalists in the nightly news, and are used by politicians and pundits to justify imperial expansion and epic wars.

Another seminal theorist, Jacques Derrida urged us to ‘deconstruct’ such discourses by paying close attention to the binary oppositions that underpin ideology (Derrida 1973 [1967], 1976 [1967], 2003 [1967]). For Derrida, these binary oppositions help to make sense of the world by reducing complex phenomenon to an austere and overly simplistic set of polar opposites that are generally thought to be at odds with each other such as ‘good v. evil’ or ‘Occident and Orient’. The process of deconstruction is first to expose these binary oppositions, to establish their inherent contradictions, marginalities and structured silences and then to challenge the lineage of discourses on which they are premised. This project seeks to expose the assumptions that underpin the binary opposition between the West’s alleged tendency to democracy and the East’s proclivity for violence. By deconstructing the binary oppositions inherent in such assumptions it becomes possible to demonstrate that, not only do they privilege
generalizations over nuance and depth, but also that they are based on suppositions and false dualisms about the politics of both the East and the West.

Arguably the most erudite example of this critical-theoretical approach to the binary between East and West is the work of Edward W. Said (Said 1979, 1981, 1994 [1993]). In his seminal *Orientalism*,5 Said deconstructed an astounding number of academic, bureaucratic and literary texts from the Colonial period. What he found was that the Colonial period had seen the West (or more specifically the European Colonial powers) approach the East (and here Said focuses on the Arab world) with a sense of superiority – intellectually, politically, culturally and militarily. This sense of superiority not only permeated an entire episteme of interdependent discourses, institutions and practices in Europe, but also served to create an ideological fantasy that bore no relation to the reality and complexity of Middle Eastern society – its myriad of cultures, religions, peoples, customs, and histories.

This Orientalist fantasy served to homogenize, demonize and stereotype the Middle East according to fairly reductive and negative terms, such that the Oriental was viewed as the ‘other’. During the nineteenth century this creation of the ‘other’ transformed from loose assumptions and general ‘ideas about the Orient – its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness – into a separate and unchallenged coherence’ (Said 2003 [1978]: 205). Clearly the unquestioned tendency to view the people of the Orient as deficient and inferior ‘others’ served the Colonial agenda and its practice of continuing to dominate and control sections of the East. The ideological fantasy of Orientalism had the effect of marginalizing or, more accurately, silencing, the histories and cultures of these ‘others’. Said concluded that the people of the Orient have been ‘rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or

---

5 It should be noted here that while Said’s *Orientalism* is widely recognized as an unprecedented breakthrough in understanding and critiquing Western conceptions of the non-European world, it was somewhat pre-empted (and paralleled) by the work of several scholars (Abdel-Malek 1963, Alatas 1977, T. Asad 1973a, 1973b, Grossrichard 1998 [1979], Jameelah 1971, Tibawi 1964, Turner, 1978).
Central to Orientalism was therefore a binary opposition between an assumed Western superiority and Eastern backwardness. As is argued in Chapter 1, this dualism is indicative of a particular sub-set of the Orientalist fantasy on which studies of the political history of both the Orient and Occident have so often relied; that of Western democracy and Oriental despotism. These discourses of democracy have a parallel history that can be traced back through the Western scholarly canon. From the time of the ancient Greeks, through the Crusades, the Reformation and the founding of modern representative democracy, most scholars have contributed to our belief of the West as unique in its propensity for democratic governance and the East as simply incapable of such an advanced political system. Continuing through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries such discourses achieved the status of a received wisdom, they proliferated an ideological uniformity that was rarely critiqued or negated, and they helped bolster the more ambitious claims of so-called experts on the Orient. However, to argue that this dialectic belongs to the annals of history severely underestimates the impact that this discursive lineage continues to have on scholarship, foreign policy and journalism that concerns itself with the Middle East. As Peters’ opinion editorial demonstrates, the notion that the Middle East and its ‘culture’, ‘bitter past’, and ‘civilization’ is somehow antithetical to democracy remains a central tenet of discussions of the region today.

Said’s work not only encourages us to deconstruct the binaries that exist between ‘Western democrats’ and ‘Oriental despots’, however, but to move beyond these by asserting counter-histories free from prejudices and simplistic dualisms. As Franz Fanon reminds us, ‘Colonialism is not satisfied with merely holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it’ (Fanon 2005 [1963]: 210). The task therefore of many Post-Colonial scholars has been to retrieve the silenced histories that lay behind the roar of Western power, ‘both in terms of the objective history of subaltern or dominated,
marginalized groups, “counter-histories”, and in terms of the subjective experience of the effects of Colonialism and domination’ (Young 1995: 58).

In this vein, the study being conducted here also holds up to scrutiny the notion that the West has a particular penchant for democracy and is therefore more civilized than the non-European world. This is a central premise of the work of Post-Colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha who noted that the guiding discourses of the modern Western world – justice, democracy, liberty – were created at exactly the same moment that the West was involved in the tyranny of the Colonial project (Bhabha 1994, 1995 [1990]). Bhabha elaborates on this point in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, where he states that:

I think we need to draw attention to the fact that the advent of Western modernity, located as it generally is in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was the moment when certain master narratives of the state, the citizen, cultural value, art, science, the novel, when these major cultural discourses and identities came to define the ‘Enlightenment’ of Western society and the critical rationality of Western personhood. The time at which these things were happening was the same time at which the West was producing another history of itself through its Colonial possessions and relations. That ideological tension, visible in the history of the West as a despotic power, at the very moment of the birth of democracy and modernity, has not been adequately written in a contradictory and contrapuntal discourse of tradition. Unable to resolve the contradictions perhaps, the history of the West as a despotic power, a Colonial power, has not been adequately written side by side with its claims to democracy and solidarity. (Bhabha 1990: 218)

Bhabha’s assertion is of particular importance in the context of this work because he exposes a more sophisticated history of the modern Western world from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards. On the one hand, this era of Western history witnessed a series of social upheavals and political struggles in Britain, Western Europe and in North America which paved the way for modern, representative forms of democracy. On the other hand, as Bhabha observes above, at precisely the same time that the West was confronting its own political instability and
forging states based on egalitarian models of social justice and representative democracy, it was spreading out across much of the globe in the quest for resources and power. In other words, while the Western world fought for a government that acknowledged and responded to the needs of the citizen at home, it was simultaneously involved in subjugating, capturing, enslaving and, in many cases, exterminating, the people of the non-Western world.

This points to the need for a more complex view of the political history of the West, and the arguably more urgent need for a sophisticated understanding of the political history of the Orient. Behind the constituent layers of Orientalism as conceived by Said and the fantasies it propagated and projected onto the region is a complicated heritage. As in the West, there are long periods in which violence and despotism triumphed and, in other times and places, epochs in which ordinary people came together to practise forms of government akin to what is today called democracy. Unfortunately, the notion that democracy could have been practised in non-Western contexts has been overwhelmingly ignored in traditional accounts of the history of democracy. Instead ‘the standard history of democracy’ privileges the keystone moments of Western civilization: the achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the later development of the British parliament, the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution, and the gradual global spread of democracy since the end of the Cold War. However, as recent research has begun to demonstrate ‘there is much more to the history of democracy than this foreshortened genealogy admits. There is a whole “secret” history, too big, complex and insufficiently Western in character to be included in the standard narrative’ (Isakhan and Stockwell 2011: 1)

Drawing on this research and employing a critical-theoretical approach, this book focuses specifically on the political history of Iraq in order to demonstrate the nation’s rich democratic heritage. To do so, it is necessary to briefly outline what is meant by the term ‘democracy’ in this context. While there is not space enough here to document the varied debates and definitions of democracy that have been asserted over time, suffice it to say that democracy itself is a complex and contested concept with little consensus on its precise character or on an
exact definition (Isakhan 2012b). There are ancient Grecian attempts to understand democracy, mostly by those who were not in favour of it (Aristotle 1943 [350 BCE], Plato 1975 [380 BCE]) and there are accounts by those who witnessed the dramatic sequence of events that led to the emergence of modern representative democracy in Europe and America (de Tocqueville 1864 [1835], Paine 1856 [1791]). More recent times have brought us minimalist empirical definitions (Schumpeter 2011 [1947]) and an emphasis on certain preconditions, such as economic prosperity (Downs 1957, Lipset 1971 [1959]), autonomous social classes (Dahl 1971, Lijphart 1977), a certain civic culture (Almond and Verba 1989 [1963]), strong political institutions (Dahl 1971, Huntington 1968) and the presence of a political elite who must be determined to see democracy grow and spread (Dahl 2005 [1961]). Paralleling this literature are various philosophical models detailing what a more democratic world might look like, including calls for wider participation (Pateman 1999 [1970]), a radical strategy to undermine the hegemony of the Western liberal model (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and the need for greater degrees of rational-critical debate (Habermas 1996 [1992]) and deliberation (Dryzek 2000).

From this corpus it is possible to offer a definition of democracy that is both succinct enough to eschew the myriad differences between the empirical and normative peculiarities of the literature, and at the same time practicable enough to be applied to the political past. Such a definition of democracy would necessarily consist of three fundamental parts. First, any claim to democracy must be constituted by a group of more or less equal individuals (the citizen body) who have similar access to certain rights (such as freedom of speech) that come with parallel responsibilities (such as respect for other opinions). This citizen body should also be vested with some power to determine key decisions facing their community (such as how and by whom they are governed). Second, this citizen body should be governed by a set of laws or norms that serve to both protect their rights and responsibilities and to hold those in power to account. Finally, for democracy to work the citizen body must be prepared to do three things equally: they must contest (offer contrary points of view, join an opposition party); they must co-operate (accept
the result of an election, form a civil society organization); and they must participate (attend assemblies, vote and get involved in politics).

This study will therefore assess the successes and failures in Iraq’s own history of democracy by applying the above criteria across five key epochs in Iraqi history. In Chapter 2, these criteria are applied to the pre-Athenian democratic developments that occurred throughout the ancient Middle East from approximately 3000 BCE to the modern age. Despite the common misconception that the ancient Middle East was home to a lineage of megalomaniacal kings and their savage empires, there is evidence that the practices of democracy were found throughout the region from the smallest city-states to the largest kingdoms. Chapter 3 analyzes the participatory forms of government and egalitarian social movements found throughout both the history and doctrine of Islam. From the life of the Prophet through to the Ottoman era, the history of various Islamic empires and the teachings of a range of clerics and philosophers reveal a picture very much at odds with the overwhelming consensus in the West that the religion of Islam is antithetical to democracy and works against inclusion, diversity and debate. Together, these two chapters raise important questions about the discourses of democracy: they not only illustrate that democracy was at work in the Orient long before the rise of Athens and the birth of Western civilization, but also that it was kept alive by the Islamic world as much of Europe declined into the inequity of much of the medieval period.

In Chapters 4–6, the focus shifts slightly. It builds atop the above analysis to also examine the extent to which Iraq developed a ‘public sphere’. For Jurgen Habermas the public sphere is defined as ‘that [which] connects society with the state and thus has a function in the political realm’ (Habermas 1996 [1989]: 28). In other words, the public sphere is constituted by those institutions and practices that engender a culture of open and ‘rational-critical’ debate towards ‘democratic deliberation’ (Habermas 1987 [1981], 1996 [1992]). These are added here because the public sphere is usually associated with institutions and practices that were not known in ancient Mesopotamia or the classical Islamic world. These include the extent to which rational-critical debate is supported by a robust media sector, the political landscape is constituted by
oppositional parties, and an engaged civil society is made up of various actors who co-ordinate activities such as mass protests which agitate for civil rights, air grievances or work towards a more inclusive political order.

In Chapter 4 these criteria are discussed in relation to Colonial Iraq (1921–58) and the role that Iraq’s complex media and political landscape played in fostering an engaged public sphere as the country navigated the thorny issues of nationhood and occupation under the auspices of British Colonialism and the installed Hashemite monarchy. Chapter 5 follows with a re-examination of Post-Colonial Iraq (1958–2003), an era which not only witnessed the ascension of a number of repressive regimes but also a number of clandestine Iraqi opposition groups from across various ethno-religious and political divides who began producing their own media outlets and calling for democratic change. Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on Re-Colonial Iraq (2003–11) following the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the ‘Coalition of the Willing’. This era has seen an unprecedented upsurge in oppositional political parties, critical media outlets and virulent protest movements – from religious clergymen to secular civil society actors – who have worked together to call for an end to foreign occupation, to rally against corruption and to demand more democracy. Far from a benighted Iraq prone to Oriental despotism these three chapters reveal an alternative vision of modern Iraqi history in which one finds a sophisticated political culture, deeply concerned with the issue of democratic governance.

Taken together these chapters demonstrate that Iraq has a very different history to the one with which it is usually associated. Care must be taken not to over-emphasize the depth and breadth of these democratic moments in Iraq; participatory assemblies, egalitarian beliefs and a lively public sphere cannot be taken in lieu of a robust democracy. As with all Western democracies, which have had their own problems and inconsistencies – from ancient Greek slavery to modern US apathy – Iraqi democracy often falls short of the democratic ideal. Nonetheless, this alternative account of Iraq’s political history does provide a more complex lens through which to view Iraq’s past and present. It illuminates a democratic potential greatly
at odds with the lineage of Orientalist tropes and motifs that have been used to categorize and understand Iraq in the West.

However, this is not the first attempt to unearth a more nuanced and detailed assessment of Iraq’s political history. Several studies have revealed that Colonial Iraq was home to a varied media landscape, a thriving religious and secular intellectual scene, myriad political parties and movements, and prolific literary and artistic discourses (Bashkin 2009, 2010, Dawisha 2005a, Wien 2006). Others have provided unique insights into Post-Colonial Iraq and noted that while a succession of autocratic leaders sought to control and manipulate the political discourse of Iraq in order to situate the Iraqi people into a position of forced acquiescence, they simultaneously gave rise to a virulent culture of resistance and opposition (Baram 1991, Batatu 1982 [1978], Bengio 1998). Taking more of a longitudinal approach, there are several excellent studies of Iraq’s political history from the British Mandate through to the fall of Saddam (Marr 2004 [1985], Stansfield 2007, Tripp 2007 [2000]). These include those which have offered a more detailed examination of the cultural formations and intellectual life of Iraq with particular emphasis on the literary, intellectual and political cultures which have openly called for Iraq’s liberation and discussed the possibilities for a cohesive and democratic future (Al-Musawi 2006, Davis 2005b, Dawisha 2009).

Despite the strength and importance of this body of work and its assertion of a more complex assessment of Iraq’s political culture and history, none of these studies provide a sustained critical analysis of the discourses which have been brought to bear on Iraq’s recent democratization. In addition, none of these works have attempted to problematize and unhinge these discourses by juxtaposing them against a thorough analysis of the indigenous roots of democracy in Iraq. Another problem with the aforementioned studies is their narrow historical focus and the virtual absence of important epochs such as ancient Mesopotamia and the Islamic period, not to mention the successes and failures of democracy in Iraq since 2003. Finally, none of these studies provide a discussion of the ways in which Iraq’s democratic legacy might be used as a tool in re-thinking the history of democracy and in building, stabilizing and
legitimizing democracy across Iraq today. This project therefore attempts to fill this lacuna by couching modern Iraqi experiences with democracy in a broader discussion of its rich political history.

In conducting a project such as this there are several key problems and limitations. First among these is the fact that it is difficult to analyze and discuss with any sense of finality Iraq’s democracy. At the time of writing, daily reports from across Iraq continue to document the chaos and turmoil of the nation, including the grim and complex battles fought between the occupying forces, the Iraqi security services, various insurgent groups and terrorist organizations, as well as those between competing ethno-sectarian factions. This is not to mention the plights of so many ordinary Iraqis (such as the seven families sharing the apartment block in Karkh) who continue to endure the countless struggles and hardships of the post-Saddam era. Furthermore, such violence continues to take its toll on the democratic process in Iraq which itself is ongoing. Despite the fact that Iraqis have participated in a series of relatively free and fair elections, seen parties and governments form and citizens elected to the ranks of Prime Minister and President, the nation is by no means a stable and robust democracy. The government, its ministries and institutions are still relatively weak and the basic infrastructure of Iraq remains well below minimum acceptable standards in much of the country. Compounding all of this is the fact that the US withdrew all of its forces at the end of 2011, leaving an uncertain future beyond occupation.

This also raises another limitation of this research project, namely that studying Iraq – its history, its political culture and especially its current situation – is decidedly difficult to do from the other side of the world. The various issues, risks and costs associated with researching Iraq have meant that while this study includes many primary sources and up-to-date information based on contacts within Iraq, it also relies on existing secondary information. While it is important to acknowledge here that such a methodology brings with it certain limitations to the scope of the study and the inferences it can make, the author has made every attempt to cite reputable and established works and to cross-reference these against other materials where
available. It is also important to note that this book does not represent a comprehensive political history of Iraq, if indeed such a thing is possible. This book is a deliberately potted history, emphasizing those moments in Iraqi history when people engaged with democratic principles, ideas and practices.

Finally, determining whether or not Iraq will become a robust and stable democracy is beyond the scope of this study. This book is about the ways in which Iraq and its democratization have been constructed according to certain discourses which have for so long underpinned Western understandings of the Middle East. In addition, this project is also about scrutinizing these discourses and closely examining the assumptions on which they are based by re-examining the long and rich political history of Iraq. In the interest of establishing a stable and democratic Iraq, this book concludes that the democratic history of Iraq might be used as a powerful political and discursive tool where the Iraqi people may come to feel a sense of ownership over democracy and take pride in endorsing it. This could go a long way towards mitigating the conflicts across the nation and in stabilizing and legitimating its democratic order. This book therefore argues that there is much scholarly work left to be done in order to broaden the narrative of democracy and move beyond the overly simplistic framework provided for us by the discourses of Western democracy and Oriental despotism. By asserting alternative histories and emphasizing their democratic potentials, a step is taken not only towards a more nuanced picture of Iraqi politics per se, but also towards salvaging the utopian promise of democracy from the intersecting discourses which have constructed it for us.