



March 11, 2004

## Q&A: Graham Fuller on Iraq

From the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), March 11, 2004

Graham E. Fuller, a former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA and an expert on the Arab world, says there is a possibility that democracy might succeed in Iraq. If it does, he says, "the implications are great" throughout the region.

He says despite the "immense distrust of the United States and its lack of credibility" in the Middle East, the Bush administration's efforts to promote democratic reform have "probably unleashed a process of change across the region with potentially sweeping consequences."

Fuller, the author of "The Future of Political Islam," was interviewed by Bernard Gwertzman, consulting editor for cfr.org, on March 10, 2004.

**There has been considerable political agitation in Iraq lately over approval of the interim [constitution](#), Shiite requests for modifications to it, and the pending return of sovereignty on June 30. How do you see the situation unfolding?**

First of all, everyone knows that the [Shiites](#), the majority population in modern times, have been excluded from what they see as their rightful place in the political order. All the calculations of the Shiites come down to whether the United States will leave a system in place that will enable them to enjoy the fruits of being the majority population.

In other words, if the United States leaves some rinky-dink, non-legitimized, uncertain, still-contested constitution and political order in place, the Shiites will find that absolutely unacceptable, because they will know they are going to have to struggle on very different turf in order to assert their power.

When I say power, I don't mean absolute domination, but simply the fact that the Shiites are the biggest and most important group in the country and will naturally dominate it. I see everything [the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-] [Sistani](#) says and does as based on that. If it looks as if the United States is not going to be able to deliver a system that is both democratic and generally accepted as legitimate by the public, then [the Shiites] are going to need to switch tactics, because some element of armed struggle, or other less-constitutional means, will decide how the Iraqi political order will come out after the

U.S. departure.

**The interim constitution is a confederal one that was the product of several compromises. Will it work?**

There is still a good deal of vagueness about the constitution, but certainly there is recognition of the different regions. I don't think anyone, including the [Sunnis](#) or the [Kurds](#), feel they are going to be left out in the cold. The Sunni calculation is rather more complicated. There are varying elements within it. I think there is a struggle among the Sunnis over how much to cooperate with the new order and how to extract different kinds of benefits for themselves out of all this. I think that over time, unless there is a resolution by armed conflict, the Sunnis will battle on constitutional grounds. There are clearly radicals, however, who are determined to upset that process.

**Why didn't the Sunnis, who are the Iraqis with the most experience operating a government, offer their services to the Americans?**

That's a very good question. I think some would like to have done so, but let's remember that the Baathist elite, which ran the government, was largely marginalized and didn't see any clear future for themselves. They were very uncertain about what the U.S. game was. There is a profound suspicion across the whole country, but especially among Sunnis inside and outside Iraq, that the U.S. game plan is to weaken Iraq irrevocably, to no longer permit it to be a great Arab state, if you will, a state that would be able, in the name of Arab nationalism and Arab power, to resist the power of the West and the power of Israel in the region.

The talk about democracy, the talk of federalism, is seen by many as really a ruse to emasculate the country generally, and that further prejudices Sunnis against the United States. There has been a lot of neo-conservative rhetoric that precisely confirms [the Sunnis'] worst fears about this.

**What do you think of President Bush's democracy-promotion proposal? He hopes to win approval for it at the June G-8 meeting. But it's come under criticism in Egypt and other countries in the region.**

I applaud the administration for addressing more forthrightly than any other administration has to date the need for democratization and liberalization and reform across the region. I think the difficulty here comes back to the raw reality of an immense distrust of the United States and its lack of credibility in the area.

There are many suspicions about the United States' broader motivations and goals. One element of distrust is the administration's apparent inability or unwillingness to bring some resolution to the Palestinian problem. There is an inherent contradiction between the war against terrorism on the one hand, and support for reform and liberalization on the other. Those very governments we look to for total support in the war against

terrorism are threatened by the liberalization program and, indeed, their own domestic opposition may represent part of the terrorist problem of the region.

**You're talking about Saudi Arabia, in particular?**

Saudi Arabia, yes, but also Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria. This makes it very difficult for both programs to be carried out simultaneously. In the end, security and stability are going to win out, as they have with every single U.S. presidency.

**You are saying it is virtually impossible to have democracy and a victory against terrorism at the same time?**

I don't think it is impossible, but it is hard by any standard. And this administration, not only in the content but also in the style of its policy implementation, has alienated lots of people and created suspicions, not only in the Arab world, of course, but elsewhere in the world, including Western Europe.

**Have you ever seen a time when the United States has been less admired by other countries?**

I have to say that, in all my long years working on foreign policy affairs, I have never seen the United States stuck at such a low level of regard.

**Who are our friends in the Arab world right now?**

I don't think we have any friends right now. I hate to say that, and I know it is a sweeping generalization. Our "friends" tend to be rulers in power who cling to us to prop up their own regimes and are willing to do our bidding. But it is precisely for that reason that they are viewed with absolute contempt by the populations at large, who strongly believe in the democratization agenda but don't think for one second that the United States is really going to bring change if it means that leaders who are less pro-American or even hostile to the United States might come to power.

It's interesting that the Arabs were very impressed by Turkey's ability to say "no" to the United States' request that it allow American troops to invade Iraq from Turkey. That decision was taken by a democratically elected, popularly supported government. In the Arab world, which was even more upset about the implications of the war against Iraq, not one of the rulers dared reflect public opinion and [public] opposition to the war. So there are a lot of messages here about the power and importance of democracy and the ability to do things.

**I've always thought that if there were a "democracy" in Saudi Arabia or other Arab states, the United States would have real problems.**

I think we would. I think we would have real problems across the whole region. There is

a great deal of pent-up hostility [directed at] the United States. I liken the people there to a Brahmin bull that has been in its cage and prodded and poked for hours, and then suddenly you open the gate and the people--in the form of free expression and democracy--come charging out and it is one hell of a ride. Whether it is going to be for 15 seconds or 15 months or 15 years, nobody knows. It will depend on the state.

### **What will happen in Iraq?**

I envision at least two widely differing scenarios. One is that in the end most Iraqis will grasp that this is a major chance for them to change the state. They will accept the necessary compromises, and the United States will be able to put these things in place, even if it won't be able to fully legitimize everything it does.

On these grounds, I would foresee an Iraq that slowly, painfully works its way forward with a very new system. I would not be surprised if there were some corrective coups along the way here and there such as Turkey has had. You can't do this overnight. Under any circumstances, Iraq will be a very powerful player in the region, even if the United States might prefer to have a "weak" Iraq. I think the force of its semi-democracy, the fact that it will truly reflect public opinion, including elements of anti-Americanism, will give it great legitimacy in the area, especially when contrasted against other states.

### **What's the other scenario?**

The other alternative would be if the United States were unable to put into place a constitution or political order that is accepted by all the players as legitimate, and they then seek to adjudicate power via force. I don't want to say outright civil war, but there could be considerable strife.

I would have to say, by the way, that any leader who is going to emerge in Iraq in the future is going to be cool toward the United States at the very least. I would go further--any leader in Iraq who is not cool toward the United States will not enjoy serious legitimacy or support.

Iraqis will reflect some of the feelings present in the rest of the Arab world. I am not saying that the legitimacy of a future Iraqi leader depends on a fierce anti-Americanism. I wouldn't see anti-Americanism as being the centerpiece of this cool approach to the United States, but there would have to be a heavy emphasis on sovereignty--"Thank you, U.S., you've done your job, now leave, we'll call you if we need you. We don't want your armies here, we don't want the biggest embassy in the whole world. We are going to develop our own policies on oil. We will normalize with Israel when the rest of the Arab world does, or at least when the Palestinians do, and there is a solution there."

I don't see why we can't live with that, especially if the war on terror starts to ease off.

### **What will the implications be for other Arab countries if the new Iraq seems to be**

## **roughly democratic?**

I think the implications are great. I believe the Bush administration actually has unleashed a process of change across the region with potentially sweeping consequences, much of which were unintended, much of which will be unwished-for, much of which will be unstoppable, and much of which will be complicating and even perhaps dangerous on occasion. But it is a necessary process of evolution. I just don't think the transition from where we are now to more open governments can be easy or simple or smooth. I think by nature it is a rough journey.

[Copyright 2004](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)