



[\[Back \]](#)

[USIPeace Briefing](#)

Building Civil Society: An Overlooked Aspect of Iraq's Reconstruction?

By [Daniel Serwer](#) and Ylber Bajraktari
July 31, 2003

- [Security is fundamental](#)
- [The society is traumatized](#)
- [Religious and ethnic identities are on the rise](#)
- [Support for women is especially important](#)
- [Building civil society requires a civilian face](#)
- [The UN and international NGOs, as well as improved communications, can help](#)
- [Conclusions](#)

Even as it deals with the immediate challenge of creating governing and administrative structures in Iraq, the U.S.-led [Coalition Provisional Authority \(CPA\)](#) faces the additional long-term task of establishing civil society in the embattled country.

After more than three decades of Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship, a motivated and educated Iraqi citizenry is enjoying political pluralism, and diverse groupings and elements of Iraqi society have been quick to flourish in the post-war environment. Innumerable newspapers and political parties have surfaced. But extremists of several types are seeking to impose their agendas on a deeply traumatized society. Iraqi democracy cannot be successful without a vigorous and home-grown civil society composed of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), schools, business and industry, and others.

To assess the various aspects on which the United States needs to focus for the establishment of a civil society in Iraq, the U.S. Institute of Peace and U.S. Department of State co-hosted on July 17, 2003 a roundtable discussion with prominent experts and experienced practitioners. The participants, including U.S. government officials, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, academics, and Iraqi political leaders based in Washington, D.C., sought to examine barriers to [establishing civil society in Iraq](#) and how they might be overcome.

The views summarized below reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

Security is fundamental

The primary impediment to civil society is [lack of security](#), including widespread fear that the old order will return. Remnants of Saddam Hussein's military and security forces continue to challenge the coalition forces, particularly in the Sunni triangle, either through direct attacks against soldiers or checkpoints, or through sabotage along vital communication routes and at sites of public and humanitarian importance. Moreover, domestic and foreign groups engage in intimidating acts against Iraqis who want to cooperate with the U.S.-led authorities. Until the remnants of the Ba'ath regime are under control, Iraqis will not feel

completely free to express themselves, and the ways in which they express themselves will be distorted by fear that Saddam Hussein might return.

The disbanding of the Iraqi army put a large number of relatively young Iraqi males out of work and on the streets, creating a public security problem quite apart from the resistance of the Saddam Hussein loyalists. Some of the army cadres need to be reconstituted for security purposes and used to [reestablish law and order](#).

The society is traumatized

Even if security were adequate, the experience of Iraqis at the hands of brutal Baath party rule would present a serious obstacle to building civil society. Every Iraqi is said to have a story of mistreatment at the hands of the Saddam Hussein regime. There is a crying need to document abuses, which the CPA is trying to do, and to develop a system for accountability. It is especially important to develop a system for discovering and documenting the fate of missing people, a subject on which the CPA has been slow to act.

Religious and ethnic identities are on the rise

The ideology of Arab nationalism has little purchase on Iraqi society because of its association with the Saddam Hussein regime. [Religion and ethnicity](#) threaten to take its place as factors of identity, generating fear and insecurity. The sense of "Iraqi-ness" is weak. This attenuation of [national identity](#) may well be a precursor to interreligious and interethnic violence, as it has been in other places.

Islamists have been especially successful where they are providing social services that the regime previously provided. The risks of this are all too apparent among the Palestinians, for whom Hamas has doubled as both a political and a humanitarian organization, with devastating consequences. Where the CPA has moved in to provide social services, especially in hospitals, the Islamists are in retreat. There is nevertheless a general so-called "[creeping Talibanization](#)" of the society, with the emergence of religious sentiments and organizations that the regime had long repressed or co-opted.

Support for women is especially important

The rise of Islamist organizations is putting women in particular at risk. Islamic law poses serious challenges to women's rights. There was no constitutional protection under the Saddam Hussein regime for women, despite Iraq's adherence to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. There is little awareness of [women's rights](#) in the broader society, and little support for women's organizations from the CPA or from Islamic organizations. Apart from their indigenous support, women's organizations are mainly being supported by international NGOs. Yet women represent one of the few indigenous barriers to theocracy and their efforts at organizing themselves should be receiving strong international support.

Building civil society requires a civilian face

While it is understandable that in the initial "trans"-conflict period the U.S. military played a strong role in building civil society—as it necessarily did in virtually every aspect of reconstruction—uniforms and guns need to give way to civilian administrators and NGOs as the security situation improves. This will lighten the load on the military and enable it to focus more heavily on the remaining security threats.

The CPA and its civilian contractors report development of parent/teacher associations, freed prisoners' organizations, and human rights and women's advocacy groups. Nevertheless, the CPA seems distant and opaque to most Iraqi citizens, and without an overall framework for its efforts, or for the role it expects civil society to play. It needs to become more transparent and accountable by improving its communication with Iraqi society.

The UN and international NGOs, as well as improved communications, can help

[Internationalizing the effort](#) will also improve the prospects for building civil society. This will likely require a new Security Council resolution. Resolution 1483 appears inadequate to the task of attracting the broadest possible contributions from both member states and international NGOs.

While Iraqis are seeing more varied sources of information than in the past several decades, they remain relatively isolated, in particular from non-Arab media. It is crucial to improve communications with the world beyond Iraq, especially through the electronic media such as the Internet, which is much in demand.

Conclusions

For a country that has lived under a dictatorship for more than 30 years, post-war Iraq appears as a surprisingly pluralistic place. Although there has been a decent beginning, a long road lies ahead in establishing a civil society in Iraq. Some specific steps that the U.S.-led coalition authorities can take include:

- Establish a secure framework for civil society, by defeating the remaining elements of Hussein's military and security forces, protecting vital communication routes and infrastructure sites, and conducting counter-terrorist operations against groupings that seek to intimidate Iraqis who cooperate with coalition forces;
- Provide for an adequate operating framework for international institutions, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations;
- Determine the most effective way to deal with the sufferings of victims of war crimes and human rights abuses;
- Establish mechanisms to address issues of documentation, evaluation, investigation, and accountability for war crimes and abuses;
- Establish effective provisions for protection and advancement of women's rights in accordance with international standards;
- Utilize local capacities and international expertise for building civil society;
- Increase Internet and other international media access and encourage links between Iraqis and international institutions and organizations, particularly in the field of local governance and education.

Of Related Interest

- [Measuring Progress in Stabilization and Reconstruction](#)
Special Report, March 2006
- [Strategies for Promoting Democracy in Iraq](#)
Special Report, October 2005
- [Donor Activities and Civil Society Potential in Iraq](#)
Special Report, July 2004
- [Post-Conflict Iraq: A Race for Stability, Reconstruction, and Legitimacy](#)
Special Report, May 2004
- [Establishing the Rule of Law in Iraq](#)
Special Report, April 2003
- [After Saddam Hussein: Winning a Peace If It Comes to War](#)
Special Report, February 2003
- [Sectarian Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Iraq](#)

Audio and Summary

This USIPeace Briefing was written by Director of Peace Operations [Daniel Serwer](#) and Research Assistant Ylber Bajraktari. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent international conflicts, promote post-conflict stability and democratic transformations, and increase peacebuilding capacity, tools, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts around the globe.

[See our complete list of USIPeace Briefings.](#)

United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)